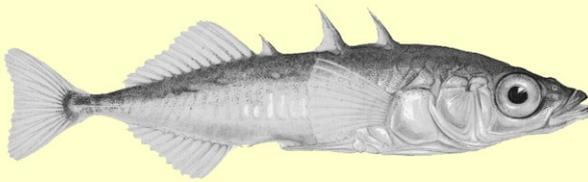




The Hedgehog Poetry Press

Stickleback



Stickleback

*Melissa Fu*

*Stickleback VII*

*String & Circumstance*

*by Melissa Fu*

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## *I. Kaleidoscope*

A present. Wrapped in red tissue paper, you step closer. It reveals itself: a sleek black cylinder with a treasury of polished stones, coloured glass and translucent beads contained in one end and three mirrors down the tube to the eyepiece at the other. When you lift and look through, you gaze on a collusion of chaos and symmetry. The patterns - vivid, intricate, transient - never repeat. They arise exactly once by the mixture of this moment, these stones, this light.

You walk through the house, holding it to your eye, slowly twisting the far end of the cylinder. Soft sounds of tiny tumbling treasures mesmerise; you are hypnotised by a six-fold symmetry of blue petals, crimson lozenges, and deep green droplets arranging and rearranging themselves against an ever-shifting background of shadows and light.

How these shapes plummet, how the light bounces from the sides, how the images layer and split, double and reflect.

Their beauty falls through your vision, like water through your fingers. A dance choreographed from equal measures of chance and gravity.

## *II. Brown Paper Bags*

You used to go shopping with your mom for groceries and they were always packed in brown paper bags. The bags felt smooth and rough at the same time. Your brothers cut them up to make textbook covers. They were good at making book covers. Secure, with crisp corners and a clean front on which to write **ALGEBRA II** or **GERMAN** or **SOCIAL STUDIES** with a black permanent marker that smelled sweet and dangerous. That was a skill of big brothers, who had homework and remembered locker combinations and walked to the bus stop across the big road instead of to the primary school, five houses and no street-crossings away.

Your brothers used to take their lunches to school packed in small brown paper bags. They were too cool for lunch boxes like your blue and white Holly Hobby one. School cafeteria food was bad and cost money, so they brought packed lunch. You watched them stuff the paper bags into their backpacks with their textbooks and Trapper Keepers. You watched as they shrugged on their jackets and went out the door. You wondered what it was like to ride the bus. You listened for when they would come through the door after school, drop backpacks on the floor, leave jackets on chairs, and slide the brown paper bags - folded into neat, flat rectangles - across the kitchen counter. Mornings, your mom would unfold and fill the bags: an apple, two homemade chocolate chip cookies, potato chips, a salami sandwich on brown bread.

Mondays, the bags were crisp and new, only creased where your mom folded down the top. Each day, the bags were less crisp and more creased, with small tears and grease stains marking the passing of the week. Fridays, the bags were tossed into the trash at school.

You looked forward to the days when you would cover your textbooks in cut-up big brown paper bags and carry your lunch to school in small brown paper bags. You looked forward to that kind of growing up.

### *III. Rag Rug*

At Willy's ranch house in Tarpley, Texas, there were rag rugs on the floor. You should refer to him as Bill, he didn't like being called Willy. You visited Tarpley over Labor Day weekend twice during your university years. Once at the beginning of your second year and then again at the beginning of the fourth. The first year you didn't know him well enough, the third he wasn't speaking to you.

But during the even years, Labor Day at the ranch was glorious. Each time, driving west from Houston, you'd look for the sign that greeted: Welcome to Hondo. This is God's Country, Don't Drive Thru It Like Hell. You'd go to the volunteer fire department's annual barbecue. You'd eat brisket, baked beans, white bread (for soaking up the bits), pickles, and potato salad. You drank sweet tea.

That first visit, you noticed the rugs: tightly woven strips of cloth, wound into circles, having been given a second or even third chance at usefulness. In the mornings, you traced the rings with your big toe, rubbing along the ridges until you spiralled out to the edge. In the evenings, you went for walks with Willy. He counted all the different birds and insects he could hear and rattled off their names. Aside from crickets, you couldn't name a single one.

That last time you went to Tarpley, Bill didn't like you so much anymore. You had trampled on too many hearts. Still, though, you were a part of the gang and, come Labor Day Weekend, the gang headed to Hill Country. You walked along a creek bed, collecting fossils and finding dinosaur footprints. You slept outside in hammocks, never mind the mosquitoes. You played a game of truth or dare. Your truths revealed you to be unsuitable for further company.

For years, you thought that game had signalled an ending. Wrong truths at the wrong time. But now you see that your posse had already started to fray by then, like those rag rugs, those concentric circles of cloth, only held together by string and circumstance.

#### *IV. Baby and the Bathwater*

You have a habit of confusing the baby with the bathwater. You know the difference should be clear, but again and again, in your moments of blundering, both go down the drain. They have more in common than you might suspect: Both give comfort, their touch soothing and warm, waking the senses. Both remind you of new beginnings, fresh hope. Either can be a shock to the system if you submerge yourself too suddenly. Both need frequent changing. Despite their commonalities, there are important distinctions: one of them reflects you and the other distorts. One loses its translucence through layers of grit and skin, one simply becomes cloudier with time. One of them makes a terrible sucking sound when you pull the plug while the other takes joy in the swirling whirlpools. Neither is something you'd want to live without.

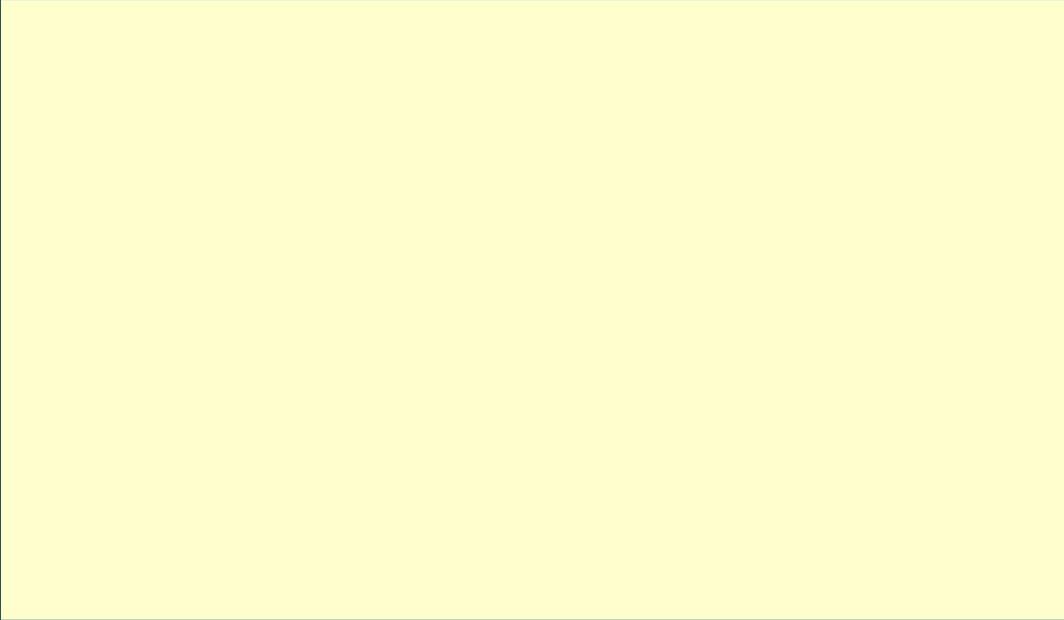
The trouble is sorting out which is which.



Melissa Fu grew up in Northern New Mexico and moved to Cambridge, UK in 2006. Her academic backgrounds are in physics and English. Prior to focusing on writing, she worked as a teacher, outreach coordinator, and curriculum consultant. Melissa was the regional winner of the Words and Women 2016 Prose Competition and was a 2017 Apprentice with the London-based Word Factory. Her work appears in several publications including *The Lonely Crowd*, *International Literature Showcase*, *Wasafiri Online*, and *A Restricted View from Under the Hedge*. Melissa is the 2018/2019 David TK Wong Fellow at the University of East Anglia. In 2019, her debut poetry pamphlet, *Falling Outside Eden*, will be published by the Hedgehog Poetry Press.



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