

Trade Paperback
 ISBN:997-8-1946448-19-4
 Price: US \$14.95/ CAN \$15
 Trim: 6.57 x 9.11 / 88pp

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Reader's Guide

from Karyna McGlynn
 author of *I Have to Go Back to 1994*
 and *Kill a Girl*

Author Asks:

1. When I tell people that the title of my book is *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*, people often ask “who’s the girl?” to which I often respond (as if I’m some sort of irritatingly secretive mystery author), “read it and let me know who you think the girl is.” While I do have an answer to the question, I don’t necessarily think it’s the one definitive answer. Who/what do you think “the girl” in the title might symbolize, and why does the speaker insist that she must be killed?
2. You may have noticed that I play a lot with form in the book, especially with columns and other non-traditional visual cues in poetry. What function does form play in reading these poems? How might your experience of reading these same words change if they were in a different format? Do you feel that “form follows function” is true in this case? Why or why not?
3. In Lynn Emanuel’s introduction she says that the book “takes liberties with our expectations of the acceptable pace and manner of disclosure in a book of poems.” What do you think she means by this? Do you think there is an acceptable pace and manner of disclosure in a book of poems and, if so, how do you think this book defies our expectations in that respect?
4. Poems are often identified as belonging to either the “narrative” or “lyric” poetry traditions. A narrative poem is loosely defined as a poem that tells a story, whereas a lyric poem generally relies more on self-expression and descriptions of the poet’s feelings. In which category would you be most inclined to place the poems in *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*? Why?
5. Many poems utilize dream logic, that is, the same sort of “illogical” thinking that surrounds dream occurrences that might seem perfectly normal to us while we’re asleep but bizarre in waking life (e.g. driving to work in a toaster). Find specific examples of dream logic in 1994 that help advance the book. Is it possible to distinguish between the unfolding of literal events in the book and dream logic? How does dream logic enhance the theme of childhood innocence in the book?
6. You may have noticed that the book is broken into three sections: “Planchette,” “Visitant,” and “Revenant.” What do these words mean and how do the titles of the sections and their accompanying quotes impact our understanding of the poems they contain? How are the three sections different? Many books of poetry are broken up into multiple sections. Why do you think this is a popular practice?
7. If you had to draw some sort of timeline to help chart the events in the book, what would that timeline look like? How many time periods are evoked? How do time and narrative unfold in the world of the book?
8. We’re taught in school not to conflate the narrative “I” (or speaker) of a poem with

the actual poet. Yet, post-1950s (i.e. since Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, etc.) we have come to strongly associate poetry with authentic confession. We often can't help but view poems as real accounts of the poet's feelings, desires, secrets and life experiences. Some readers have viewed the poems in *I Have to Go Back to 1994* and *Kill a Girl* as highly confessional, whereas others, like Lynn Emmanuel see it more as an "appropriation biography" in which I use the language we've come to associate with confessional poetry without actually revealing any real information about myself. What do you think?

9. I sometimes describe the book as a "film noir," and, in fact, use a quote from the film noir classic *The Lady from Shanghai* as the book's epigraph. What is film noir and what elements does *I Have to Go Back to 1994* and *Kill a Girl* share in common with this particular cinematic genre?

10. The dominant tone of the book is dark and foreboding—after all, it involves murder!—but it is also playful, ironic, even humorous in parts. The title alone embodies these multiple tones: it announces an intention to "kill a girl!" but it also tends to make people laugh. Find other places in the book that utilize similarly contrasting tones. What effect do these moments have on your overall interpretation of the book?

Writing Exercises:

1) Much of the poetry in *1994* springs from a sense of negation: what's wrong, what's missing, what's not where it's supposed to be, or behaving differently than expected. Look at "Where There Should Be a Plant Stand, There Isn't" and "In a landscape the color of bleached limes." These poems, like many in the book, use a statement of what's missing, wrong or altered in the physical terrain—usually something small (e.g. a missing telephone, a pool without water, a fox without a face)—as a catalyst to explore a psychological terrain. When we write poetry, we often create vivid images by describing what is there. For this exercise write a poem (or revise an existing poem) in which you catalog what's not there, or what's wrong with the picture. Don't attempt to explain the significance of what's missing or altered—this should rise organically from the finished piece.

2) The late poet Frank Stanford has been a huge influence on me. I've always admired the way he strings together short, declarative, potently imagistic statements without punctuation to form something that sounds like a narrative, but is intriguingly full of holes. His seemingly simple diction and realistic descriptions ultimately give way to potent dream logic. He's one of the best models to use for the old "show don't tell" adage, and my former students have had great luck with the following imitation exercise:

- In imitation of Frank Stanford, most of your lines should be brief, independent clauses, which feature lots of action and repetition. Ex.:

I heard the pump again
It sounded broken
I looked out the chink hole
It wasn't the pump
It was the pig

- Your poem must not use any punctuation (except for quotation marks and commas used inside quotation marks).
- Your poem should be highly imagistic, but it may not use more than two adjectives per page (note how few adjectives Stanford uses) and may not feature any adverbs.
- Your poem should be rooted in the natural world of a specific, but unnamed,



place (preferably the place you grew up, or the place you feel the most nostalgic for). It should feature at least one animal and at least one reference to water (or a body of water).

- Your poem may not include any elements that would obviously date it. In other words, your poem should feel timeless—like it could have been written any time during the last seventy years. Therefore, it should not mention the following: brand names (unless they've been around for 70 years), new-ish technology (e.g. cell phones, laptops, SUVs), or contemporary references/terminology/slang.
- Your poem should struggle in some way with fear, grief, violence, or death, but it should accomplish this mostly through imagery, symbolism, and action. In other words, the poem should show, not tell.

Further Reading:

Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*
Frank Stanford, *The Light the Dead See*
Richard Siken, *Crush*
Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*
Sharon Olds, *Satan Says*
Alice Notley, *Mysteries of Small Houses*
C.D. Wright, *Deepstep Come Shining*
David Berman, *Actual Air*
Nick Flynn, *Some Ether*
Simone Muench, *Lampblack & Ash*
Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*
Jennifer L. Knox, *A Gringo Like Me*

