Alicia Jo Rabins’ *Divinity School*, winner of the prestigious Honickman First Book Award from the *American Poetry Review*, pivots on the erotic and mystical, the embodied and ethereal, drawing deeply from contemporary images and classic Jewish sources. The epigraph, “the future has an ancient heart” (Carlo Levi), provides us with a divining rod for the watery wisdom of her poetry. She plumbs the ancient myths, not by transcending their time, but by ingesting them to the point of satiation in the present: “Now/like manna,/is perfectly sufficient/and will rot/if stored” (22). In quoting the scholar of Jewish mysticism, Aryeh Kaplan, she reminds us “that which defines time…cannot remain apart from it” (7). Like the *tsohar*, the source of light that illuminated Noah’s ark through the forty days and forty nights of dark downpour, her poetry thrums down your throat until you gurgle up courage to breathe through it. Like Noah and his dove, one hears the cries of the damned, the drowned, in her poems and yet fly out through the *tsohar* (which could be “a. a window b. a glowing precious stone c. we don’t know”), “away from the people who died because he did not save them.” (9) Rabins wants to know what happened next. These poems take the reader to the edge of that “next”, with urgency, posing questions about birth and death, sex and suffering. We may read these poems as letters or prayers, or ironic “How to…” instructions directed to herself, to God, and to the reader.

Most striking are the poems that go underground to the “Earth Room,” the first written as a letter ten years earlier, being single and 26, addressed to the caretaker of the earth room. She knows he is merely a man, though she called him an angel as she watched him eat soup behind the white privacy wall, “a hint of the afterlife,” noting that angels eat soup “because it does not crunch.” (14) There she learns not “to be afraid of death for the first time” (p. 20), imagines through that “darkest brown of rust,” (14) “the wedding dress that she would wear one day.” (20) It is not intimations of immortality but the machinations of time, juxtaposition of dark loam and scattered blossoms, which we gather as manna in reading these poems.

In “How to Sail,” she examines the Sotah ritual (of the suspected adulterous in Numbers chapter 5) with her twelve-year old student, Molly. She urges: “Scrape the curse off the parchment. Stir the broken letters/into a jar of water. Make a woman drink...
it.” (49) And juxtaposes “thus said Elohim” to Molly’s “thus said:” Why. We worry, along with the poet, about this meeting between Present and Past, musing about how “time is both a destroyer/and preserver.” (50) Will these texts, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, disintegrate “when air/and sunlight touch/those ancient letters” (50)?

This reviewer first encountered Alicia’s poetry through her music, as the creator and performer of Girls in Trouble http://www.girlsintroublemusic.com/ — an Indie-folk song cycle about the complicated lives of Biblical women. And then invited her to perform and read for the students in the rabbinical school at Hebrew College. As a poet and professor of Hebrew Bible and Midrash, this reviewer was fascinated by how she wrestled with the ancient texts—especially those difficult stories about women—both creatively and compassionately, while maintaining an edge in the poem a “scrimshaw knife” (46), which can carve pictures and clean a fish for dinner. In C. D. Wright’s introduction, it is her “intense listening or resistant acceptance,” (xi) that draws the reader into her reading of ancient texts. In the poem “Divinity School,” which graces the collection’s title, as she thinks about suffering (the age-old question of theodicy), she moves from a monastery to a solitary cabin, where she knits “hats for us all./Once you’ve had beauty,/it’s hard to let it go./Now I remember why I ran/from the Ancients.” (24) But she does not really run from the Ancients. She dares them. Unflinching. Through her poetry, the future finds an ancient heart, reclaiming the coeur in courage as it breathes air and sunlight into the crumbling parchment. There are the hats (the poems) that she knits after all.