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A Plucked Zither

POETRY BY

Phuong T. Vuong

In a polygamist commune in the desert, a fourteen-year-old boy and a twelve-year-old girl fall in love and consummate that love, breaking religious law. They are caught, and a year later, she gives birth to his father's child while the boy commits murder four hundred miles away—a crime that will slowly unravel the community.

Told by eight adolescent narrators, this is a story of how people use faith to justify cruelty, and how redemption can come from unexpected places. Though seemingly powerless in the face of their fundamentalist religion, these “strange children” shift into the central framework of their world as they come of age.

ADVANCE PRAISE

“A spellbinding, symphonic marvel of a novel. It could not be stranger, darker, or more illuminating. I found it impossible to put down.”

—**Rikki Ducornet**, author of *The Deep Zoo* and *The Jade Cabinet*

“I admire *Strange Children* for its mythic grandeur, its intoxicating cadences. This is a novel about a world unraveling, a desert place illuminated by the vulnerable young who belong to it—a place of child brides and murder, predation and exile, solace and exultation. Sadie Hoagland's heart is spacious and her sentences are marvelously lush.”

—**Noy Holland**, author of *Bird*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sadie Hoagland has a PhD in fiction from the University of Utah and an MA in Creative Writing/Fiction from UC Davis. She is the author of *American Grief in Four Stages*, a short story collection published by West Virginia University Press. Her work has also appeared in the *Alice Blue Review*, *The Black Herald*, *Mikrokosmos Journal*, *South Dakota Review*, *Sakura Review*, *Grist Journal*, *Oyez Review*, *Passages North*, *Five Points*, *The Fabulist*, *South Carolina Review* and elsewhere. She is a former editor of *Quarterly West* and currently teaches fiction at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.



PUB DATE: June 6, 2023

ISBN: 978-1-63628-095-0

SIZE: 6 in x 9 in

FORMAT: Tradepaper

EXTENT: 96pp

PRICE: \$17.95

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MORE PRAISE FOR *STRANGE CHILDREN*

“Sadie Hoagland’s vast imaginative compassion gives her uncanny access to the minds and bodies of eight strange children, their histories of abuse and longing for transcendence. I fell in love eight times, bearing the children’s pain, witnessing their afflictions. Through their mesmerizing, gorgeously lyrical language, the reader shares the joyful mysteries of spiritual desire, the ecstasies of secret faith, and the terrifying thrill of subversive reinvention. Harrowing and tender, this fiercely intense, exquisitely composed novel transports us from an isolated polygamist community in the wild desert of southern Utah to the bewildering buzz and glitter of urban streets in Salt Lake City, from the raptures of adolescent love to the violent extremes of sexual obsession. If we are biased, if we cling to comfortable misconceptions about people who live beyond our experience, these magnificently beautiful children will pierce and transfigure us.”

—Melanie Rae Thon, author of *Silence and Song*

FROM *STRANGE CHILDREN*

If I remember it when I am awake, as a place, not a world, but just a piece of earth, then I remember only sand. Pink sand that would stain your hands, your feet, whose ruddy mark is still smeared somewhere on the skin of my heart. Sand that turned to stones and then the low mesas that rose up like two hands lightly cupped around our town, keeping us in it. All of us gathered there so close that it was not just our whole world but our whole earth, and the only sign of it not being the whole and only earth was the road. The road ran straight through town like a pious bloodline, red dust for twenty miles to the west and then it turned to pavement and then, only forty miles later, was a town bigger than ours, and beyond that, though I could never have imagined it at the time, was a city bigger than that. And this road didn’t stop as it went through our earth; it cut right through and went to the east, toward another desert or wilderness, and if you could follow it you’d eventually get somewhere. And so, even as we knew there was more world and that this world was part of there and here, this other world was made further away by the road which was so long and straight so as to disappear on either end. And you could watch it and you could see a car coming from a long while away but not very often, sometimes days apart, and so the points where the road disappeared in each direction were stretched longer in space by the length of time that one would have to wait for a car to come, and these two kinds of distances, miles and days, together uninhabitable, meant that the rest of the world was not for us. It was dry and hellish, full of sagebrush and rattlesnakes, and had no water for our plants or our beasts or our mouths. And we had irrigation and a crick and green fields, but still wildness would creep in with sandstorms and sunburns and cold, cold nights and yelping coyotes just to let us know it was there and that we belonged where we were. A lonely people.

If I remember the place when I am asleep, it is not just the whole earth but also the whole world again. The world as it was for years and that is this: my hand over Emma’s smaller one, teaching her to milk, squeezing the hot gray teat through her fingers to show her the pressure, the pulling motion, her cry that I am crushing her fingers, the cow stamping away flies, and the milk finally sounding in the pail.

That’s all it is.



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