

A Review of *Gold Star* by Emma McKenna

Reviewed by Corinne Gilroy

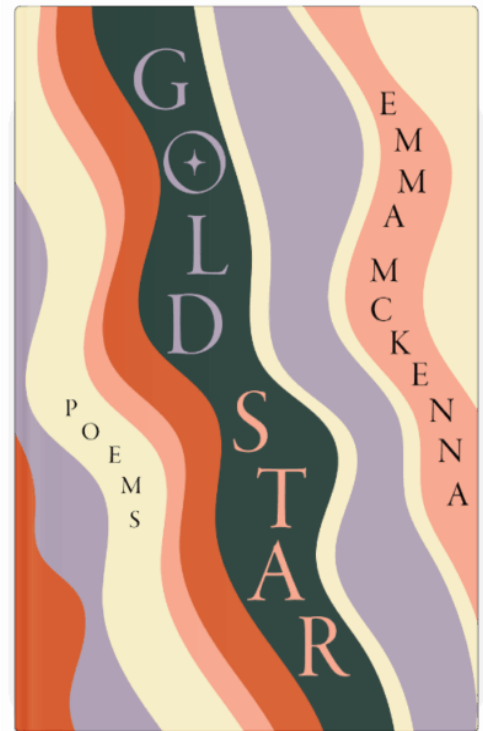
Cover to colophon, Emma McKenna's poetry collection *Gold Star* (Book*hug Press 2026) sent bits of an old documentary film flickering through my mind. But I can't remember what the film was called or where I saw it. All I have are visual impressions and fragments of an interview in voiceover: an elderly woman describes a trip she took in the '40s or '50s to the American southwest, where she explored a canyon that would soon be flooded by a hydroelectric dam. Young and statuesque, she posed nude between the water-carved rock faces while her travelling companion took photographs, immortalizing both her glowing body and the rippled sandstone around her.

What I most wish I could remember from that documentary—what screams out from the gap in my memory—is the desert sky, both day and night, because McKenna's poetry is as celestial as it is geological. It's right there in the title, of course: a metal that doesn't tarnish crossed with an untouchable cosmic engine of heat and light. Concrete constellations skipping across tectonic page gutters. Ethereal lines enjambed with hammer and chisel—"slow down / fracture / self from I / detach" ("Chasing Ivory," 68). Gleaming seams like rivulets. Molten, metamorphic, mutagenic.

McKenna organizes *Gold Star* into "Breech," "Breach," and "Break." The sonic and semantic overlap of these three section titles is a prelude to the body of work itself, where fitting observations and quick lines become "one second split in half" ("Carrying Capacity," 11). "Breech" meditates on early life, bodily emergencies, family transgressions, observations through young eyes that can shift or reframe without even a moment's notice. In "Easter Sunday," for instance, "fathers are outside shooting / hoops my mother gave me" (24); riding the wake of the poem from the previous page ("Gun Metal"), bloodsport becomes beer league; homosocial bonding is suddenly mother/child.

"Breach" introduces a more forthright and independent poetic voice that defiantly wears "the muted gleam of worn / gold" ("Anniversary Dress," 39); a "new / identity beat back" ("Gold Star," 43) that keeps pushing "up against / the bravest bodies" ("Miraculous," 32). Other bodies chafe violently against this autonomy in ascent, but it "find[s] safety in / the overlap [...] an oblivion laugh / like there is nothing / singular about trauma" ("Section 271," 51)—tenuous resilience revealed to be sedimentary layers of "abuse-sick attraction [that] is epigenetic" ("Under Brandenburg Gate," 52).

When "Break" finally arrives, those softly accumulating sediments reappear, metamorphosed by the heat and pressure of time and maturity—"walking forward" ("Mentorship," 67) into colossal decisions like whether to become a parent, but of course "the mind follows its own formula" ("With Child," 73). The geological weightiness of McKenna's words sublimates into something cosmic once again; the poem "Close Your Eyes to Block Out the Sun" (77) casts long, consequential shadows across the page, "structured / with pulleys / and slides and ladders / to hang on to / to hold thoughts to" (77), and the expanse of adult autonomy is "Cauterized in Orbit" (78), "another part to / strangle / choke" ("Neck of the Womb," 80).



Yet *Gold Star* concludes with a brilliant north star—an apogee of peace, resolve, and contentment; “there is joy here, and it is boundless” (“Kindred,” 82) because “you chose” (“And How Would You Like to Spend It?” 83) and no one else chose for you. I initially thought it was the structure, design, and imagery in McKenna’s book that conjured up memories of that documentary about the woman exploring the canyon before it disappeared into floodwaters, but perhaps it is this burst of lightness—of cleaving to the gold seams and orbits we find ourselves following, even if their future is something unknowable.

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