

THE FUTURE ONLY RATTLES WHEN  
YOU PICK IT UP

By David Giannini

Review By Ravi T.Y

David Giannini's poetry and prose poetry collection *THE FUTURE ONLY RATTLES WHEN YOU PICK IT UP*, explores the myth of Sisyphus, and uses it as an anchoring point to explore topics such as innocence, love, death, and meaning. The book is witty yet genuine, raw yet elusive, and just when you begin to think that it is getting too nostalgic—it dawns on you that you are lost in one of Giannini's intricate meditations. The book opens with:

*"Who would condemn  
small children? What  
if, with Sisyphus, toddlers  
were forced to roll*

*small stones beside him  
on the long push uphill  
before the terrible treck  
back, all of them compelled*

*to repeat their acts forever? ...*

...but, could

*any of us in this century  
bear to look at pebbles  
without sensing those kids  
forced to stone?"*

Stones, rocks, pebbles, and geodes are reoccurring images that we keep stumbling into throughout this book. When we are not stumbling into rocks we run into things which Giannini has turned into Sisyphian rocks. Giannini weaves a beautiful web of images and symbols throughout his book— each one communicating and building on previous images.

The book itself is a meta-allusion to Sisyphus' myth and is broken into three sections, each section characterized by different levels of self-awareness and intention. The first two sections are poetry, while the last section is a section of prose poetry.

The first section has no title—alluding to Sisyphus' first encounter with death—where Sisyphus had angered Zeus, and Zeus sends Thanatos (or Hades depending on the version) to chain Sisyphus in Tartarus.



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Sisyphus convinces Thanatos to show him how his chains work. Thanatos is reluctant at first but eventually yields to Sisyphus' child-like nagging. Immediately after Thanatos gives him a tutorial Sisyphus binds Thanatos to his own chains—binding death with death. Once death was dead, everyone is freed from death— including the sick and suffering. In Sisyphus' first encounter with death, he does not expect death; and, his escape is spontaneous, witty, and in some ways very childish.

The first section of Giannini's book has no title, appearing unplanned and spontaneous. It looks into the loss of innocence and the desire to escape this death (the loss of innocence) through love and companionship. The poems carry a unifying impulse, but at the same time are sporadic and random—like children who ate too sugar for their own good, and are now running around the house yelling delightful words at you. Some of the poems in the first section of the book use left indents making the poem appear as though it was a receding wave or thought, and there is even an erasure of a Petrarchan sonnet on page 11.

Sisyphus' second escape from death is intentional, but short-lived. After Sisyphus frees death, he is sent back to the underworld. Before going to the underworld, he asks his wife to throw his body into the middle of the public square. Upon reaching the underworld, Sisyphus convinces Persephone to let him go back to the world of the living so that he can convince his wife to give him a proper funeral. But, once he got out of the underworld he did not to go back until Hermes dragged him back by force.

Giannini's second section is the shortest, but unlike the first section has a title, "A Speaking Born Of Us". However, this section's title is also the title of the only poem in the section. This section/poem aspires to find meaning through love and sensuality. The entire section is only nine pages, whereas the first section was about twenty-eight pages long, and the last section was thirty-two pages long. In this context, brevity signifies another level of awareness and the importance that this poem has for Giannini. Furthermore, the voice that populated this section seemed somber, controlled, and in a way restrained.

Zeus, now furious with Sisyphus' deception and antics, punishes Sisyphus by forcing him to roll a boulder up a steep hill for all eternity. Every time Sisyphus gets close to the top, the boulder rolls back down, and Sisyphus needs to start over again rolling the boulder back up the hill.

While the first two sections of the book were poetry, the last section of the book is a section of prose-poetry. The third section titled "Vertical Prose Poems" alludes to Sisyphus' vertical journey upwards. The third section delves directly into the depths of Giannini's psyche, and does not hesitate at all to put the 'truth' on the table. The first prose poem is a hilarious piece about prose poetry itself and is in part Giannini's way of easing the reader into the section. Nonetheless, this did not really help the unsettling feeling I felt while reading this section. In the previous two sections, I felt as though I was navigating through a dreamlike trance. Then suddenly was shook awake by Giannini's absurd humor, which is also how and where he tied all his loose ends together. For example in his prose poem "PHILOSOPHERS ASSISTED LIVING", Giannini writes "Are not stones logical, asks Socrates?" (Giannini 53). Giannini's use of humor in this section also raises the question of what role awareness plays in humor.

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From Lucretius to Plato, many have interpreted what Sisyphus' punishment might mean to us. Albert Camus' lyrical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" argues that Sisyphus is not as a villain who disobeyed the gods, but instead an absurd hero who was searching for meaning and purpose in an existence devoid of purpose and meaning. Camus says that "One must imagine Sisyphus happy", because the search for meaning is in and of itself enough to give one purpose and allow one to revolt against the chains fate has wrapped around him/her. A person only dies, Camus argues, when they resign to fate and stop searching for meaning.

Giannini's take on this myth however is strikingly different from other interpretations. Giannini makes Sisyphus work for him. He turns Sisyphus' story into an exploration of his own search for meaning and the numerous deaths that he tried to escape. Just about everything we do, whether we realize it or not, can be interpreted as our attempt to escape death. In the end though, this awareness of our constant desire to escape death is in and of itself perhaps the only way for us to find meaning and purpose in life.