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**OPENING THE MOUTH**

**OF THE DEAD**

By Catherine Woodard

Art by Margot Voorhies Thompson

“Not only is the heart still needed, it’s still dangerous,” writes Catherine Woodard about mummies. “The brain is useless, removed and discarded.”

The central character of Woodard’s first full-length poetry collection, **Opening the Mouth of the Dead** (September 1, 2017 | Lone Goose Press | trade paperback edition and limited-edition letterpress edition) is a third-grade girl growing up in 1960s North Carolina who uses the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to navigate her complicated relationship with her father. She struggles to reconcile her heart with her brain in a family where her father grapples with alcohol use and depression. When the narrator is in college, her father dies by suicide.

“The decoupling of brain and heart confuses and worries the narrator as she pores over pictures and spells in the *Book of the Dead* for clues to help her father,” explains Woodard. The narrator finds comfort in Ba, which she calls “Soul-Bird.” In ancient Egyptian concepts of the afterlife, Ba refers to the part of a human soul that is like the modern notion of a personality. It is often depicted as a creature with big wings and a human head, and its job is to provide protection and solace to its mummy.

The young narrator is precocious, and asks adults questions that they prefer not to answer. In “Joseph Rescues His Family and Egypt,” she asks her grandmother “if *depressed* is a way to iron dresses” and her Sunday school teacher how the Egyptians wrote down the story of Joseph before the Bible. The teacher’s response is to say, “*Nothing / Came before the Bible but desert and dirt*” and hand her a Baby Moses to color.

In the poem “For Causing a Man To Turn in Order to See,” the narrator refers to her father as a “self-made mummy” who used “Vodka and Valium as embalming / As oil of cedar and natron.” In another poem, “Hieroglyphs, Reread,” Woodard points out that “The word for house and tomb/Is the same, pronounced *per*.”

Many poems refer to keeping up appearances. The young narrator says in “Family Album,” “I look / Where the photographer asks.” The narrator’s mother appears in several poems doing laundry, bringing the narrator to church in black patent shoes, and instructing her and her brother, Luke, how to behave when their father is drunk. In “For Not Playing Dead,” Woodard writes, “Mother says we can die / if he’s drinking. / Says to scream, fall. / Kick if we must.”

Another example of keeping up appearances is the poem “Concentration.” The family hides dead birds in order to compete for the Garden Club’s Yard of the Mouth, where only the front yard counts. Luke “collects dead / Sparrows that crash / Into the roof. / Thinks the birds kill / Our shot.” In “My Father Saves the White Gardenia,” the young narrator works with her father to give flowers Miracle-Gro and buries lollipops in the garden because their shape represents life in Ancient Egypt.

Other poems refer to self-preservation and vulnerability. In “Weekend in Emerald Isle, N.C.,” Woodard writes, “We cook crabs I net. / Crack the claws / Meant to protect.”

Following the death of her father, the narrator returns to *Book of the Dead* in order to release and forgive him.

Several poems refer to Declarations of Not, which Woodard describes as “protestations of innocence to cleanse sins.” Ancient Egyptians believed that the dead spoke this litany to 42 gods in the hope of balancing the Feather of Truth and gaining eternal life. Each line begins “I have not.”

In the poem “Declarations of Not,” the child narrator describes first learning about this ritual from her third-grade teacher, Mrs. Long, who just returned from the 1964 World’s Fair: “The mummy/needs a lot of Nots and no brains to pass the test. / Winners get a ticket to a Heaven of Eternal Reeds, where everyone you love will be safe, waiting.”

Later in the book, the narrator returns to this idea as an adult following her father’s suicide. In the poem “Searching for *Nots* in the College Library,” she says, “I have not read a *Book of the Dead* since Mrs. Long. / I pull out a translation by the Brooklyn Museum, / find a corner in the stacks I can read out loud.”

The poem “She Said Yes” breaks up the day after the narrator’s father’s funeral into short vignettes, mostly focused on the narrator’s mother. In one vignette, “Mother Thanks Me for Being a Helper,” she says, “*You were four when you asked if your daddy was drunk. I said yes. / You left and cleaned up your room.*”

Woodard shows a narrator placed in the role of providing support for adults, much like Soul-Bird. In the poem “Referee,” the narrator describes watching TV with her grandfather five days after the death of her father. Her grandfather remembers his wife, the narrator’s namesake, who overdosed from pain pills. He says, “*Never should have left her that night. But what could I do*?” The narrator thinks, “He asks as if I referee.”

**About the author**

**Catherine Woodard** swerved to poetry in 2001 after an award-winning career in journalism. She helped return Poetry in Motion® to the NYC subways and is vice president of the Poetry Society of America.

Her poems have appeared in literary journals, anthologies and CNN online. She co-published Still Against War/Poems for Marie Ponsotand has been featured in The Best American Poetry blog for essays about India and the nexus of basketball and poetry.

Fellowships and awards include Playa, Ragdale, Vermont Studio Center, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences and Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences, Women’s Voices for Change, Unshod Quills and Willow Review.

A former newspaper and new media journalist, Woodard volunteers with the News Literacy Project. She was an early digital journalism editor who led coverage that Columbia Journalism Review hailed as “the most ambitious” and “delightfully irreverent.” At New York Newsday, she won reporting public service awards about the social and political impact of AIDS and HIV, how NYC dodged a possible epidemic of drug-resistant TB and at Newsday how poor school districts were cheated by feudal tax assessments on Long Island.

Woodard has a MFA in poetry from The New School, MS in journalism from Columbia University and BA in history from Wake Forest University.

She is a former president of Artists Space, one of the nation’s oldest spaces for emerging visual artists. She is married to Nelson Blitz, Jr. and is the mother of Perri and Allie Blitz. She writes and plays basketball in New York City.

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**About the artist**

Margot Voorhies Thompson is a painter, printmaker, designer, and calligrapher who creates studio work as well as public art projects. She was an Eliot scholar at Reed College and also studied at PNCA, Lewis and Clark College and the Hochschule Fur Kunsterlische in Linz, Austria. She is represented by the Laura Russo Gallery. Her public commissions include projects at the Doernbecher Children’s Hospital, the Woodstock Public Library, Portland State University, and the State of Oregon Library.

**Praise for *Opening the Mouth of the Dead*:**

“In this beautiful, haunted book, the author’s granddaddy asks her as a child, “*But what could I do?*” The grown child says “He asks as if I referee.” The child that survives catastrophic family history inevitably feels that she is a referee. The combatants are gone and were, always, not only powerful but unreadable. This child’s mind, facing a harrowing present and harrowing past, turns to a paradigm that she was given in the third grade: the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The ancient paradigm gives dignity and density to the tragedy of her parents’ lives. Litany, the insistent search for truth amid bewildering fragments, is what the survivor can perform to release, if not to save, the past. This is a superb book.” –Frank Bidart

“Yes! This is news. In depth and energy, Catherine Woodard’s poetry penetrates the whole intense story. She has achieved a dazzling work.” –Marie Ponsot

“Like a yearning, incantatory prayer, the extraordinary poems in Catherine Woodard’s *Opening the Mouth of the Dead* build to an exquisite and devastating story of loss. With a child’s precision of observation made especially poignant through her 3rd grade reading of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Woodard’s narrator renders a brilliant portrait of an alcoholic father that is not likely to be forgotten — a poem cycle truly remarkable for its economy, surprising humor, and sharp truths.” –Kate Walbert, author of *A Short History of Women*, *Our Kind*, and other novels

“In this deeply moving, beautifully conceived book, the spellbound world of Horus and Ra intermingles with Piggly Wiggly, Moon Pies, and Mrs. Long’s third-grade class where blue crepe paper rolls down the aisle and is a river named The Nile. It is here where the imaginative narrator, whoseheart is a muddle*,* latches on to ancient charms and prayers that she believes will fix her troubled family, will keep them—and her—safe from hurt.

“These are tender, sad, strong-minded poems of the eternal human desire to breathe life into the lost, to bring them back to us in love and forgiveness, and to learn how to balance the Feather of Truth on our aching hearts.” –Emily Fragos, author of two books of poetry, *Hostage and Little Savage* and editor of six poetry anthologies for The Everyman’s Pocket Library

"Catherine Woodard's *Opening the Mouth of the Dead* casts a powerful spell and maps a royal road into several of poetry's oldest themes-- the persistence of sex, death, and family in our imaginations, and the need to speak from beyond the grave events of our lives. Here the heart testifies to its unadorned truths in every poem." –John Lane, poet, essayist and author of *Abandoned Quarry: New & Selected Poems, Fate Moreland's Widow: A Novel*and several nonfiction books including *Coyote Settles the South*

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