

**Poet Lisa J. Sullivan has
a “Theory of Impact”**

Interview by Doug Holder

I caught up with New England Poetry Club poet Lisa J. Sullivan about her debut collection of poetry-- “*Theory of Impact.*”

Lisa J. Sullivan is a New England native who holds an MFA in Poetry from the Solstice MFA in Creative Writing Program, where she was a Kurt Brown Memorial Fellow. Her poems and book reviews have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Arts Fuse*, *Evening Street Review*, *Third Wednesday*, and elsewhere. She was the United States winner of The Poetry Project–Ireland in collaboration with the Academy of American Poets and was an Adrian Tinsley Program Creative Grant recipient. Lisa is the Art Editor for *Lily Poetry Review* and a Poetry Editor for *Pink Panther Magazine*. Her debut poetry collection, *Theory of Impact*, was published in 2026 by Lily Poetry Review Books.



It seems that so many of the poets I read are from broken homes. Your book deals with yours. They say great pain can bring great art—do you agree?

A: I do agree that pain can bring great art, although I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether that is true for *Theory of Impact*. I’m sure great joy, in its own way, also can bring great art, but perhaps joy and pain tap into different parts of the creative brain. I personally feel the poems that affect me most—poems that I remember long after reading them, often deal with some sort of traumatic event. *Theory of Impact* was indeed born from the trauma of a broken home and its impact on the trajectory of the speaker’s adult life.

You told me that your poem “My father drew maps” was a signature poem. Your father was disabled—this was an escape for him. Could this be the theme of the whole book?

“Escape” is definitely a recurrent theme, and not just as it relates to my father, but I wouldn’t say it is the theme of the entire book. Love, loss, death, pain, grief, hope, and forgiveness all make appearances. One could argue the writing of the book was an attempt at an “escape” of sorts. But I will say, my father’s military disability (and its devastating effects on our family) was the impetus for *Theory of Impact*. I tried to present the poems in a non-judgmental way, sometimes through the eyes of a child confused by her father’s alternating violent and tender behavior. One of my goals was to bear witness to the complex suffering of a disabled veteran, while also acknowledging those who suffered because of his actions (e.g. the poem “Late Rose”). It was a difficult balancing act, as I wanted to maintain the dignity of all parties involved.

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I quote Stanley Kunitz, "In a murderous time the heart breaks and breaks and lives by breaking." What is your take on this, in relation to your collection...your life?

My take is that Kunitz was a wise poet. Sometimes heartbreak begets heartbreak until it is all that one knows. That is sort of what I was getting at in my poem "-ectomy": after the surgery, I grieved – / grieved for the lost part of me, / until it became, / again, part of me." While *Theory of Impact* does contain some profoundly heartbreaking experiences, it is also a story of survival and forgiveness, or at the very least, acceptance and understanding. I think the serious subject matter is tempered by some gorgeous nature imagery and settings. Perhaps nature is my coping mechanism—I didn't fully notice its prominence in the poems until they were compiled.

Was writing this collection cathartic for you? Writing is used as an expressive therapy – was it in anyway therapeutic?

I have to be honest—at least in the beginning, writing *Theory of Impact* was, for lack of a better word, traumatizing. I know that sounds dramatic, but earlier versions of the manuscript were grittier and more detailed. It took years to distill the poems down to a level that felt emotionally safer, and several more years to gather up the courage to put them out there. It helped to have the encouragement of a supportive and empathetic editor—the brilliant Eileen Cleary of Lily Poetry Review Books. However, now that the book is done, I do feel a measure of relief.

Why should we read this book?

As you stated in your first question, "...so many of the poets I read are from broken homes." Broken homes are not an uncommon thing; neither are the other subjects in *Theory of Impact*: disability, abuse, divorce, new love, childlessness, forgiveness, etc. Because of that, I believe my book will resonate with a wide audience and is worth reading, as it offers insight into those experiences with an undertone of resilience.