

How Do We Create Love

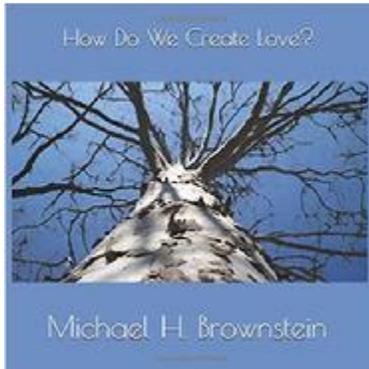
By Michael H. Brownstein

Independently published, 2019

28 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1703570014

Review by Jacqueline Stearns



[Click to purchase](#)

How Do We Create Love, is a visual feast for the eyes. The text is accompanied by gorgeous mural like photographs textured so the reader can almost see paint applications. My favorites are gigantic trees arching up into majestic dark blue skies.

How Do We Create Love, is one long prose poem, that tells the story of two couples, one earthly, one magical. The lives of the earthbound couple are depicted in chronological order. The young husband treks along the banks of the Missouri river, in search of a Christmas gift for his wife. He discovers a flower and an agate. He returns home to their woodland cottage. Husband and wife talk about their love. Hugs are enough for them. This couple doesn't need anything beyond each other.

The wife finds joy in nature. Singing birds. A coyote finding its way to the river for a drink.

The man and woman live out the seasons of their lives.

When they reach old age, they take in a young boy, who is lost in a winter storm. When the boy reaches adulthood, he travels to the Germanic forests. The inhabitants are starving. The young man conjures up a tree that provides sustenance. He marries a beautiful Viking princess. The young couple traverse the world, giving people music, trees, and food.

The symbolism of Christmas and the majesties of nature are skillfully interwoven. Water in the forms of snow and a mighty river dictate living conditions for all forest citizens. Humans live alongside deer, possum, raccoons, birds, and coyotes. A boy appears on Christmas Eve, and grows up to be a savior. The tree he creates for the people of the Germanic forests is akin to the tree of life.

I like this book's depiction of marriage. Commitment is tied to the true meaning of love. What are values? What really matters? For the earthbound couple, the bane of their lives is connected to the sanctity of their relationship. Expensive presents mean nothing to them. For them meaning is found in a hug or meaningful glance. For the young man and his princess, giving to others is what brings them joy.

How Do We Create Love, has elements of a fairy tale. Love, magic, a lovely princess, and happily ever after. The book also has a folk hero. The young man is reminiscent of Paul Bunyan.

This work is a cautionary tale as well. Sometimes beauty needs to be sacrificed to practicality. While in the Germanic forests, the young man cuts down an oak tree, which is turned into firewood. He creates a fir, whose branches contain food.

How Do We Create Love, is a reverent testimony to the power of simple, romantic love.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Jacqueline Stearns holds a bachelor's degree in Mass Media Communications from William Paterson College now University. She is honored to have been published in Highland Park Poetry and several Montclair Write Group Anthologies.

Posted April 1, 2021

Pictures, Postcards, Letters

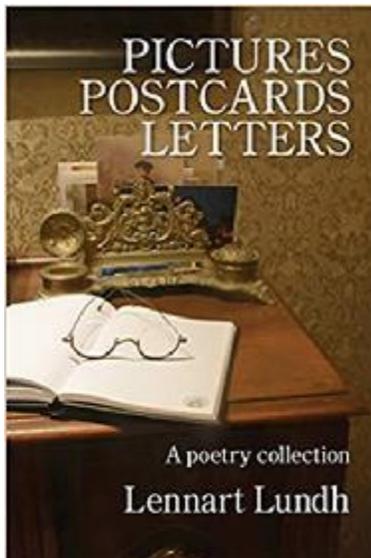
By Lennart Lundh

Kelsay Books, 2020

81 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1950462-93-3

Review by Lynne Viti



[Click to purchase](#)

In this moment in history, public poetry is ascendant. From newcomer Amanda Gorman to established poets like Louise Gluck, Ilya Kaminsky, Richard Blanco, Joy Harjo and Jericho Brown, poets are getting their work out to everyone, not just to the academy. Poetry is everywhere, with Zoom, Crowdcast and similar platforms temporarily supplanting the pre-pandemic venues for readings and poetry slams—community centers, houses of worship, libraries, classrooms, farmers markets, art galleries, food coops, pubs and the public square. Lennart Lundh's *Pictures, Postcards, Letters* deploys free verse poetry as well as rich, dense prose poems, some comprising three sentences, others filling two or three pages, to convey deep truths about his life and the lives—and deaths-- of those around him. Both challenging and -with a bit of work—accessible, this writing speaks powerfully to the social and political issues of our day.

This collection, Lundh's twenty-first, begins with a look back to the poet's youth, moves on to snapshots of midlife, and concludes dramatically with the honest summing up that is part of aging. Lundh frequently writes persona poems: in "I broke a heel," a gay man on holiday in France with his partner breaks a high heel that is repaired by a religious French cobbler. In "A terrible week here" a woman ambulance driver writes home about knitting during a lull in the shelling and shooting, just before her colleague is shot dead by a sniper. He alternates long, free verse poems with abrupt, compact paragraphs reporting on the range of human rituals: courtship, young love, marriage; a vigil for a fellow soldier who stepped on a land mine and "kept screaming until the morphine set in or he bled out."

The three sections of this collection give readers minimal orientation: "In a Box in a Drawer," "Wrapped in Old Ribbon," and "From the Front." It's often a mystery as to who is speaking, where the story is set, and when. This demands some work on the part of the reader; one cannot just glide through these pages easily. But the work of rereading and discerning the time-place coordinates in each chunk of text is worth it, drawing the reader deeply into the emotional life of the poet.

My particular favorites are Section II's poems of love, scenes lived and later reconstructed by the older speaker. In *Pillow Talk*, the words "they were talking" begins with "they were talking as true friends do when they trust each other" in stanza 1, and reprises that first line later, with "they were talking as two people do when they feel safe/ in their love for each other." In "A couple seated near me," the poet observes a couple kissing across a bistro table and is reminded of a day long past when his partner "stained your new cardigan with a cheap Cabernet," and they hurried off to make love in their hotel room. These details are so real and so personal; the reader feels drawn into the speaker's intimate space. *Three Marriages* charts a love affair that develops into marriage and soon thereafter, the birth of a daughter, then a son. They carry on even though "everything around them has screamed in flames to the ground." Juxtaposed with that union is a trip across New Mexico towards San Diego, the assassination of Martin L. Luther King Jr., and an imminent departure to the speaker's army duty in Vietnam. The last section of the poem chronicles an extramarital affair and its ashes; the speaker continues to write to the woman, the letters go unanswered, and he keeps her photograph in his wallet because when he remembers it, "it makes him feel good." This is a man who finds it hard to completely let go of the past.

In these snapshots or imagined letters, the speaker's identity may change from poem to poem, but the underlying focus throughout is humanity at its most fragile, imperfect, and sometimes tragically impotent. The soldier endures the war and loses his buddies, viewing the conflict as increasingly pointless. The adulterous lover learns that love is fleeting, and he is weighed down by the grind of daily life ("Eventually his wife forgave him. He works with machines now.") The country presumably Vietnam, "here is amazing in its possibly infinite beauty...Except the parts we've bombed and burned the shit out of and pissed on" with Agent Orange, which the speaker calls "misty Orange Crush," in the sarcastic vernacular of young soldiers.

Near the end of the book, this old soldier/poet/lover, in *12 June 2016: Again We Get It Wrong*, kneels in the garden, clearing out the Rose of Sharon seedlings with arthritic hands, pondering the loss of life in the Charleston church shooting of 2015 and the day's news of a mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub: "down in Orlando/the clean-up crews aren't even starting to get ready." He contemplates this carnage on American soil, asking, "Why does the wrongness of this take forever to process?" Here, in the twenty-first century lexicon of recovery, the poet fuses a moral judgment of actions clearly "wrong" with the desire to heal, through "process." It's a tall order.

The final poem, *There was a die-in* begins in the immediate

present, where university students are demonstrating against violence, and returns to a vivid, searing memory of “the carnage on the flight deck” when helicopters brought those with ‘real blood from real wounds bathing real bodies, the/efforts at triage and the clergy trying to at least save souls...” Perplexed, he observes that all this “never made the news until just now.” His stoicism in the face of suffering does not detract from his empathy for those who suffer, in the Vietnam era, and today.

In sum, this book is the product of the poet’s “processing” of trauma, his brave confronting of the violence and loss in everyday life and in war and domestic terrorism, and the repetitive cycles of conflict and loss of life that our society experiences. It’s not an easy read, but in confronting the damage done, Lundh produces truth in his writing, and as Keats reminded us, truth is beauty. In that sense, this book achieves both, and bears reading aloud and rereading.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Lynne Viti's most recent book is *Dancing at Lake Montebello* (Apprentice House Press 2020). A lecturer emerita at Wellesley College, she has published two chapbooks, *Baltimore Girls* (2017) and *The Glamorganshire Bible* (2018) from Finishing Line Press. She blogs at lynneviti.wordpress.com

Posted March 1, 2021

Becoming Vulnerable

By Joshua Corwin

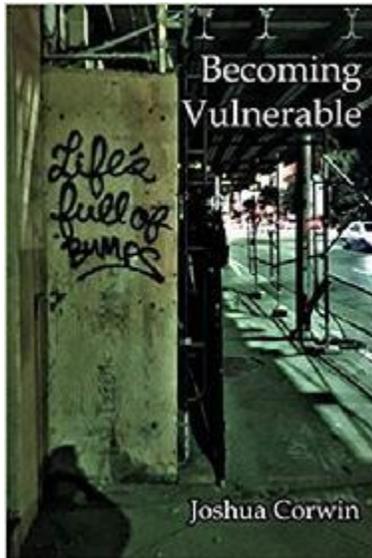
Baxter Daniels Ink

Press/International Word Bank,
2020

72 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-0996392778

Review by Mike Freveletti



[Click to purchase](#)

The question has been asked before but the answer, if you get a genuine one, is different for each writer. Here it is: why do we write? Joshua Corwin's book, *Becoming Vulnerable*, has a dedication to his grandpa, Mert, right in the introduction and it indicates that his grandpa's last words to him were *don't ever stop writing*. I'm sure that message is what propelled the poet from word to word in his honest collection of poems.

One thing you notice very quickly in Corwin's poems is the varied experimentation: enjambment, the use of one word lines, the fractured stanzas. In the poem *Little Ensos*, these choices are center stage, "I can't lift/my head/up/out/of/this/sink." Notice the break of the lines? The drama of letting those words essentially fall off after one another? The poet also does a wonderful job with white space on the page and uses it to perpetuate the human drama in these poems. For me, it's a skill that I think is incredibly hard to implement properly and at times can look lazy or forced. Not for Corwin though, he uses it wonderfully throughout.

On the opposite end of that spectrum in terms of form is the poem *Hello Grandpa*, which startled me at first with the presentation of so many words on the page. With this poem though I felt like I was opening the journal of a person I didn't know. It was intensely personal, "God graced me with sobriety on August 13, 2015", and other lines like, "I didn't know why I was smoking & doing what I was doing/this substance, no longer sustenance for me." Those are serious moments of internal inquiry and Corwin seems to be working those moments out on the page. I appreciated his willingness to share.

My favorite poem in the collection, *Memory Smile*, is a bit of a treatise on mental disorder combined with drug dependency. It is both beautifully written and stylistically simple for the subject matter. "His mind wouldn't let him/he couldn't say the words/when he tried to vocalize them/his mind fought back." There the poet references a friend who struggled with addiction and mental disorders and how difficult it can be to get in the right headspace to feel better and reclaim your mind and body. I won't spoil the poem but there is a line at the end, "so why not just smile?", that hit home in the face of any difficult time in life. Why not just smile? Does the alternative to happiness help anything? Questions I asked myself while reading this one.

Another treat in this collection is Corwin's photos of his own paintings and his own photographs. In addition to poetry, the author seems well equipped in both of those mediums. For what it's worth, I'd happily flip through a photobook done by the poet if he ever decided to do so. A wide artistic breadth is on display in this collection that I'm sure many readers will appreciate.

A poem towards the end of the collection called, *The Gate Is Not A Gate*, felt for me like a modern haiku. “*Until it speaks/until you don’t say/your mind is shut*”, and then we get a break before it ends, “*the gate is not a gate.*” Corwin makes it clear that so often what is left unsaid is as important as what is said. A fine, thought-provoking collection.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Mike Freveletti is poet, short fiction writer and occasional dabbler in literary criticism. His work has appeared both online and in print.

Posted March 1, 2021

Haiku Rose

By Colleen McManus Hein
Self-Published, 2019
225 Pages
ISBN: B081DGC18X

Review by Hope Atlas



[Click to purchase](#)

As I started to read *Haiku Rose*, I was intrigued by its unique format. While it feels like a romance novel in many ways, the author lets the main character, Rose, tell her story using original haiku, poetry and introspective diary entries. As the author was weaving the romantic storyline, I found myself waiting to see when the next haiku would appear. Each haiku presented Rose’s life in a different way - sometimes profound, at other times silly. The author captured the beauty of haiku - its succinctness, yet ability to convey complicated emotions and observations. She deftly used haiku in her novel as mini-illustrations of the Truth that made up Rose’s life. Reading the haiku in the novel encouraged me to revisit haiku and actually try my hand at it! Rose’s daily entries were an effective technique to reveal her inner thoughts and feelings and to maintain my interest. Rose’s journal writing inspired me to peer into my own memories, hopes, aspirations, regrets and feelings of loss.

While the plot carries some predictability, I found the characters engaging. The author expertly developed Rose’s many faces - the girlfriend, the trusting friend, the daughter and the writer. As I read the novel, I was pulled into the main character’s life and how she would fare.

The sudden loss of her mother is a common thread throughout and helps carry her through times of joy and sadness. She speaks often of the desire to plant a garden like the one her mother had - thus keeping the theme of renewal in the forefront of the novel.

Her use of haiku elevated the novel to a level of creativity rarely seen in novels. The author skillfully crafted the emotional layers of friendship, loss, grief and renewal. Her theme of nature is powerful. The garden and the emotional impact it has on the main character reminds us of the interconnectedness our lives have with nature. These universal themes open the novel to a wide audience. Indeed, as I continued to read *Haiku Rose*, I was moved to take out my journal and write about my life

observations and my own journey.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Hope Atlas has a master's in reading education and has been published in multiple literary publications. In May 2020, her book *My Upside-Down World, Journaling Through Unique Quotes and Prompts* debuted. www.quotehope.com.

Posted March 1, 2021

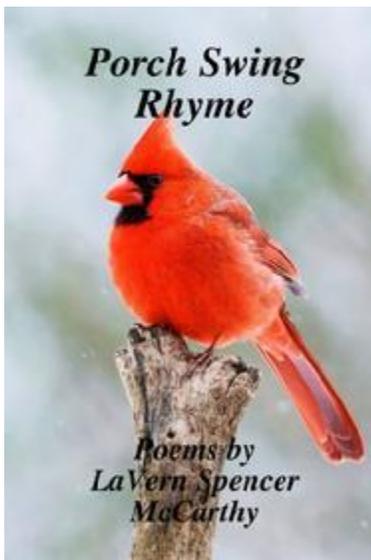
Porch Swing Rhyme

**By Lavern Spencer
McCarthy**

Self-Published, 2019
64 Pages

ISBN-13: 9780359975556

Review by Curt Vevang



Click to purchase

Porch Swing Rhyme is a pleasant collection of rhyming poetry that should thrill the hearts of the rhyming community. A title such as ***Porch Swing Rhyme*** would lead us to believe that this 62 page book would provide us with rhyming poems that we could leisurely and enjoyably read while gliding back and forth on a porch swing. It does not mislead, it is indeed such a book.

These poems are not profound or difficult to read, just comfortable, feel good, reminiscent poetry. With chapters covering *Rural Poems of Nature*, *Back in the Day*, *Country Critters*, and *Country Folks* we know we are about to take a *step back in time, to a quieter gentler place. Many of the poems in fact combine a delicate balance of all four, nature, olden times, and country critters and folks. For example consider these snippets from:*

On Silent Feet.

*There might be coyotes I must greet,
their shadows, gray from winter's chill.
Wild creatures mostly are discrete.*

*My feral friends deserve a treat.
If I can help them out, I will.
At night they creep on silent feet.*

and from Coyote Songs

*Coyotes wail
a lively tale
that gives my heart a thrill
of days replete
with green mesquite,
bluebonnets on the hill.*

There was a day when all poetry rhymed. Today rhyming poetry

is often snubbed, yet many still enjoy it. For them, as well as myself, this book contains a wealth of rhyme.

Porch Swing Rhyme is close to a textbook on the various forms that rhyming poems can take. Instead of relying on just one or two different rhyme schemes the poetry in this book uses a myriad of the most popular rhyme schemes. For example, you will find poems written with:

aabcbcaa
aba aba aba aba aba abaa
abab bcbc cdcd dede eaea
aabbccddeeff
abcb defe ghih
abab cdcd efef ghgh

While rhyming poetry is not for everybody, it is well suited to a porch swing. So if you are into rhyme or just curious as to how many ways rhyme can be used I suggest you take a look at this book.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Curt B. Vevang is active in the Chicago area poetry scene. He has published three poetry books, *a scant bagatle*, *the nature of things* and *poetry as we like it*. His fourth book is *poetry of the engineer*.

Posted March 1, 2021

Central Air

By Mike Puican

Northwestern University Press,
2020

80 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-0-8101-4207-7

Review by Carol L. Gloor



[Click to purchase](#)

Mike Puican's book *Central Air* relies on sequences of images, rather than a narrative framework, within most of the poems. These sequences are always full of surprise, sometimes verging on magical realism. These surprises often work well, as in the poem "Man Digging a Sidewalk," which is a miscellaneous, but interesting, catalog, of people on the sidewalk, including a teenager walking her "chihuahua dressed/as a honeybee," and then the dog turns to the poet and says "Don't fuck with me. I'm capable/of anything. I am boundless," a surprising speech for a little dog. The whole poem "Unbridled," tells of a fry cook dealing with many customers, but both the fry cook and the customers are all horses or colts, which makes for some surprising sequences, like ". . . A team/of colts, who are also graduate students, / exchange tips on how to locate hotel/ rooms rented by the hour." In the first poem of the book, "The Lawyer Says," the images of wish and reality are suddenly broken because "a lion enters/the courtroom." So the unexpected, at its best, keeps us looking at physical reality in new ways.

This is not to say that this technique is always successful. Sometimes the strange images seem put there just for shock value. In "Clark and Belmont Ghazal," a people-watching poem, which first grabs us with its specific images, like three brothers turning on every faucet in the church bathroom and then sprinting for the door, a waitress who is philosophizing then experiences a plane which "flies in her left ear and out her cheek." Or again, the poem "Fall," at first a lovely poem of rain, trees and hidden secrets, gets lost in the line "I watch a jet float through an el train." The poet generally walks a careful line with the imagistic, non-narrative poems, but sometimes steps over that line.

Beyond form, *Central Air* deals with the universal themes of place, family, work, God and spirituality in complex and original ways. Of course the place is Chicago, and the city is both grit and beauty. In the poem "Chicago," the city is made of "car alarms" and "Cigarettes/in a doorway." But in "Tequila and Steve," a love poem of sorts, the grit and beauty mix easily to end the poem:

The scents of fried eggs

*and just-cut lilacs filled
the air while the back*

*of her neck and a can of beer
created a near-perfect tranquility.*

The place poems decrease as the book moves on into the other themes, sometimes in "I" poems, where the poet speaks

directly, sometimes in third person poems, in which the poet observes others, and sometimes in combined form. The poet's father emerges as a somewhat relaxed figure, but also a worker and problem solver, revealing the poet's complex love for him. The poem "Joke," which is not really about the poet's father, opens with "The one Dad told . . . /A dog walks into a bar and orders a beer". In "Drying the Dishes," Mother wants to work harder, but Dad puts his hand on the poet's arm and says "Let's not get up today." The poem "Settlement" describes how the poet and his father "would spend hours with our faces/inches apart fixing a sink, installing/a ceiling fan." In the wonderful poem "When He's Dead," a catalog of the things the dead no longer have to worry about, the first lines ask, "why he never had the nerve to hug his father," and one can only wonder if this is the poet speaking of himself.

The family poems mix with the some of the strongest poems in the book, which concern the world of work and its hypocrisy, in a trenchant and sometimes totally laughable way. Again in the poem "Settlement," the poet contrasts his father's view of work, "He believed a person's story /was told in their work," with the poet's own: "Most days my story's told in dollar signs/I shake hands, smile, lie, and have lunch. /then am lied straight back to." In "Why I'm in Marketing," advertising becomes completely laughable:

*The three-story woman in a negligee was my idea. It stopped traffic
but no one bought the oatmeal . . .*

*We're not selling breakfast,
we're selling escape. Everyone pretends to write it down.*

The unreality of the poet's work in marketing comes home again in the poem "30 Seconds," "It doesn't have to make sense; it just has to sell product," and "Dryer sheets become spring rain, ready-to-bake/ desserts are cookies in the oven at Grandma's."

Interspersed with the work poems, and often combined with them, are images of God, spirituality and religion. The poet has little respect for religion as such. In "Abandoned Church," the poem personae leans against the stone wall, lights the day's first cigarette and listens to a restless wind that is definitely "Not God's voice." And in "The Magi Ask for Directions" the three wise men are told first to "Turn right at the Olive Garden," and are then led through a series of commercial landmarks that end with the admonishment "You can't miss it. / It's just beyond Land's End."

But religion is not God for the poet, and God keeps turning up in unexpected, and expected, places, in many different guises. In

“Friday Night Poker,” God can’t help from loving everyone,” and everyone becomes “like babies, unjudged.” In the poem “Here,” everyone is doing the best they can, including “God in heaven, / silent as it is, is doing the best it can.” This clearly is the voice of longing, of wanting to know a loving God, or at least a God who pays attention. The last stanza of the poem “Loved One,” a visit to a graveyard, is really a prayer for that kind of God:

*Let there be a God that sees this.
Then a light, a grieving, a swatch of childhood,
Let there be a father, an affection that suffices.
Let there be a memory that finally,
irrevocably resolves, even as it is also capitulation.
Let there be someone who sees this.*

Central Air is not for those who want narrative or progression, but for those who can let disparate images wash over them, for those who are open to surprise and amazing originality.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Carol L. Gloor’s poetry chapbook, *Assisted Living*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2013, and her full length poetry collection, *Falling Back*, was published by WordPoetry in 2018. Her poems have been published in many journals and anthologies, most recently in *Gyroscope*, and she is a member of the Chicago poetry collective Egg Money Poets.

Posted March 1, 2021

Dancing at Lake Montebello

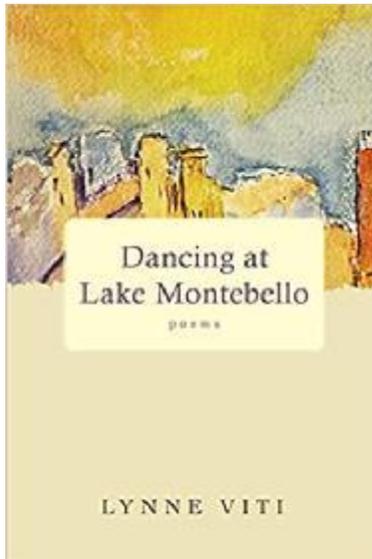
By Lynne Viti

Apprentice House Press, Loyola
University Maryland 2020

113 Pages

ISBN-13: 9-781627-202800

Review by Terry Loncaric



[Click to purchase](#)

Lynne Viti snares the reader into the compelling layers and calculated nuances of poetry. Her latest collection of poems, *Dancing at Lake Montebello*, strikes that rare combination of evocative imagery, lyrical language, and potent themes. She has the capacity to delight and jar you in the immediacy of her narratives.

Viti's precision of language is evident in every line of every finely-crafted poem in her memoir-inspired collection. Viti's work is deeply introspective, yet a joy to read. These poems are clearly meant to be savored, mulled over, and reflected upon. Each reading of a Lynne Viti poem invites you to glean new meanings and discover fresh layers. The power of memory becomes crystal clear.

In "Biography," Viti exposes the stain of segregation, through the lens of a young woman growing up in the '60s in Baltimore, the most segregated Northern city. Viti was raised Catholic. During her life, she taught writing at Wellesley College and worked as a lawyer. She is the daughter of a tavern owner and school teacher. She captures some visceral memories in "Biography."

White girl, born in the city, grew up near the county line.

Catholic school, navy jumper, nuns in round white collars.

Negroes, only saw them when we went downtown,

on the streetcar -- after North Avenue when you looked around.

Viti bears witness with the grace of a poet and the brutal honesty of a memoirist. In our tumultuous times, this message seems less about the '60s than the scab of racism, which never seems to heal.

*I breathed the air of segregation, taking it in,
hardly knowing how it worked in this border state city
of unstated rules, takeout only, segregated pools,
separate schools, public or private, secular or parochial.*

Some of her poems are simply beautiful narratives. In "Matinee at the Shore," she shares a vivid childhood memory of sneaking candy into the movie theater with a surreptitious delight.

*I followed DewAnn's long legs up the wooden staircase,
dragged my hand on rough painted wallboards as we went.*

The candy bag bulged in my pocket.

Laughter met us at the landing.

"Labor Day" recalls a boating accident with haunting imagery. Viti skillfully juxtaposes softer images with the darker details of the event.

*To say something went wrong that day
is to turn away from the sun on their faces,
the sun on gray water,
beer cans they drained, tossed overboard.*

"I Can't Get No" describes with a tinge of wistfulness a basement

party in which college friends flirted and danced to the sexy beat of the Rolling Stones. In the details of her narrative, Viti makes you remember your old crushes and sexual attractions.

you were the preppiest guy I knew.

I never knew anyone who

could dance like you, with such abandon.

It could be Mersey sound, blues beat, r&b.

You were an equal opportunity

music-loving dance machine.

In the same poem, the poet comes to realize, most friendships outlast the sexual attractions of our youth.

You were my friend, one who asked so little,

who made me laugh and shared

his cigarettes and his Scotch with me

his fake cynicism and his jokes.

You were never my boyfriend,

never my lover. You were

the companion who years later left a handwritten poem

rolled into my old typewriter,

blue-black ink, corrasable bond.

In "I Learned That Marilyn Had Died," Viti writes a poignant tribute to Marilyn, a free-spirited English teacher she met at the first school where she taught. Marilyn had a complicated life, grew up with an alcoholic father; she was once engaged, but she never married. Viti has regrets she lost touch with Marilyn, "one of those beloved teachers everyone remembers forever." She reflects on the fragility of life.

*She had the saddest face even when she smiled,
black lashes against white skin.*

*Her dark wit made me laugh and wonder
really, what was so funny about what*

was so sad. I wished I knew

what became of her, before

her short ticket was punched.

Often Viti mines poetry from the mundane. Like all great poets, she can capture and crystalize a moment, and then grasp its significance. The lovely images in "Last Sunday in July" linger in these simple lines. That last line slays me. It reads like a mantra.

Sun, then not-sun, clouds.

Then not clouds.

Warm, then not warm.

Not much to do save

listen to Bill Evans play the piano

wrestle with the crossword.

Turn off the phone. Dream.

A composite of life experiences, condensed into poems, *Dancing at Lake Montebello* is a substantial and enduring body of work. Lynne Viti captures with grit and grace the experiences that brought her full circle, through love and loss, social unrest and reconciliation. In its rhythms, Viti's poetry moves like a wave that keeps slapping you with its force, yet calms you in its serenity. Viti paints a landscape of emotional truth and intellectual depth. There is a cohesiveness in her storytelling that is never lost in the devices of poetry. Viti sharpens every one of her skills as a poet and academic to chisel lasting, precise, and beautiful life narratives.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Terry Loncaric, of Hampshire, Illinois, is the author of *Crashing in Velvet* for Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared locally, and nationally, on storefronts, newspapers, and anthologies. She has hosted many poetry events in the Chicago suburbs.

Posted February 1, 2021

Decennia

By Jan Chronister

Truth Serum Press, 2019

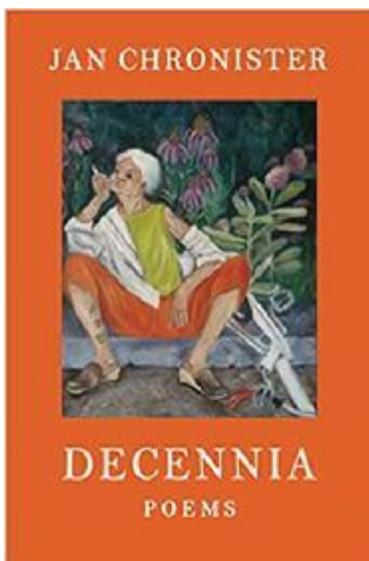
156 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1925536980

Review by Carol L. Gloor

Jan Chronister's book of poems, *Decennia*, is a journey through five decades of the poet's life, from the 1950's to the 1990's, and through a changing world during that time. Each decade has its own section. From the publication credits at the end of the book, almost all of which are very recent, one wonders if these poems are primarily memory pieces written fairly recently, which is suggested the use of the past tense in many of them, or if they were written earlier and just now offered for publication. In the poem *Thoughts on the Nomination of Brett Kavanaugh* from the 1960's section, she hints that she was writing poems early: "I had an angry heart /a city bus ride to college/ and a folder full of poems."

Whether written then or now, poems traverse a landscape of alteration: of the body, of family, of gender relations. The poems are totally accessible and sometimes give the reader who lived through all or part of these decades a startling twinge of remembrance. In the 1950's poem *Self Portrait as Tea Kettle*, she remembers how her father called her "Trixie/after my favorite cereal." I lived through all these decades and fondly remember Trix as the cereal that always turned the milk orange. In the 1960's section she notes "I am from a 60's ranch house /built in a cornfield," which certainly recalls the heedless growth of subdivisions during that time. On a more serious note, in the *Brett Kavanaugh* poem, in the 1960's section, she recalls how women then always had to "Feel pretty/Feel important." Similarly, in the 1970's section, the poem *Still in Alabama*: recalls the still pervasive imposed impoverishment of



[Click to purchase](#)

African Americans, especially in the south, ending with the poignant lines “traces of cotton fluff/ catch on the roadside weeds.”

At best the poems focus on a specific event or object and use sensory images to evoke their meaning. For example, in the 1950’s section poem *The Blues*, the poet is going through drawers of old items and finds a piece of cloth she meant to somehow use and didn’t, but most importantly the smell of the cloth, “pine, touch of lake, tears” stunningly recalls the childhood moment when she saved the cloth. Similarly in *Letter to Myself at Forty*, she begins recalling many family vacations, both actual and dreamed of, then berates herself for not keeping an organized scrapbook as her sister does, and ends with finding a photo that both surprises her and absolves her from the roads not taken and from disorganization, a photo which “takes me back to that day/ in Tucson or Seattle/ when the four of us were still together.”

At worse the poet falls into the old trap of telling instead of showing. In *I Never Eat Strawberry Sundaes*, she recalls seeing her grandfather slaughter a pig in a scene awash with blood, and then being served ice cream with strawberry sauce, which sauce “pools in my mind,” a totally unneeded phrase because the rest of the poem and the title have already done the needed work of the poem. Or again, in *Decorating Habits of the Male Sexual Predator* she sustains a metaphor of comparing wallpaper to women, and uses strong verbs like “slaps” and “peels”, but then ends with the statement that this is how such a man “picks out his prey.” The ending is superfluous because the title, the sustained metaphor and the strong verbs have already gotten us there.

But these are small lapses in an otherwise satisfying trip through time. Does the poet grow and change? Yes, because by the 1990’s she confronts her own truths and the truth of inevitable final loss. In *Car Crash* and *Three Minutes* she movingly laments the death of a friend, and in *All The Things I Did Not Mention* she tells us “I never really believed in God” and “I also have sex with myself.”

Decennia is an easy read, and worthwhile one.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Carol L. Gloor’s poetry chapbook, *Assisted Living*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2013, and her full length poetry collection, *Falling Back*, was published by WordPoetry in 2018. Her poems have been published in many journals and anthologies, most recently in *Gyroscope*, and she is a member of the Chicago poetry collective Egg Money Poets.

Posted February 1, 2021

the samurai

By Linda Crate

56 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1735023021

Review by Cynthia T. Hahn



[Click to purchase](#)

What writer among us has not been surprised by a kind of déjà vu of the self? Linda M. Crate, in her poetic chapbook, "the samurai", has personified this discovery of a stronger, subconscious self, the stuff of dream incarnation, in a feminized samurai form, beautifully portrayed by the wood cut cover by artist Ann Marie Sekeres (annemarieprojects.com).

The dual self that author Crate describes, fuses into one as the text reveals her, that strong sword-wielding warrior, yet falling-from-a-roof self, the one who has lost her life and yet whose essence is prolonged as she is received, integrated and understood in the context of the narrator's current life.

This poetic text can easily be read as a river of words, as one poem flows to the next, in a continued inner monologue of self-uncovering, punctuated by poetic jewels along the reader's path such as, "the lyric of an honest wind," (31), "the starlight she put back in my eyes" (21), and "we have a future in new bones" (13). The thematic of current self in creation initially spurred by "little seeds of doubt and curiosity singing together" (7) encompasses both remembering a stronger version of self to supplant a more recent, weaker sense of self, one who has been rejected in love, and freshly grieving. As the narrator picks up the other 'self sword', her anger is given symbolic weight, and imbued with the power to free herself from past wounds. She projects herself both backward and forward, as if sewing a connection to a female samurai of the self, one who has fallen in a dramatic demonstration of loss, and yet also exhibits strength in her fall. In a sense, the author poetically catches her, or catches up with her in the words, and resurrects her past, envisioned self, re-"incarnating" her as she recovers from her own fall into the grief of unrequited love. As the author states, "we both know the misery of unrequited love" (31) "but choose to focus on the kindest moonlight" (31).

The cover's spectacular red samurai, falling head-first from a green-blue tiled roof into near night lit by full moon is a powerful image echoed by the text; the sword she wields whose arc echoes the shape of her unbound hair suggests a warrior who has lost her balance and whose white, outstretched hand reaches for the full moon's light. The back cover's image continues the front, a red sun setting into an ocean of blue-green, and whose white 'butterfly' birds suggest a free flight of spirit, while coasting and falling across the page around a red-boughed tree. These contrasting images of dark and light, of stability (tree, house, tranquil sea) and movement (samurai woman, birds, sun and moon) comprise a wonderful visual summary of the textual duality and movement towards healing that Crate underscores throughout the text; the poet notes that the samurai took the "monsters" and "sent them packing" (33). It is the samurai's look that reminds the author she is a "tiger" in the "Chinese zodiac"

and can use her "claws" to 'slash' "through the throat of every painful memory" and depart from the clutches of death, in her poem, "14. a grave that was not mine" (33).

The three internal black-and-white renderings offer inscrutably strong faces of standing women, one with sword. The final greyed image of the samurai woman with cat, drinking tea at the window as she contemplates bird, tree and rooftop (reminiscent of the cover) also faces an open lock on a string, suggesting the undoing of the lover's bond, and new freedom to see the horizon, underlining the poetic journey of the text.

These twenty-one poems, moving from "lost in translation" to "there is no surrender" complete a textual identification and self-transformation that is nearly seamless, devoid of capitals so as not to interrupt the stream of consciousness effect, paused by only a strong image of sword-wielding samurai in the middle of the text, following "10. every monster will fall," (23), and the numbered titles of each page's poem. In Linda M. Crate's penultimate poem, "20. i won't stop fighting", the author clearly expresses the inspiration and healing essence of the samurai sword, and a path forward, in her broad statement of the movement of inner healing: "the samurai in me still lives through me and so I make my/ dreams, my words, my light a sword against/ the darkness of this world" (45).

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Cynthia Hahn has been a Professor of French at Lake Forest College, teaching language, literature, culture, film, translation and creative writing since 1990. She is also a published poet and author. Visit Cynthia's web site - www.cynthiathahn.com

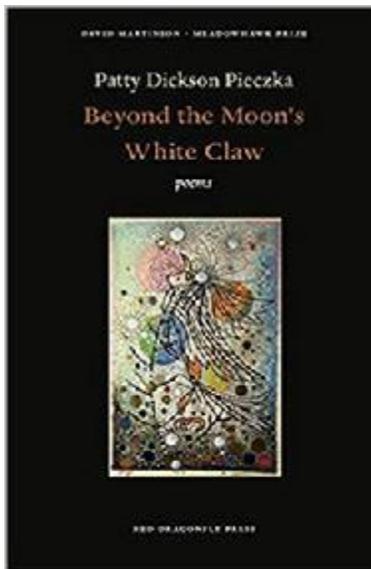
Posted February 1, 2021

Beyond the White Moon's Claw

By Patty Dickson Pieczka
Red Dragonfly Press, 2020
128 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1945063329

Review by Michael Escoubas

Originally published for Quill & Parchment



[Click to purchase](#)

In my role as a book reviewer few collections have moved me more than Patty Dickson Pieczka's new work. As a poet I have learned that reading and writing poems brings about healing in the aftermath of stress. Pieczka avers in her introduction, "I needed to come to terms with the some of the murkier parts of my past." *Beyond the Moon's White Claw*, chronicles that journey and its results. She offers these poems in love, as a gift to her fortunate readers.

Divided into five parts, Pieczka invites readers to accompany her on a quest for healing. While the poems are strong enough to stand on their own, she urges readers to take them in chronological order.

Part I. Marriage to Vic and his father's suicide
Part II. Life after divorce and my friend Kinouk
Part III. Vic's attempt to return home
Part IV. Dedication to all those affected by violence or war
Part V. Epilogue, my present life

As a veteran of the Vietnam war, your reviewer is well acquainted with Pieczka's profile of her husband Vic. At 18, he, like so many young men was

Young and in the war-singed jungle,
his face as carved as an old man's,

shadows of death weave through his hair,
ghosts drifting past his eyes.

This excerpt is one of "Four Snapshots of Victor," which open the collection. Each poem contains five couplets which correspond to Vic's life in carefully measured decades, at 18, 28, 38 and 48. These poems form a kind of artist's sketch of the man destined to influence the poet in profound ways and compel her to inspect *both the beauty and undersides of situations that sparked and flared from her memory*.

Like the changing of seasons in the middle-west, where nature signals gradual transitions, so between Patty and Vic, changes were subtle, moving from

Sing to Me

and make the rough-ridged rocks
of this day
vanish into the sun.

Unlace the afternoon;
let its blue-gray ribbons
fly loose in the silver breeze.

Your voice is a satin river
that lifts me to its currents,

to things more sinister on the horizon

War Shadows

When dark wind and leaves
cannot console each other,
he thrashes the night into thin black rags
as fear runs its hot tongue
through his veins.

As the poems progress in Part I, my heart felt heavy for both
Patty and Vic as their
marriage gradually changed to the point of no return; Patty
writes in *The Well*

I drag my emptiness behind me.
it clatters along the stones
like a metal bucket.

Divorce segues Pieczka toward friendship and hope as she
faces the pain of an
appendage being ripped from her body. In a series of memorable
poems Pieczka blends the visible outer world of nature with the
invisible (but no less real) world of the human psyche. The
moon, the collection's pivotal metaphor, is present throughout.
Even when it is not directly referenced, it is still there, as in this
excerpt from

Silence and Echoes

Wind whispers Vic's quiet laugh,
gathers leaves and piles them
against my door. Kitchen pots
Speak in hollow voices.

...

Sometimes, I wake
in the cool arms of night,
feel his presence and know
he's traveling closer.

Perhaps some readers have felt the same as Pieczka, sensing
that a relationship is moving toward crisis

Back from the Bayou

Vic appears from the Gulf,
and we circle each other

like suspicious cats,
our once-flowing conversations
threadbare and sparse.

As Part II develops Pieczka draws readers up close and personal
as

I pour bittersweet August
into my opened wounds
and pray for light,
tear the night's fears
into tiny black pieces
for the breeze to hold.

Pieczka's anguished heart brings forth powerful imagistic poems. In Part III, she *reaches into the night to feel morning's warm hand*. Vic returns home from his sojourn in Louisiana, but things do not go well. The trauma to Vic's soul from his military experiences finds expression for Pieczka in poems laying open the pathos of their relationship. Here is an excerpt from *What Lives in the Dark*

The day closes its heart,
and I listen through gaps of dusk
to the breath of black trees.

While darkness is profound for the poet, she does not give into darkness; she continually has faith that light will not forever be obscured

While Waiting for Sunlight

I ignored the moon,
never noticed its shape
was an unopened dream
ready to bloom silver.

This poem, toward the end of Part III, marks a subtle transition moving the poet ever-so-cautiously into the orbit of hope anchored in love.

In parts IV and V, Pieczka unfolds a tapestry of poems, born of love, and dedicated to all affected by violence, racism, and prejudice in its many forms.

Though the poet is dealing with issues of profound emotional and psychic depth, she remains faithful to her poetic craft. She is an artist of amazing skill and range.

I would be remiss if I did not cite a particularly poignant poem

from Part V; I leave you with this in power and in majesty

Autumn

I carry your breath in my hands
like warm sun at dusk.
Your laughter vines through my hair,
roots growing into my heart.

Stay with me
while the forest rings
its small brass bells,
and the lake reflects the oracle

of October's bronze mirror,
candling golds and russets
of evening's wild dance.

Hold to our branch and whisper
your song of riffling leaves
before wind clips our stems

to whirl us
back to earth
in our separate turns.

We have only
until the moon blinks.

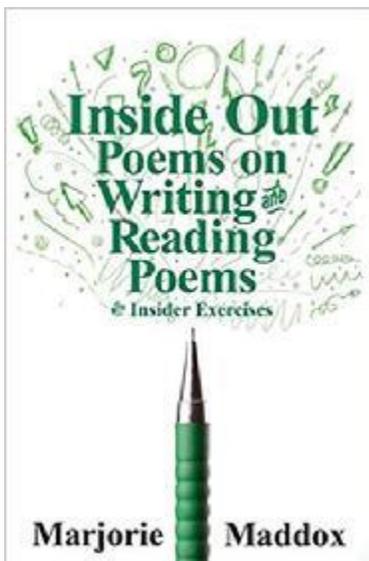
===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Michael Escoubas is editor, contributing poet, and staff book reviewer for *Quill and Parchment*, a 19-year-old literary and cultural arts online poetry journal. This review was originally posted on *Quill and Parchment*.

Posted February 1, 2021

Inside Out: Poems on Writing and Reading Poems with Insider Exercises

By Marjorie Maddox
Kelsay Books, 2020
63 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1950462445

Review by Teresa K. Burleson



[Click to purchase](#)

"Have you ever befriended a poem?" Marjorie Maddox asks in her book, *INSIDE OUT POEMS*. In this book, she takes a subject which could easily become rather dry and tedious and makes it a delight. With a whimsical and lighthearted touch, she doesn't just explain the major poetic forms and literary devices. She gives you original examples of metaphor, personification, simile, dramatic monologue, pun, paradox, alliteration, onomatopoeia, enjambment, caesura, eye rhyme, couplet, clerihew, triolet, iambic pentameter, English sonnet, Italian sonnet, sestina and villanelle.

I especially liked "Befriending a Poem," in which she talks about inviting a poem home for dinner and ends with the line, "Much of what he has to say lies between the lines."

Another of my favorites is "Tug of War between Concrete and Abstract," which discusses the limitation of the abstraction. It concludes with the line, "Meanwhile on the other end of twine or hemp, Concrete's daily dedications pump pictures weighing thousands."

All in all, I found the book a refreshing reminder that poetry is meant to be enjoyed. At the end there are nine insider exercises and a glossary.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Teresa K. Burleson is the author of *A Pilgrim's Lyre* and *Rose Without Thorns*. She has been freelancing over 40 years and has credits in over 45 magazines.

Posted February 1, 2021

Ministry of Flowers

By Andrea Witzke Slot

Valley Press, 2020

104 Pages

ISBN-13: 9781912436439

Review by Lois Baer Barr



[Click to purchase](#)

Fasten your seatbelts! From the first poem to the last you are in for a thrilling ride. Don't worry, you're in the hands of a skilled driver. Not always one to race, Andrea Witzke Slot knows just what pace to take on dangerous curves.

Yes, Highland Park Poets, you guessed right, the book takes its title from Emily Dickinson's poem #905. She invokes her muse with the second poem in the collection, "Between my country and the others-a sea." This poem deals with the distance between the lover and the beloved. The citation is no mere nod to Dickinson whose slant rhymes and nature imagery infuse Slot's book from beginning to end. One of the last poems is called: "Between my country and the others/As ministry." This poem is about the painful process of finding forgiveness and forgiving: one of the main themes of the book. The flowers offered as she crosses a bridge to her "sister" stand for the work of the poet. This is no dozen carnations purchased at the grocery, these flowers represent an opening of the self to extreme scrutiny. "Please open our door. I have changed."

Reconnecting with loved ones who've been wronged requires dealing with ghosts. Slot converses with the patients of the former owner of her house, a psychologist. Her stairway reverberates with the steps of others who creaked up and down them. In "Disguises" her friend comes back after midnight "in your absence, we talk/ and, sometimes, we laugh."

The poetry allows us to be inside very intimate moments as Slot speaks of her annual breast exam or of sitting at a truck stop with truckers waiting for their turn to shower. As she waits for the tow truck that never arrives, she observes the truckers with warmth and startling images: "The odour of stale hotdogs coils/Around this truck stop of quiet men." Her baby in "The Incubator" has "sapling lungs" and is an "unwrapped bundle of earth, bone, flesh." There are sensual poems about making love and about carrying a sleeping three-year-old to the toilet. Direct address to the reader heightens the intimacy in poems such as "Remember when we thought we'd live forever?"

But do you remember the night
The boat left the shore
When we realized where we had been?-
And that the Island was gone?

Readers from Deerfield Poetry Workshop will especially like the tribute to one of our members, the late Helen Degen Cohen, in which the author addresses Helen directly. A Holocaust survivor, Helen was an elegant poet. She lived her life with joy and ferocity; she left no poem uncut.

Despite the serious tone of the collection, there's lots of

humor. In “Self-portrait, Desk,” a persona poem, the desk hears a piano upstairs and “wonders how wood can make such a noise.” A narrative poem in epistolary form, “Dear Police Officer,” tells how the poet got a ticket parking in Chicago when she couldn’t drag herself away from Sonia Sanchez’s performance of her poetry.

Ministry of Flowers is a compendium of poetic forms: sonnets, prose, elegies and visual poems. One visual poem is an ode to a cactus that blooms after three years of dormancy. The dashes at the beginning and end of each line and exclamation points at top and bottom form the needles. On the page, the piece looks like the pad of a nopal.

It’s not surprising to learn that Andrea Witzke Slot is also a scholar. She reveals her academic side with literary allusions and abundant Latin words. Slot uses Latinate words that go beyond our common knowledge, like proprioception and *Lasius Niger* (garden ant). In “Blood Ties, Circa 1932” she calls the work her grandfather did to commit suicide in his garage “the achene preparation.” I had to look that one up. Thankfully, Google lets you hear the word. It sounds like “a keen” which adds acuity and doggedness to the way he pursued death. As always, the sound of the word adds another level of meaning. It reminds the reader of aching preparation and of the aching that the grandmother would relive the rest of her life.

I started with the image of a joy ride. But after that experience, you’d feel the adrenalin rush but not remember many details. With Slot’s work, the images linger: a body collapsing like the circus tent billowing down or her grandmother finding her husband asphyxiated in his car. The plate with what would have been his last lunch waits on the table. Andrea Witzke Slot probes moments of terror and tenderness. There is so much to find in this short book: poems about social justice, poems about llamas and slugs in the garden. Poets, start your engines and race to the bookstore, or perhaps it would be safer to order from this website.

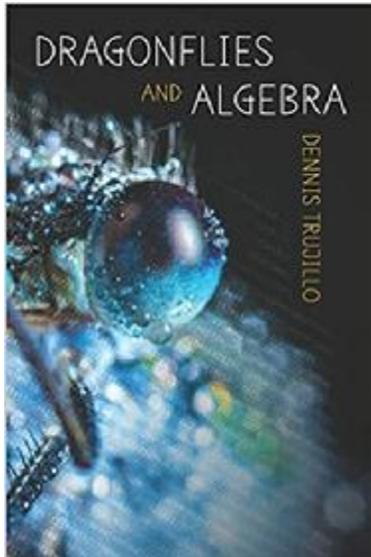
===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Lois Baer Barr lives in Riverwoods with her husband and her pandemic pup Aggie. You can read her poetry in *Biopoesis* (Poetica Press, 2013) and her stories in *Lope de Vega’s Daughter* (Red Bird, 2019). Her work is online at *Alimentum*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Highland Park Poetry*, *The Jewish Literary Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, and *Southern Women’s Review* and in print at *cream city review*, *East on Central*, *Valley Voices*, and forthcoming at *Rattle*.

Posted January 1, 2021

Dragonflies and Algebra

By Dennis Trujillo
FutureCycle Press, 2020
82 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1942371861

Review by Ed Werstein



[Click to purchase](#)

I had taken notice of Dennis Trujillo's poetry over recent years in ezines like Blast Furnace and 3Elements Review, and also on websites like Your Daily Poem and, of course, Highland Park Poetry. So when opportunity knocked about reviewing his latest collection, *Dragonflies and Algebra* (Future Cycle,, 2020) including a free review copy, I answered the door.

One of the hallmarks of good poetry is that it can both surprise and challenge us. Trujillo's book accomplished that before I even opened it. Reading the back cover I was amazed to learn that he is a graduate of West Point and that he had a 20 year military career, facts which both surprised me, and challenged my peacenik anti-military bias. That bias will be a long time in tempering. This brief review will focus on the poetry, which did not disappoint.

Maybe you've imagined what garden gnomes would say to you if they could talk. I haven't, but Dennis has. Maybe you've thought about the taste of raven wings and black diamonds. I haven't, but Dennis has. And maybe you've considered that dragonflies might be interested in studying the quadratic equation. I haven't, but (you guessed it) Dennis has.

In *At the Scrapyrd*, Trujillo offers us obsolete telephone booths waiting for demolition. "They wait/ like dinosaurs looking up at a sky/ of dark ash." And in *The Red Mower* he shows us a weekend project of assembling a new mower. The narrator "poured myself into the job as if/ it were the Apollo Lunar Lander". Later, "The mower loomed in the backyard / like a giant red ant from Mars."

After his military career, which included time spent in Asia, Dennis became a math teacher. He is also an avid, avid as in daily, runner and has kept a journal of his runs for years. The result of this wide and seemingly unconnected experience is a poetry that covers an astounding variety of subject matter: Eastern myth and philosophy, astrology, long distance running, science, insects, math, parenthood, love and loss. There are even odes to the veins on the top of his feet, and to the lowly dandelion.

Dennis is a master of simile and metaphor. In *My Heart Sprouts Wings*, Trujillo happens upon a wounded pigeon while running. The bird "made me think/ of an escaped convict in shackles." The next day the pigeon is still struggling and two other birds are there, "Two others/ kept company like sentries/ at a queen's chambers." And in *Voices*, "...strands of starlight/ murmured through the branches/ of the ginko tree outside/ my window in a language/ only fairies and fireflies/ could unravel."

The poem titles invite the reader in: *Wooden Bicycle*, *Shaman of*

Atlantis, Crayola Therapy, Meteorite Wine, and Where Angels Vacation, to name a few. These poems are full of the sudden turn to the unexpected, and the surprise ending.

Dennis Trujillo's poetry is imaginative, speculative, whimsical, and yet, at the same time profound. And always, always, surprising. Buy this book.

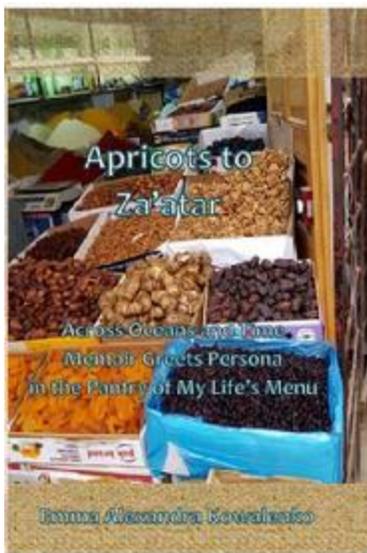
===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Ed Werstein is a regional VP of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, and the 2018 recipient of the Council of Wisconsin Writers Lorine Niedecker Prize for Poetry.

Posted January 1, 2020

Apricots to Za'atar: Across Oceans and Time Memoir Greets Persona in the Pantry of My Life's Menu

By Emma Alexandra Kowalenko
Self-published, 2019
129 Pages
ISBN-13: 9781701893696

Review by Dr. Jonathan Gourlay



[Click to purchase](#)

Emma Alexandra Kowalenko's book *Apricots to Za'atar* offers a cornucopia of poems tracing her immigrant experience through food. Each of the alphabetically arranged poems offers a first course of memory or association, followed by a second poem that adds dimension to the first. This structure, with two poems in conversation with each other around a specific dish, creates a depth that captures something unique about the immigrant experience. Her Polish parents' longing for herring as refugees in Morocco in "Herring and Vodka" is complicated by survivor's guilt in the next poem, when her mother is met with an abundance of herring as an immigrant in Chicago. The secret ingredient here is time. The way something as simple as herring, matzah, or a roasted peanut can link generations, suggest lost villages in Poland, bring loved ones back more viscerally than any photograph.

Kowalenko's perspective on the past is also told from point of view of the objects and ingredients that witnessed it. Poems in the persona of "Garbanzos in Hummus Disguise" or a soup bowl further complicate her story. The poems are not only about how food binds our memories to our present and creates our sense of self but also about the objects we carry with us from place to place. These metaphysical poems suggest that cuisine is not an individual pursuit reflected only in the poet's memories. From the perspective of hummus, after all, our lives are fleeting.

Kowalenko's poetry derives its' power from the noun-driven, deceptively plain-spoken way she spins her memoir in poems. Here's a verse from "Borscht, Hot, Cool, Red, and White":

*Hot borscht, the eastern European, Ukrainian version,
pork ribs simmered in Papa's beet broth.
He adds potatoes for body.
Countering Papa's version,
Mama cooks beets in chicken broth,*

bay leaves, a touch of marjoram.

The specificity of the ingredients has an incantatory power, almost like speaking a spell to bring back the memory. Because of the tactile nature of her images, the reader feels the pull of time, the sense of loss, the full scope of the immigrant journey when she returns to borscht, and her Jewish faith, at the end of the poem. She understands why her mother never made the Jewish version of borscht:

*Life secrets are better kept
than told.*

The poems remind us that, like borscht, we all have versions. For Kowalenko, a youthful fascination with couscous and tagine, an early education in the many flavors of Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, and later travels among the olives and cheeses of Italy.

Perhaps this interest in how food defines us is why Kowalenko calls her book "memoir greets persona." Our versions of ourselves were created in the kitchens of our youth. And we are constantly adding new ingredients, as long as we are alive, from apricots to za'atar.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Dr. Jonathan Gourlay is a writer in Oak Park, Illinois. He is the author of a memoir, Nowhere Slow, numerous articles, and a dissertation concerning sea cucumbers.

Posted January 1, 2021

Time Is Not A River

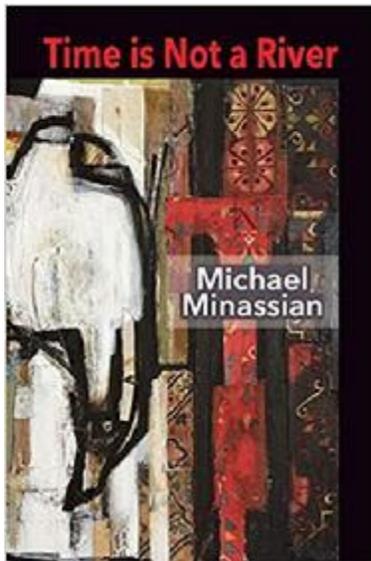
By Michael Minassian

Transcendant Zero Press, 2020

103 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1946460042

Review by LaVern Spencer
McCarthy



[Click to purchase](#)

Since I am relatively new to reviewing books, I will focus mostly on what I like about Michael's book. The first thing I noticed was the impressive amount of acknowledgements. That tells me that the poet is prolific and serious about his work.

In *Is This History?* the poems are well written with an economy of words. Verb usage is strong with sparing use of adjectives. I was especially fascinated by the poem, *The Rosenbergs Come Out To Play*. I can almost smell the stench of death from the electric chair and feel the fear Ethel undoubtedly experienced in real life. Powerful imagery runs through the entire book.

The poems' subjects are varied with a few rhymes interspaced. In the section, *History Follows You Home*, I felt a certain pathos for the pan-handlers, as though I were there refusing to help, feeling guilty and then giving all I had. I noticed an over-used expression in the poem, "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out." I feel that could have been omitted without detracting from the poem.

Michael's poem, *I Heard a River*, a villanelle, would read better if the meter was consistent. Otherwise, the poet did a good job writing the poem. In *Remembering the Starving Armenians*, Michael gets the point across on how seriously his mother disliked wasted food:

But I had to finish my dinner
no matter how full I felt
and if any scraps
remained on our plates
my mother stood
at the kitchen sink
and licked each one clean.

Part 2--Postcard Blues-- In *Postcard From Key West*, the poet explains love as "The overseas highway--sometimes the road doesn't go on anymore"--an apt description. Michael's poems have a certain poignance and elegance that I have rarely seen before.

Most of them have a haunting quality, such as *The Children Send Postcards*.

The children send postcards
to their parents, missing
since birth, lost in a parking
lot behind the empty hospital.

I liked these lines:

The old, wooden crosses leaning into each other
as if they would hear what the other confessed.

Postcard From the Edge of the Lake is another great poem. Its near-rhyme on certain lines did not detract from the poem. I know that rhyming is not the poet's strong point. I especially enjoyed reading *This Autumn Day*, where he describes the sky as:

an old cup of tea that swirls of oily milk.

Michael's poems are full of life where he uses all his senses to describe and relate. In Part 3--Let's Burn the Bed--*This Winter Day* has astounding imagery.

The clouds are piled up
like a train wreck
across the sky,
and tongues of rain freeze
before they hit the ground.

Then, the perfect last verse:

with only the memory of your glance to guide me
home.

Part 4--Like Black Rocks--In *The Short Story*, the poem is not a true Shakespearean Sonnet. It would scan better if the rhyme was iambic and precise. The almost-rhyme does not detract from the poem too much. It was readable and enjoyable. In *Early This Morning*, the poem is whimsical, one of the poet's finest, I think. He compares his friend to Walt Whitman:

with his long hair and beard
he looked like Walt Whitman
wandering into the wrong century.

Throughout the book the poems have an unforgettable, haunting quality. I would recommend it as fine reading, written by a literary genius who goes to extraordinary lengths to make his writing superb.

===**ABOUT THE REVIEWER:** *LaVern Spencer McCarthy is a life member of Poetry Society Of Texas. She has published five books of poetry and three books of short stories.*

Posted January 1, 2021

Other Maidens

By Toti O'Brien

BlazeVOX Books, 2020

146 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-60964-374-4

Review by Linda Imbler

Toti O'Brien's marvelous collection, *Other Maidens*, has a common thread running through the entire book—angst. Bare, vibrating, soulful angst.

Yet, each work is penned so beautifully that one forgets that the poems are born of heartache or despair. Her masterful grasp of language graces each piece, and allusions to the arts are highly present. Toti obviously has significant knowledge of various art forms, and she employs that knowledge to sing, dance, and paint her way through each of this book's poems. Furthermore, her scholarly appreciation for Mythology and History is used to best advantage, as she sieves references to these two themes through her eyes and heart, in order to create the treasures that become her poems.

Lines such as those following seem simple, but are lush with symbolism when read within the context of the entire poem. Lines such as:

“*you have seen many skies bleeding purple*” (*Voyager*),
“*don't trust jaguars, it sighs. Not when they come in pairs*” (*House Of Jaguars*), and
“*if she dares intruding the arboreal crowd without blinking*” (*Of The Palm*).

I highly recommend this book for its intricacies, gorgeous language, and stunning revelations.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Linda Imbler is the author of *Big Question*, *Little Sleep* and *That Fifth Element*.

Posted January 1, 2021