In her newest book, *Fence above the Sea*, Brigitte Byrd reckons with the task of construction of self out of many: many people, many ideas, many roles, many memories. But instead of trying to create a kind of communal voice, a universal truth, Byrd instead forces a reckoning with a very real specificity, and splits the “I” into multiple personae, each of whom must reckon with this gathering of voices and bodies in a unique way, creating a finite specificity of self. And beyond this type of construction, Byrd tasks herself with enacting and questioning the very act of building, from the body to memory to the structure of the sentence and the phrase. The book is comprised primarily of prose poems, with four sections that formally disrupt the prose of the text and the cyclical memory-making and unmaking around which the prose poems revolve.

This hyper-specific self that is created in this book frequently defines surroundings in an unabashedly declarative manner. The poems in this collection repeatedly and explicitly define what *is* and what *is not*, at times creating contradictory meaning, as when “the father is a breath. This is not a mistake it is” (3). This definition and redefinition enacts and reenacts the narrator’s attempts to construct actuality from memory:

> Streamwaves are back again. We cut the grass with his hand mower. We do. We cut and cut and cut. There is no question. Why no memory. There is. The daughter trims the flower beds. Time is not. Not the enemy it is...She says *le vide ment des entrailles est un signe*. This is not an escape it is a bag. There. The garden is ready. He is there to meet. The priest is not the father. Every time there is a question there is a decision. There is always fear. And there is religion always. We believe in nothing in the grass is not the answer in the house. It is a gesture. The daughter waves from the sea. (6)

This repeated definition and dis-definition calls into question the formation of memory and its subsequent dependence of recollection. No memory is safe from its own undoing; in the act of remembering lays the potentiality to obliterate the memory itself: “Is remembering/ the destruction of memory and where does it go” (68). Remembrances of the past will always be erred, eroded, and so each memory recalled is destroyed in its attempted preservation. The task of constructing memory is not an easy one, particularly because of the roles that the narrator is called to fill: remembering being a daughter while tending to a daughter, remembering the parent while being a parent.

The seemingly interchangeable third and first person furthers the sense of being in another person’s life, and of another person’s life intruding on the life of the self. The “I” takes not only the form of the first person pronoun, but also that of “she,” and in the first section of the book, “the daughter,” where “the daughter is not a mother. She is mine and I am a daughter and there/is another one” (8). Later on in the text, the self is explicitly confused into familial roles: “She thinks she fucks the father when she f**ks her and/the mother and the others and all of them think that and look. At me and/her” (28). There is an irrevocable disruption in the division between selves, a rupture through which self is defined. The blank or gap between spaces and objects constitutes a way for memory to exist: “There is always an empty place and not often a/soundwave. A soul maybe if she is not. Present and absent at the same/time and always alone” (31). Here is the simultaneous presence and absence of the “alone” or lone self, divided out from designatory names and left bare. Later, “she
reads that no/absence cannot be replaced and she lifts the sheet to find her body”(40). Once the logic of “no absence cannot be replaced” has been parsed out, the inevitable question is “replaced by what?” Even absence fills a space and makes it whole.

Byrd’s construction of space is enacted most readily in sentence structure. Although the vast majority of the poems in this book are prose poems, they often work against the sense of the sentence, creating specific rhythms that are dependent on the shortness of the phrase, an effect punctuated by the lack of any punctuation besides the period. We aren’t allowed the pause of a comma or the querying of a question mark, and so the phrases become direct, at times brutal in their declarative candor and miniature, sentence-level narrative arcs: “She runs through a herd of tall blonde poodles./She would do anything to watch him smile. She wears her watch upside-/down. I don’t know why. He stopped speaking on the day she arrived”(27). These short sentences are far from terse, and instead allow for the phrases to feed into each other instead of creating containment, allowing associative leaps instead of direct syntactic connection. Byrd’s split prose is a gesture that pulls together what is, by nature, fragmented memory; it is a reconstruction that makes memory reenact itself.

The memory of the body is exact, in which marks on the skin recur as images simultaneous on each body. Throughout the text, these marks that trace the trajectory of the physical body appear with regularity: “From the edge of a chair she caresses his hand covered with/freckles his brain frosted with reds and browns of hemorrhage yellows of/necrosis”(23). “The hands are covered with freckles. Is/memory the future and it is lost”(3). “A mistake it is. His hands are not. They do not speak. I face the sun. Bluish and swollen they are and covered with freckles and/so are the daughter’s cheeks as if we were in the wrong place”(5). This “wrong place” seems to be the body itself, another’s body which has become one’s own. All of these marks of the body—freckles, moles, birthmarks—infiltrate the skin of every “character.” What we have in common is what we grow and what we grow into, the marks that inevitably arrive, unfamiliar, on our skin.

Just as Byrd makes and unmakes the sentence, she calls into question the power of memory to build and undermine self and the power of the self to build and disassemble memory. These constructions result in a text that is assembled with exactitude and ready querying, forging an active relationship between builder, site, and inhabitant.