

**Belly**  
**Steven Schreiner**  
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Cervaná Barva Press



Review by Mary Buchinger

*Belly* holds the story of loss—loss of a father early in life, followed by later loss of a chance at fatherhood. Along the way, a tick latches, a flock of tulips cannot speak, another man fathers the longed for child, and we are served “a plate of quartered hearts” in “little regions of blame” within “small countries of expectation.”

This is a poignant and moving collection of poetry narrating a thwarted desire for parenthood in light of a difficult and largely fatherless childhood. The beginning poems compose a stark picture of a child’s life that contains a father’s funeral and the sharing of a mother with an explosive and abusive stepfather.

Within this frame, the quest to become the missing father figure turns into a tale of frustration. The title poem, “Belly” is a harrowing account of attempts to procreate with medical interventions:

*You set up another syringe  
which I flick and tap  
to dislodge air. Your part, to be*

*beyond the pain I bring.  
You make me promise  
to glide this ice*

*against your belly  
where it burns  
until you feel numb.*

*I pinch you  
with one hand, with the other  
uncap the needle*

*to reveal the 45° bevel  
cut as in a marrow bone  
sharpened to a point,*

*turn it so the spear  
will pierce your skin.  
Then I draw back for blood...*

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*What are they doing to you?  
Capture. Harvest.  
Lately you feel sexless.*

*They are ripening you.  
Retrieval. Cryogeny...*

Eventually, this woman bears a child, but not the child of the narrator, though he visits her and the baby in the room they once shared, “the father lounging in silk...in the next room.”

Throughout this book, with its striking pink cover and letters crayoned in childish script, we are treated to gorgeous language and images, such as:

*The birds are windows that open  
after long seasons rope creaking  
up a windless well.*

*Schreiner notes, in this chronicle of yearning:*

*Death is that day on which  
it makes no difference what  
you choose to imagine.*

The life imagined, projection of self into the future on the wing of offspring, thwarted—

*how many years of such quiet emptiness  
lacking futurity  
will it take my life to arrive?*

—is the hurt from which this pearl of a book, *Belly*, has formed.

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