



Nightbloom & Cenote by Leslie Contreras Schwartz

Schwartz's second collection of poems examines the legacy of trauma, abuse and illness among a family of women—and the ability of women and girls to survive and sing. Exploring debilitating illness and the loss of physical abilities, at times searing in grief and in other moments patient and willing to accept, Schwartz questions the truth behind any survival, what it looks like for a girl to emerge from the bottom of any cenote, a person to live with debilitating disease and still thrive, or a city's residents to move forward after a hundred-year flood.

Call all thriving things illegal: / The magnolia tree, its roots, / That vast network of veins that feeds itself / And others like it in dry soil, / Pushes space through concrete sidewalks / To breathe ... Every tough, gnarled thing holding / Its own life in a fist of vitality is illegal.

--from "Everything is Illegal," *Nightbloom & Cenote*

Praise for *Nightbloom & Cenote*

"*Nightbloom & Cenote* sifts into the dirt beneath the cracks of girlhood, uncovers a retribution of generations, of family and of birth and misfortune of daughters unloved and unprotected, from the ever-unfolding story of patriarchy and its brutality, and sings of survival in the midst of all that violence. Sinuous as vines and gleaming as night-blooms, these poems tangle and snake and take the generational blame, the guilt reserved for us girls who grow into women, and finally break the cycle, finally crack the sidewalks we girls/women have been buried under all these years.

Schwartz, with her lyrical prowess, sings us to safety: "we will run out / this run belongs to us / both out that door with the baby and all her future babies and we will find all your sisters / my mother and hers." These poems are steeped in culture and myth, are lush with the landscape of survival, are the voices of mothers and our mothering forebears who braid our hair and hold us as we weep, who teach us how, once our tears are dry, to fight back."

—Jennifer Givhan, author of *Girl with Death Mask*

In *Nightbloom & Cenote* Leslie Contreras Schwartz traverses a nighttime landscape with eyes purposefully wide open. She descends into "nightcups of hurt and stains"—navigates rugged territory—where most would refuse to tread. In these darkened depths, Schwartz pushes against every uncomfortable edge: personal and generational affronts.

She relents, "there is too much to move, that won't." Yet, she keeps stepping with her gaze focused on what wilts and blooms. In her hometown of Houston, she reflects on both literal and metaphorical landscapes, "where streetlights bust out and stay busted." She's bold in her witnessing though her poems seem to palpate under her exacting "knife, the sharp edge / that we use to make something, / Even if it disappears." In this brilliant volume, Schwartz instructs best in how she navigates loss. "Let me walk unsteadily. / Let me lose and lose / my body in parts while I watch and sing anyway." Her verse though sorrow-tinged—shouts a powerful song of resistance. She bade us sing no matter what we withstand.

—Glenis Redmond, author of *What My Hand Say*

"In (*Nightbloom & Cenote*) the smallest detail opens a kind of world all its own: "I am made of those sweat-filled / sheets of sorrow, / a clothesline of flinching blouses / waiting for that slap and back beat / to dry." I loved this, and I loved also the intensity of being a single person as exhibited in the lyric voice of this work."

—Ilya Kaminsky, author of *Dancing in Odessa*

"The night-blooming jasmine invoked by this book's title reveals its flowers not in daylight but in darkness, and in that same way, this stunning collection by Leslie Contreras Schwartz unfolds what's hidden, whether it's the personal and cultural histories we carry inside us, the hundreds of dollars concealed in a grandmother's curtains, the words we want to say but don't, or 'those wings'—as one poems says—"that flutter / within my cells." At its core, so much of this book tells the unspoken truth of what it means to inhabit a body, with its frailties and beauties and abuses and miracles. The insight of these poems will leave you shaken."

—Nick Lantz, author of *How to Dance as the Roof Caves In*

READINGS: 5/19/2018 at 7 pm, Inprint, 1520 West Main, Houston, (reading with Leah Lax) *
7/11/2018 at 7 pm, Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet St., Houston, (reading with Melissa Studdard) *
October 18, 7 pm, Rice University (reading with Nishta Mehra)



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ABOUT SCHWARTZ: Leslie Contreras Schwartz is an essayist and poet, whose work has recently appeared in *Catapult*, *The Texas Review*, and *Tinderbox*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and finalist for the 2018 Joy Harjo Poetry Competition for *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*. Her new collection of poems, *NIGHTBLOOM & CENOTE* (St. Julian Press, May 2018), was a semi-finalist for the 2017 Tupelo Press Dorset Prize, judged by Ilya Kaminsky. She is the author of *FUEGO*, and was a finalist for the 2018 Houston Poet Laureate. Her fiction will be included in the *HOUSTON NOIR* anthology, edited by Gwendolyn Zepeda (Akashic Press, 2019). She is currently an Interviews Editor at *American Microreviews and Interviews*, and works as a writing instructor for *Writespace*. Her work can be found at www.leslieschwartz.com.

A Q&A with St. Julian Press