

# Guide to *Makeshift Instructions* for VIGILANT GIRLS

By ERIKA MEITNER

Author Asks:

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- 1) This book is titled *Makeshift Instructions for Vigilant Girls*, and many of the poems in it offer instructions for various scenarios. Does the book offer more subtle advice for the reader, lurking beneath the surface, in the non-‘instruction’ poems? If so, what would this advice be?
- 2) There is one epigraph that opens the book—from *The Song of Songs*. Does the epigraph speak to issues addressed in the book? If so, how?
- 3) This book is broken into three sections: “Makeshift Instructions for Vigilant Girls,” “The Contact Notes,” and “Domestic Spasm.” Do the sections differ from one another thematically or stylistically? Both? Neither? How might you characterize each section? Why do you suppose the book arcs in this particular order?
- 4) How is sex wrangled with or presented in these poems? Do the way these poems characterize sex and female sexuality remind you of the way any other poets or particular poems address the same topic?
- 5) What is the role of humor in poems like “Quisiera Declarar” or “Sex Ed”?
- 6) *Makeshift Instructions for Vigilant Girls* continually oscillates between images of pleasure and danger. Can you give examples of where each of these images occur? What do you think the book is attempting to demonstrate with these shifts?

Writing Exercises:

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- 1) **Found Text Poem:** The poem “Quisiera Declarar” uses the language of a U.S. Customs Declaration Form to create a love poem. “Blow” makes use of text (and the rhyme and rhythm) that I found printed on the side of a 7-Day Prayer Candle from the Mexican foods section of the grocery store. (“Angel of God, / my guardian dear / to whom God’s love commits me here / ever this night be at my side / to light and guard / to rule and guide.”)  
  
Using vocabulary and syntactical phrases that are specific to a found object or text (religious pamphlet, form from a government office, flyer, handbill, warning sign, repair manual, billboard, etc.), write a poem about a powerful emotion you’ve recently experienced. If necessary, take scissors and cut out compelling phrases from both the found text and a journal entry of yours and physically intersperse both languages until you form a new hybrid piece that works to your satisfaction.
- 2) **Smell-o-Vision Poem:** The poem “Kinky” was inspired by sense-memory—specifically, the smell of men’s cologne. I had opened up an old journal, and inside were two samples—the kind that come in magazines, with scent strips that you peel open—of Calvin Klein’s Eternity, and Drakkar Noir. These were the two scents that every guy in my high school doused themselves in during the late 80’s and early 90’s, and the smell that I associate with my first sexual experiences. The whiff of these strong scents immediately brought me back to a time and place, and inspired me to write about particular memories and encounters. Think about smells that might have a similar power for you, and seek them out or recreate them. While sniffing them, close your eyes and see what images the scents generate. Write them down. See if you can string them together to make a poem.

- 3) **6 O'clock News Poem:** Many of the poems in this book, like "Instructions for Vigilant Girls," "Electric Girls," and "Treatise on Travel," use news accounts—kidnappings, news of the weird, a politician's shockingly racist quote, or chronicles of triumphant escapes—to create poems. Find a news story that strikes you as noteworthy and quirky, and use it as the basis of a new poem. Free-write on the story and see if you can figure out what drew you to it. This will help you find a way in to a 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative. What other texts or events (either personal or non-personal) can you connect to the story to make it more imperative, emotionally, for both you and your readers?

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### *Recommended Reading:*

*The Song of Songs*, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch  
*The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters*, Ronald Story  
*The Encyclopedia of the Occult*, by Lewis Spence  
*Bitter Angel*, Amy Gerstler  
*Ghost Girl*, Amy Gerstler  
*Jimmy and Rita*, Kim Addonizio  
*The Incognito Lounge*, Denis Johnson  
*Too Bright To See & Alma*, Linda Gregg  
*Reckless Wedding*, Maria Flook  
*Bad Boats*, Laura Jensen  
*Ocean Avenue*, Malena Morling  
*What the Living Do*, Marie Howe  
*And Her Soul Out of Nothing*, Olena Kalaytiak Davis  
*Steal Away*, C.D. Wright

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### *If This Book Had a Soundtrack:*

"Kiss" – Prince  
"Cream" – Prince  
"Thieves in the Temple" – Prince  
"Nasty Boys" – Janet Jackson  
"Bizarre Love Triangle" – New Order  
"Suck My Kiss" – Red Hot Chili Peppers  
"Cradle of Love" – Billy Idol  
"Rock Lobster" – The B-52's  
"Tainted Love" – Soft Cell  
"If You Leave" – Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark  
"The Choice is Yours" – Black Sheep  
"All for One" – Brand Nubian  
"Buggin' Out" – A Tribe Called Quest  
"Twice my Age" – Shabba Ranks  
"St. Teresa" – Joan Osborne  
"Iowa" – Dar Williams  
"New York, New York" – Ryan Adams  
"You Said Something" – P.J. Harvey

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### *Artistic/Visual Influences:*

Diane Arbus – S.P Dinsmoore – Sally Mann – Weegee (Arthur Fellig) – Mary Ellen Mark