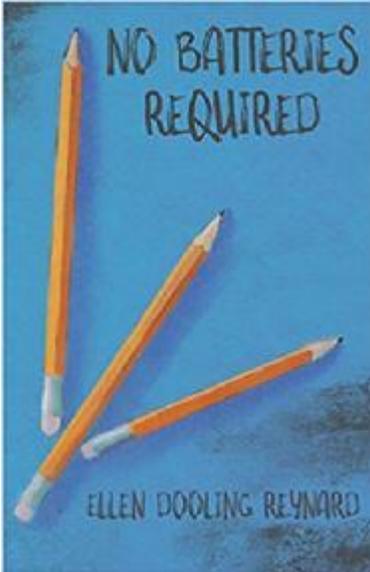


No Batteries Required

By Ellen Dooling Reynard
Yellow Arrow Publishing, 2021
78 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1735023045

Review by Carol L. Gloor



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No Batteries Required, by Ellen Dooling Reynard, is a charming little book. It combines memoir, musings on daily life, observations of nature and animals, and even humor, to give us a picture of a creative, and an emotional, life.

Some of the best poems are close descriptions of domestic and wild creatures. “Black Cat” evokes a cat on the prowl when its space has been invaded:

[the cat] then straightens to tiptoe
 one paw in front of the other
 on a balance beam she alone can see

Similar careful observation enlightens “The Cricket,” who “appears from nowhere/to sit on the rim of my water glass/After flexing his various legs”. In some of the poems these careful descriptions evince a love for “Other Creatures,” [the title of the third section of the book] beyond observation, which combines with other moments of the poet’s life. “Right to Life” begins with a rough bear, then, through several deft turns, moves to preventing the men’s attempt to kill the bear, “The creature lumbers into the shadows/and the men lower their rifles,” and ends with the protection of the poet’s unborn child, “As rage melts, I put my hand on my belly/and feel the stirring of my unborn child.”

Other poems reveal an emotional honesty in confronting past and present, with careful and original language. The lovely poem, “Your Hand,” moves from a youthful moment, “Your finger touched mine/ and my hand caught fire,” to a moment many years later, “I remember how you held/ the pencil, the brush/ your hands/your hands.” In “Ladybug,” a child of four becomes fourteen, then eighty-four, all the while watching or ignoring a ladybug, until old age blends with childhood in the timeless observation of the old woman, like the child, observing a ladybug “blend with the red-orange rose petal.” “Fabric of Friendship” sustains a metaphor of thread, yarn and weaving as relationship through three stanzas, to ask whether a friendship will endure through a whole life: “is the warp and weft still strong/enough to weave new rows?”

Finally, the poet is bold enough to try humor, with some success. In “A Riddle,” the poet riffs on the word “fly,” using several cliches and then gives the answers in backward letters. In the title poem, a pencil is comically compared with a word processing program, “one end for ENTER,” the other for DELETE.”

If there is anything not to be liked in this book it is the tendency toward too much narrative and occasional oversimplification. “Easter 1949” occurs in Montana snow, an

incredible enough image, but spends too much time getting to the gravamen of the poem, that the poet's father had planted an Easter egg in the snow especially for her. And "Old Age" begins with a cliché, "the best years when it is no longer/necessary to prove anything to anyone.

But these lapses do not detract from the essential careful observation, emotional honesty, and original language which permeates the book. All in all, a good read, like a conversation with a close friend.

==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 September 1, 2021

The Bold News of Bird Calls

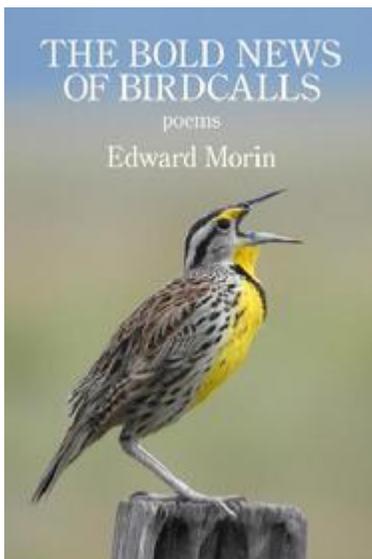
By Edward Morin

Kelsay Books, 2021

102 Pages

ISBN-13: 9781952326707

Review by Lynne Viti



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To label the arresting poems in this collection nature poetry alone would be to miss the breadth and richness of Edward Morin's subject matter in this, his fifth collection in four decades of teaching, writing and publishing poetry, translations, reviews and academic essays. In a volume packed with long-line free verse (with a few exceptions, when he ventures into a tight rhyme scheme, usually to have a little fun with the subject matter), Morin gives the reader plenty about birds—robins, wrens, sparrows, swallows, swans, ducks, grouse as well as house cats, toads, and a neighbor's particularly surly dog. His powers of close observation are evident in the very first poem, about blue jays— "sinister as Dutch elm disease"—and juvenile cardinals, who sing "with the modesty of talented beginners."

Morin's conversational tone and language and his gestures of familiarity with his reader often belie the seriousness at the heart of so many of these poems. In "Elegy," the middle-aged speaker memorializes his colleague from the time of their first teaching jobs, where the two of them 'craved to write fine stories/and bring as many students as we could/by sleigh over the moonlit tundra where/Hemingway and Chekhov had left their tracks." After both he and his friend are denied tenure, they continue their separate professional journeys "know[ing] what stories/sound genuine (and why), what gives us hope/ in life and art, and is most likely to endure." Here, Morin's language and subject hearkens back to Keats' pondering immortality through the poetic art.

The strongest works here are not Morin's studies of nature and

particularly, birds, but narratives plucked from a long life—the tale of a paint store robbery told in “Valentine’s Day, 1972,” when Morin was minding the store and left shaken, on the floor, his hands bound behind his back. In fourteen stanzas full of exquisite and jarring detail, he allows the reader to share his fear and later, his need to tell and retell—both to his lover and us—the story of the robbery and its aftermath. His PTSD is evident, both to him and his girlfriend. The next day, as he sums up in curt, understated language, he quits: “It was only a job.”

Politics, tales of an ex-wife, lovers, a second wife, a flashback to a train trip at age four, from Milwaukee to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to visit grandparents who “smelled wrong/and spoke an unintelligible tongue” are interspersed in no particular order with an elegy for a high school debate team buddy (“Old School Ties”), his factory worker father who “kept our few possessions in good order” (“Bolts in the Blue”), a close study of phragmites in the Erie Marsh (“Mighty Phragmites”), and the tale of his fall from a ladder that resulted both in an ankle fracture—and a spectacular self-mocking poem. A meta-poem, “Poem as a Deconstructed Car” chronicles a spontaneous sports-car boosting caper, whether real or imagined, nonetheless intriguing.

There’s much more, the clever and funny “The Bernie Madoff Hustle,” “Epithalamion,” likely an occasional poem for the wedding of friends, and the collection’s final, and in my view, best section, “The Passage of Swans.” In this last group of poems, Morin paints the portrait of a large extended family, with marriages that stuttered or flew apart, and some that endured. All this is seen through the seasoned eye of the poet, for whom old friends and loves, family, wrens, robins, Presidents (Nixon and G. W. Bush), toads and University Presidents—are all grist for Morin’s omnivorous poetic self.

===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 September 1, 2021

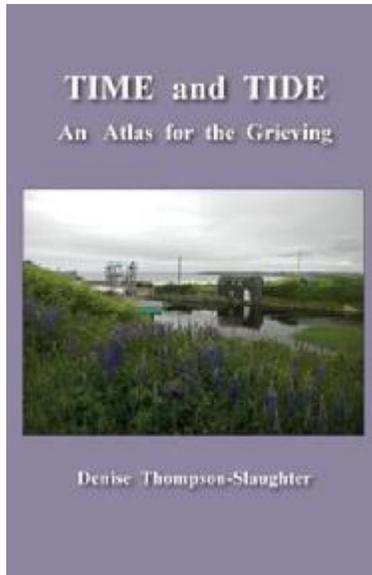
Time and Tide: An Atlas for the Grieving

By Denise Thompson-Slaughter
Plain View Press, 2021
32 Pages

Denise Thompson-Slaughter, a writer residing in western New York State, has published two earlier books of poetry as well as having her work appear in journals such as *Nine Cloud Journal* and the *Tipton Poetry Journal*. She also has published prose, including the recently-released study of the paranormal, *Cleaning the Coincidence Closet: Exploring the “Inexplicable.”*

ISBN-13: 9781632100870

Review by Bill Cushing



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Now she offers a new chapbook of poems, *Time and Tide: An Atlas for the Grieving*. Dedicated “to the Grieving, with special thanks to the medical personnel and first responders during the Covid-19 pandemic,” it is only natural to expect that the 21 poems contained in these 26 pages focus on the effects the virus had on the people of the world over the year of Covid 2020.

Titles such as *Covid 19-20*, *New York City* and *The New Normal* encapsulate the recent year of lockdowns where she recalls how “I am quarantined at home with my many ghosts” in *My Ghosts*. In *The Purell Bottle Is Half Full*, she delivers a perspective on that bromide that brims with dark humor as she asks

In such times can death be kind?
Can death be timely?

How lucky were those who died of old age right before the Black Plague?

Those who had heart attacks in Nagasaki the day before the bomb fell?

***It Could Have Been Worse* offers its own strange form of optimism:**

It could have been Ebola
or the Black Plague or the Red Death,
something bodily gross, bloody.
It could have lasted a decade.
Thirteen times as many could have died.

It could have been worse.

But then again, it could have been better.

The poem *2020* reads like poetic Vonnegut as Thompson-Slaughter notes how

The numerals looked so round and pleasant,
like a date from “The Jetsons” TV show—
simple, clean, easy.

She goes on to observe how the last year was like

1918, 1929, and 1968 rolled into one
with unprecedented new horrors on top.

Then she works through an alphabetical listing of some of the horrors of that year to end with the line “Could it get any worse? Don’t ask!” Meanwhile *Mourning Tote* employs multiple meanings of its title while it examines the impact of mandatory lockdowns

on the human psyche as

We think of all the thousand ways
we're fragile and prone to mistake,
while others we for granted take.
The year advances as it will,
but we tote up our losses still.

One of her most powerful poems concerning the year of the virus is the poem *Lament*, which opens with the stanza

Imagine
death without rituals,
 grief without hugs,
mourning without companionship,
comfort without community.

She follows this with an observation on *Personal Protective Prisons*, an apt metaphor for the trend in masking. Yet here she sees it as means by which we “climb Maslow’s pyramid of needs.”

Still, her best writing focused on Covid, perhaps ironically, are the two Pandemic Haiku. I won’t give them away here as these two deliver a real gut punch to readers.

The writing here also examines modern lives as well as universal ones. There are a number of poems that stand as personal political statement. These include titles such as *Murder of an Innocent* written in memory of Breonna Taylor, *Where Does It End? (for Daniel Prude)*, or *A Nation’s Women Mourn*, an abbreviated acrostic that acts as a paean to the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

Thompson-Slaughter is at her strongest when her writing is more universal in perspective. *Against the Tide*, the opening poem, presents readers a narrator with

arms wrapped tight around a wooden pylon
connecting earth to the river of time.

as “Barnacles begin to cling, but I don’t care” because, as Thompson-Slaughter notes,

Eventually the spring floods come.
The raucous river is full of new water, new life, new eddies and sites of interest, even to me.
My grip loosens and the waves pull me from my post,
wash me further downstream
with my hands full of splinters,
bobbing like a cork,

anchorless.

The Club No One Wants to Belong To identifies with and clarifies how it feels as a parent who experience the loss of a child when she asks,

Don't you get sick of everyone saying
"I don't know how you do it"?
There is no how.
There is only to die or to keep breathing

then explains

But the only superpower you've got
is putting one foot in front of the other.
So,
we do it again today.

These are reactions that I can easily attest to.

The beauty of chapbooks—when done right—and their challenge to the writer is packing as much skill and creativity in a short span of text. Denise Thompson-Slaughter meets that challenge in *Time and Tide* and does so while covering a variety of topics.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Bill Cushing is a retired English teacher currently residing in California. He is the author of two poetry collections, *A Former Life* and *Music Speaks*. His newest chapbook, ...*this just in...*, is also available from CyberWit.

Posted September 1, 2021

Kindness in Winter

By Sally Nacker

Sally Nacker, 2021

42 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-954353-37-4

Review by Michael Escoubas

This review was previously published in Quill & Parchment.

In the winter of his life Leo Tolstoy devoted some 17 years to compiling a journal of wise sayings that he felt would serve the world for generations yet unborn. Of kindness, Tolstoy had this to say, "Kindness is for your soul as health is for your body: you do not notice it when you have it."

I thought about Tolstoy's dictum as I enjoyed the poems in Sally Nacker's latest collection, *Kindness in Winter*. While I sense no motive in Nacker's work to "save the world," or to promote a moral agenda, I find embedded in her poems a heart for life, an empathy for the world which surrounds her. The season itself, speaks a word of kindness into her being, into her soul.

A complaint about reading poetry that frequently reaches my ears runs variously as follows, "I don't read poetry because

KINDNESS IN WINTER



poems

Sally Nacker

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poetry is so hard to understand.” On a personal note, I want first and foremost that my readers understand my poems. So does Sally Nacker. These are poems written to be enjoyed. I begin with the title poem, “Kindness in Winter.” The poem’s protagonist is a nine-year-old girl named Scarlet:

Young Scarlet stands in deepening snow—
where she knows the doe
knows she has stood
at the edge of the wood.
The doe turns her ears toward the soft, recognizable sound
In the snow on the ground.

She listens from far in the wood—
and from a place of long-ago. Good
Scarlet feeds the gentle doe
red apples in the twinkling snow.

I picture the softness of the scene, the open and kind heart of Scarlet. I’m drawn to the color contrast between Scarlet, the red apples offered, and the twinkling snow. In a mere 10 lines we have a winter scene. But this is more than a scene contrived. The poem is a tone-setter. In a world often characterized by violence and the get-out-of-my-way push to achieve one’s selfish ends, this collection is refreshing.

To be sure, Nacker does not restrict herself to just one season. She touches all seasons and, with little effort, links common experiences to them. “Old Age,” is but one example:

Despite all likely lonelinesses,
illnesses, and losses,
my wish is still
to one day be very old—to sit
beside the windowsill
like now, and know
the birds that come and go—
to quietly observe the snow
dissolve into a field of flowers.

Power in language looks away from itself. With stunning simplicity Nacker captures the aging process in terms that make the inevitable palatable.

Nacker’s background is New England; Connecticut to be specific. “Early Spring” captures a simple life any one of us might aspire to:

The man and his wife live simply,
turning the wood in their stove.
It burns like thought and poetry

In the making, throws love

On the cool spring morning. Behind
their little house a garden grows
spinach and greens, the kind
uplifting faces of new primrose.

This poem causes me to conjure applewood smoke curling from
the chimney, the sweet fragrance of biscuits baking and dew
sparkling on early spring grass.

Continuing with examples of seasonal poems other than winter,
you shouldn't skip over "Edge Habitat in August Rain." This gem
pictures a woman sitting quietly in the rain while birds flit and
frolic "as though she were not there."

Similarly, if you like poems wherein the weather and human
beings meld into a single being, make a note to read "David's
Art." *Watercolors splashed over the paper, coloring / the blank
world with a heaving and tossing / of my own heart.*

By way of poetic technique, Nacker's poetry is fraught with
rhyme. But she does it effortlessly. I am not a big fan of rhyme.
Poets often force their rhymes, straining self-consciously to think
of just the right rhyme to fit in the line. Nacker is like Javier
Baez fielding a grounder at shortstop. The batted ball, the
pickup, the toss to first base are of a piece, a work of art
contained within itself. This is the treat for-tunate readers have
in store when they purchase a copy of Sally Nacker's *Kindness in
Winter*.

===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 September 1, 2021

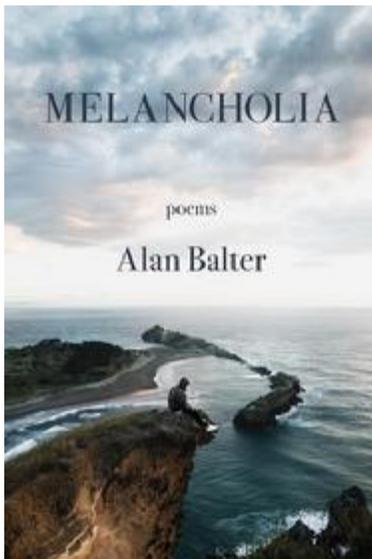
Melancholia

By Alan Balter
Kelsay Books, 2020
41 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1952326301

There are books of poetry that you read all the way through and
there are books of poetry that you pick up, periodically, when
you need a little perspective. *Melancholia* by Alan Balter is a
collection of poetry that acts as a time capsule. Vignettes
touching on moments from a past life, verse on the nature of
nostalgia, ruminations on age, love and, of course,
death. Balter's poetry is profound in its simplicity and while I
didn't find it subversive, I did find it illuminating.

Review by Mike Freveletti

Throughout my notes taken while reading this collection I kept
coming back to what appears to be one of Balter's major



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“themes” in his poems: time. A specific type of time, age, in his hands is multifaceted at the very least and continuously evolving. Take for instance the poem “Imagine” which appears close the middle of the book, “six bedrooms each with a bath en suite/ with marble tile and golden faucets/ but nowhere a place for the boys to strut/ their stuff and tease the girls a while”.

It’s a portrait of growing up and how over time, like all things, how we grow up *changes*. What’s most important, in terms of environment, for a child to grow up happy? Is it a lot of money and cool stuff? What I see in this poem is an image of a somewhat lost view of domesticity. Completely gone? No. Fading? Kind of. In the cosmos of Balter’s poetry there is the slight notion that the words he chooses take us back to a less complicated time even if that’s not necessarily the case.

A character in some literary movie once said that nostalgia is denial. You choose to ignore the present because it’s too painful and instead revel in the past. I love the movie *and* the line but disagree with the sentiment. In the poem “Lost” this reader got a heavy dose of nostalgia and it struck me as one of the best poems in the whole collection. Lines like, “the first love poem I ever wrote/ and the sad novel I almost finished,” made me think about my desk full of love poems and the many shelved novels. The plight of the writer. The poem ends with the poet thinking back to old friendships, “maybe they’re all in a quiet place/ on a slope near a mountain stream gurgling/ waiting for me to find them again/ or maybe they’re lost forever”. That stanza almost took me back to my yearbooks from school.

Many of the poems here represent situations that are common but common doesn’t necessarily mean happy. One such poem is called “Depression”, a word that resonates with me personally but what Balter does at the end is ask the age old question, “am I living or am I dead/ and which one is second best?” A timeless question that’s always contemporary no matter how many times we ask it. Here’s another poet asking the right questions.

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

Posted September 1, 2021

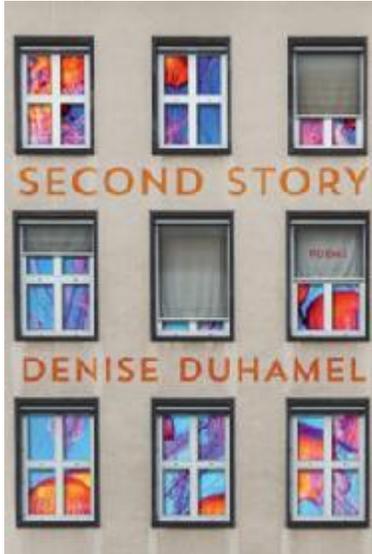
Second Story

By Denise Duhamel
University of Pittsburgh Press,
2021

Denise Duhamel says she became a poet because of a poetry course she took in college. That made all the difference. A transplant in the Miami area since the first decade of this century, Duhamel is the daughter of working- class Rhode Island parents, and she pays homage to their traditions, ethics, love of

110 Pages
ISBN-13: 9780822966531

Review by Lois Baer Barr



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education, and their influence on her in many poems in this volume. “Poker Hands,” the second poem in the book, is an elegy to her father centering on his calloused hands and the myriad things they can accomplish, in contrast to her own “weak hands.” Even more telling, in the antepenultimate line, she reveals that the first time she boarded an airplane and would “travel farther than you and mom had ever been,” her purple nail polish was already beginning to chip. She would study abroad, she would attain advanced degrees, but she would still be a girl with a thin veneer of polish.

The first poem of the book centers on Duhamel’s political commitment and one of her most urgent topics, global warming. Living and teaching in Florida, she knows firsthand the upheaval and human suffering that climate change can inflict. “Folkways” begins with the poet seeing the sea coming closer and ends with a homeless man who showers at the beach where the upper classes rid themselves of sand before heading home. The man sometimes simply bathes in the sea, and his words to the poet are ironic and prophetic.

He says maybe his luck is changing,
Maybe one day soon
The ocean will come to him.

At the heart of the book is a long poem about Hurricane Irma. I admit I stopped reading “Terza Irma” my first time through the book. It’s thirty-one pages that cover Duhamel’s evacuation and return home during the upheaval caused by Irma (9/5 to 9/18 2017). I went back to the poem for the sake of the review, and realized it is well worth savoring slowly. The poet relates the utter chaos of trying to get out of harm’s way when the highways are parking lots. The reader is brought into the confusion and fear the poet and her friends experienced when they didn’t know where to go or where to find the basic necessities. They see damage everywhere as they return home. It becomes personal when Duhamel gets to her first-floor condo to find sea water and mud everywhere.

I hoist my suitcase up the stairs, brace
myself as I open the door, slip
on water in the hall and come face
to face with my books, the white shelves drip-
ping. I pull down Dante -the pages
heavy, wavy as potato chips

There is also humor in “Terza Irma.” The rather clunky separation of *dripping* into two lines to make it rhyme with *slip/chips*. The pratfall and the salty metaphor just make the poem more poignant to this reader. I enjoyed the satirical portrait of her neighbor, the new age yoga instructor, who

becomes overbearing in her attempts to teach Duhamel how to deal with the loss. Irritated and impatient, the poet just wants to get the woman out of her apartment so she can rub some Tiger Balm on her sore muscles and go to bed.

As far as structure of “Terza Irma,” Denise Duhamel follows the terza rima form with rhyme on first and third line of every three-line stanza. The form (aba, bcb,cdc, etc.) is used in Dante’s *Divina Comedia* and she follows this form for the entire length of the work. It is not heavy-handed, and I was so interested in the plot, the personalities of the good friends, and the kindness of the condo superintendent, that at first, I only noticed that it was done in tercets. Now (thanks Wikipedia) we know why the first ruined book she pulled from her shelf was by Dante.

She deals with humor about the menace of spam with her found poem using words from an email sent by someone called Mindy whose subject line read “I Love Sex in all its Forms” Duhamel followed the links offered in the email and created her entire poem with language from the sex websites.

Also, very political are her two clever prose poems called “Forty-five...Noun.” The titles are written as dictionary entries complete with International Phonetic Alphabet guide to pronunciation. The first poem emphasizes the ubiquity of guns in society now and take us back to days when we Ops only knew about cap guns or Davy Crockett’s rifle. She ends it by saying that when she mentions forty-fives to her students, they think she’s talking about a gun. “When I teach David Trinidad’s ‘In My Room,’ a poem about a pensive boy listening to 45s, my students ask if he is listening to guns.” The second poem called “Forty-Five” is a rant with all the hilariously sickening names applied to the president of that number. It ends:” “See also Trump: code name for Meth.” One wonders whether she was influenced by an article in *Rolling Stone* by Annamarya Scaccia, “Donald Trump’ Tops List of New Meth Nicknames” in the May 30, 2017 issue.

Another thread that weaves throughout the book is her love life. Love Poem #6 and Love Poem #11 should be called love/hate poems as they deal with the struggles she and her ex-husband have had with their relationship.

Because of her use of simple language and highly original images from mythology and pop culture, I didn’t realize at first that her work is often written in classic forms. There is an artful sonnet, “The Unreturning, 2019.” “I Love Sex in All its Forms” is a pantoum. She also has a pantoum about the Covid19 pandemic. But the most wonderful pantoum is about becoming her mother. Its repetitive nature underlines her fears that she is, like her mother, losing her memory. Another poem reveals her as a devoted but somewhat baffled aunt to six boys under six

who all look very much alike, in “A Sestina of Grand Nephews.”

Denise Duhamel has the confidence of a successful poet whose work has received important prizes. She not only uses Italianate forms, but she pens her own brief version of Ginsberg’s masterwork “Howl.” In her interview with Tim Green for Rattle’s weekly YouTube/Facebook reading and open mic (Rattlecast #86), she addresses that divide between rap and academia that no longer exists. A Distinguished Professor at Florida International University, I would say she bridges that gap artfully. Maybe she built the bridge herself. Anyway, I invite you to cross over and climb up to her *Second Story*. All good poems have a second story and, like her work, maybe a third or a fourth. From now on, I’ll be climbing stairs behind Denise Duhamel to wherever she may lead. I’m a convert.

===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 August 1, 2021

***Kissing the Long Face of
the Greyhound***

By Yvonne Zipter

Terrapin Books, 2020

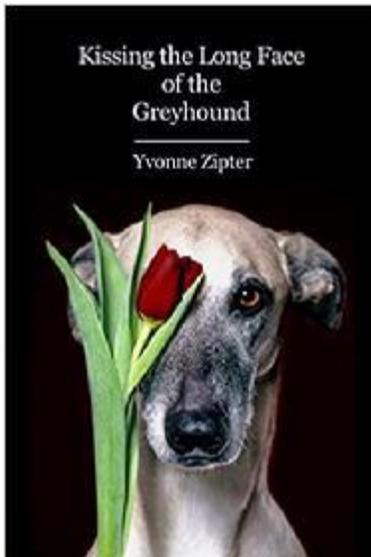
92 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1947896291

Review by Marjorie Skelly

Yvonne Zipter writes of the outdoor natural world in surprising ways that invite her readers to both look at and see that world more comprehensively than we currently do.

The book begins with the poem “Summer Lament,” the first few lines being “Catalpa blossoms clot the sidewalk/ like too much joy/ or an explosion of faith....” This beginning sets the stage for other arresting nature imagery. One can start to feel as though Zipter is our tour guide taking us on a journey that we have never been on before, one that ignites the everyday lives we



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lead into places where the mundane is somehow transformed into magic, something precious that we just might have overlooked in the absence of Zipter having written this book!

By the time we get to the last poem, “Blue Wild Indigo,” we have hopefully better learned the art of paying close attention, both to the ways we read and interpret poetry and the way that the natural world unfolds our senses if we have the patience to stay with nature instead of running through it as fast as we can to get some place other than nature. At least that is the way that I interpret some of my own reactions to nature at times.

That said, Zipter invites us to not just see, hear, smell, and taste nature. In the poem “Blue Wild Indigo,” we even learn about the history of this plant that once yielded the “dye prized, once, by shamans,/slavers, rag traders, and kings....” And, of course, Zipter stays with nature long enough to see the Blue Wild Indigo’s interior consisting of “seeds lined up/ like piglets at suckle/ like rowers in a scull,/ like socks in a gentleman’s drawer, like/ footlights glowing golden against the pod’s/ black backdrop, ready to illuminate the next/ stage of their cycle: heroes of their own story.”

I would be remiss not to comment on the cover of this book which encapsulates in many ways and in one picture, the intent of the book. The Greyhound dog is looking at us readers with just as much intensity as we might have if we looked at him/her carefully. The Greyhound looks at us with one eye open and the other covered with a freshly picked red rose. I won’t bother with my specific reaction to this book cover as your reaction should be yours, not mine. But...with a title like “Kissing the Long Face of the Greyhound,” who would not want to open the book and read it? Who would not want to experience such killer lines as “I let the grass run its fingers/ over the naked back/ of my foot.”? (From the poem “Into the Opening” on page 61).

So, sit back with a glass of wine, or another favorite drink of yours, while you read this book, and perhaps you will have the same questions that I have: Who can always tell what is ordinary, extraordinary, mundane, spiritual? Can heaven be right here on earth? What might I be missing, not seeing?

When I closed the book, and thought about it for a while, I realized that the questions might be more important than the answers.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Marjorie Skelly is the author of *The Unpublished Poet*.

Posted August 1, 2021

The Purpose of Things

By Peter Serchuk

Photography by Pieter de Koninck

Regal House Publishing, 2020

86 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1646030194

Review by Gail Denham



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What's missing in *The Purpose of Things*, a book of poems and photographs? Flowery language, excessive metaphors, and hyperbole. For that, I give thanks.

For me, this is the best poetry book I've read in a long time. It's simple, down to earth, creative and fun. Not just fun, but also full of meaningful comparisons, and statements.

The book is the brain child of author Peter Serchuk. This author has collaborated with the unusual photos presented by Pieter de Koninck, unusual photos that somehow end up fitting the poem.

Whether this was planned or simply happened, I cannot say. However, I know that the poems work well with the photographs. As I read, I am led to unusual connections that come together as you read the poems and view the photos.

Which came first - the chicken or the egg? It matters not. These combinations of poems and photos broaden the understanding of each. I'm definitely in love with this style book.

The book's theme and title is "The Purpose of Things" Illuminating the Ordinary. This has always been important in my writing career, whether in story, essay, or poetry. "Write the real," I counsel attendees at writing workshops. "Do not be afraid to talk about a shoelace, what lives under the bed, the kitchen sink, or even a flat tire. Listen in to conversations in restaurants or other public places. Take notes, collect unusual words and record images in your mind. Everything counts. Your observations carry weight, and further - could encourage or influence the readers of your work. Write the real.

In "The Purpose of Things", I would point out a few lines that spoke to me. For example: beside a photo of rather worn shoes, Serchuk writes: "The purpose of Shoes is "The chauffeur always waiting when...you wear your welcome thin." Trees: "A coat rack for the fog To shadow every field." Maps: "To praise the names of dying towns whose dot the world forgets."

A photo of weeds growing through a fence: Serchuk writes, "To shame the greenest thumb. To praise what won't be tamed." A pair of glasses sitting on a book compliments Serchuk's words: "To hack your way through fog to find a cabin in the woods."

So much un-spoken wisdom comes through the lines of Serchuk's poems. A photo of water surging over soap goes with: "To learn how quickly anything can slip right through your hands." I must end, else I quote the whole book. "The purpose of Faith": A close up of candles in a sanctuary accents Serchuk's "To point your compass north before the dealers call your bet."

The Purpose Of Things has only 79 pages. It's a book to keep nearby to read again and again. Plus purchase copies for fellow poets. Thanks to the author and the photographer as well.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Gail Denham says, "Writing keeps me sane at times - Have had stories, essays, poems, and newspaper articles, plus many photos published in magazines, newspapers, books, over the last 45 years."

Posted August 1, 2021

Resonance

By Gary Beck

Cyberwit.net, 2021

135 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-818253-706-4

Review by Jacqueline Stearns

Resonance is an eclectic work that combines writings dealing with themes of frontline workers, progressive politics, history, and romantic entanglements into a deftly written cohesive whole.

Dire Prediction begs the question, Will societal changes i.e. outsourcing jobs thus eliminating indispensable blue collar workers, deprive Americans of safety and protection provided by firefighters, police officers, and service people?

Radiation Rhapsody is a chilling poem that fuses two worlds together-Everyday life: The A train stopping at Times Square, sparrows hanging out on windowsills: with the theme of nuclear annihilation. School children hide beneath desks. Their fathers construct rockets. People suddenly silenced by a blinding flash.

Rant tells the story of a left wing militant, preaching about oppressed citizens rising up and throwing off the chains of tyranny. He forgets his ideology when a sexy woman passes by.

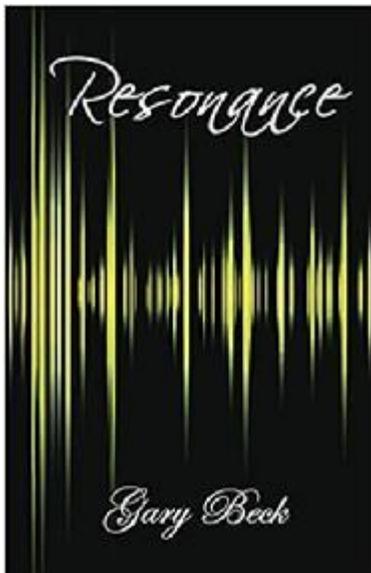
Much of this book deals with romance.

1. Brief encounters with people who can't be forgotten.
2. Long term relationships where both partners do little more than go through the motions.
3. Long standing liaisons ending badly.

Resonance is a charming mix of free verse rhyme and vivid imagery that grab the reader's attention. Lines that caught me include: "My life's perpetual burning, impaled on tortuous spirit," and "Cut, parry, lunge, disengage."

From *Zoo Threat*: "The leopard prowls from wall to wall, cursing the bars with flame eyes."

Religious references are interspersed within secular themes. In *Haunted*, a group of people are together giving serious thought



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to life choices. One line reads: "Captured by the serpent's spell."

Overview depicts a person escaping into the realms of fantasy, has this to say: "While wings of iron ravish God's pure realm."

Opium Escape: "We devoured each other like wafers," is part of a jilted lover's recollections of a woman he loves. The aforementioned rhyme patterns breathe life into the pieces they inhabit.

Sequoias is about a person wandering through a copse of dying sequoias who finds beauty in nature's sadness. "The path unfolds in awe as I catch my breath, all splendor gone in such majestic death."

Respite describes a stranger walking along noticing the happiness and joy of playing children. The man realizes he can never recapture the magic of childhood.

This book also follows a life in chronological order. A baby is born, reaches boyhood, attends school, becomes a troubled teen. He gets married when his lover becomes pregnant. He gets trapped in a dead end job.

From *The Voice of One Man Singing About the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962*, "Old Age speaks of someone nearing the end of life, wishing for one last stab at living before the inevitable."

Resonance brims with offbeat wisdom, as it takes poetry lovers on a journey of reality, using humor and irony to reach its destination.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Jacqueline Stearns holds a bachelor's degree from William Paterson College (now University). She is proud to have her work include in Highland Park Poetry's Summer Challenge Muses' Gallery on Shoes. Jacqueline's work has also been published in several Montclair Write Group Anthologies.

Posted August 1, 2021.

Nature: Human & Otherwise

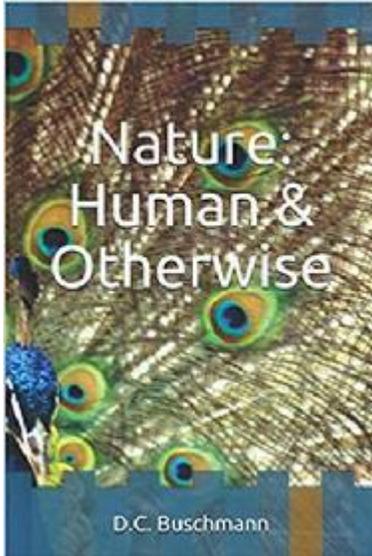
By D.C. Buschmann
Independently Published, 2021
62 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-8550-9000-8-6

As I began working my way through Denise Buschman's debut collection *Nature: Human and Otherwise*, I happened onto a poem that, for me, serves quite nicely as an anchor to the whole: "Disengaging to do Other Work." The poem is about "leaves disembarking / from their life source / without pain," to engage in doing other work. This other work involves enriching the soil, giving the gift of life to other trees, humbly and efficiently contributing to the cycle of life.

Leaves are small, organic things which may escape our notice

Review by Michael Escoubas

Originally published for
Quill & Parchment



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unless we pay attention. Buschman DOES pay attention, that is the whole point! Buschman sees small things like leaves, she sees how they matter, how they do their part. To be sure, people are not leaves; unlike leaves, human beings share the gift of speech, the attribute of consciousness and responsibility for their actions. Yet, the anchor I propose seems to apply. Consider the poem, “Small Things Are the Stuff of Life”:

Americans are vibrant blocks
in a living quilt, shades and hues
shapes and sizes, stitched together
into a colorful, cohesive Picasso.

Then, in an incisive commentary on contemporary journalism, she continues:

But, the media divides and separates
like Playtex Living Bras.

In their eyes, homogeneous and harmonious
quilts are a non-story.

Long-nosed puppets, politicians
over promise, under-deliver.
You and I have to make
our own peace with one another.

The poet sees, really sees, the world around her. In the art of living, we often, and in diverse ways disengage to do other work, important work like making our own peace with one another.

In a famous quote by Jane Kenyon on the calling and commission of the poet, Kenyon had this to say:

“The poet’s job is to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in such a beautiful way that people cannot live without it; to put into words those feelings we all have that are so deep, so important, and yet so difficult to name.”

--From *A Hundred Daffodils*

As I trace Buschman’s thought, I find no hint of over-stated piety. She is a dedicated student of the human condition.

She is good at putting into words those feelings so important, and yet so difficult to name. Who among us would resent this reminder about the dangers of engaging in “Gossip”:

A snake lurks
in the dark

infuses carriers
with venom

sinks fangs into
prey
 by proxy

Buschman's poetry showcases variety and craftsmanship. The poems are an interesting mix of free verse, rondeau, haiku, a collaborative piece, two prose poems and several poems with as many as 12 indentations which delightfully fuse form and message.

Enticing titles drew me in: "Giving Birth to a Dancing Star," raises the curtain, "The Futility of Darkness," made me curious about why,

The sun slips
steadily
through
empyrean

"Green Beans, Potatoes, Ham & Charlie," brought back memories of my childhood when my parents insisted that I could not get down from the supper table until I ate ALL my green beans.

"A Blessing," is dedicated to James Wright; Langston Hughes is channeled in "Nature's Medicine." I have read Hughes, Buschman's take is faithful not only to Hughes' style but to the truth about his world.

The poet's titles piqued my interest; her content made me stay.

As a reviewer I seldom purchase poetry books. I receive a steady stream of them in the mail. However, I would order this collection in a heartbeat. Where else would I learn about "Nature's Hairbrush"?

Twigs and branches
black and brittle
flew off trees
 during the storm
as if a giant hairbrush
had winnowed
the stiff, lifeless tresses
empowering the living
to dance
unfettered
in the breeze.

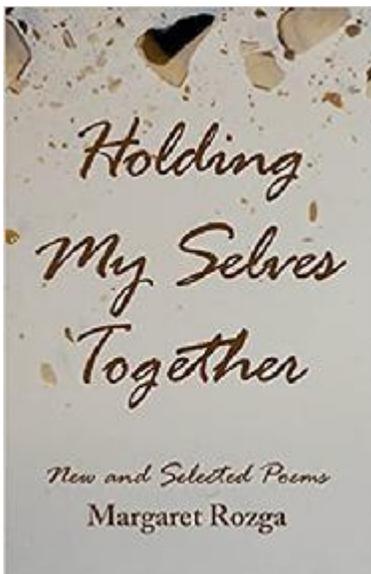
===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Michael Escoubas is editor, contributing poet, and staff book reviewer for *Quill and Parchment*, a 19-year-old literary and cultural arts online poetry journal. This review was originally posted on *Quill and Parchment*.

Posted August 1, 2021

Holding My Selves Together
New & Selected Poems

By Margaret Rozga
Cornerstone Press, 2021
231 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1-7333086-6-3

**Review by Christine
Swanberg**



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“Gravitas” is the word that describes Margaret Rozga’s *Holding My Selves Together*. In this full-length, 141-page collection, poems are grouped seamlessly from each section to the next: *Alice Marathons*, *The Last Six Miles are the Hardest*, *Even in Beauty*, and *Holding My Selves Together*. We have the magical, mythological Alice as the collection swells into poems of a wise elder reflecting on social justice begun in the 60’s and a life filled with commitment to create a better world. The sections transcend into a broader world of beauty and garden, Covid, ending spiritually with personal reflections.

In this collection are a dazzling array of forms, some experimental and many very challenging. We encounter persona poems, prayerful poems, imperative voice, family honor poems, and poems about heroes and friends of the past. Themes include reflection on past activism and wistful yearning that it had solved more problems. Other sections explore search for beauty, transcendent questions and renderings on the nature of being itself.

The selves listed in “Conjugating Pronouns” nail down the identities in an accessible manner, for me the linchpin poem in the collection. Here are the beginnings of the lines:

The gardener gets herself dirty...
The grandmother talks fractions...
The editor seeks to create...
The sky-watcher learns...
The poet feels...
The citizen knows...
The activist now...

Yet the collection’s magnitude morphs these various selves into a story that is much art as narrative. The breadth and depth of the chapters are exquisitely captured in the book’s arrangement into sections. Each section ends with a poem that leads into the next session, a clever poetic foreshadowing telling us to get ready for what is next. As a longtime poet myself, I have noticed a tendency for poetry books to revolve around a single theme. This collection explores more than one theme in more than one style, revealing a committed poet who has been devoted to her

art and to her commitment to social justice for many years. An important poet, once Wisconsin Poet Laureate, reveals a life of commitment, which invigorates the reader.

The last section often alludes to life during Covid. I appreciated “A Pandemic of Misses” in which Rozga’s repetition of “I miss” feels as though we were having a conversation. Several voices join on what they miss. A few lines from that poem include:

I miss eating with other people, I said.
I miss our Yoga class, my sister said...
I miss soccer, the granddaughter said...
I miss school lunch. I miss school breakfast, the grandson said...

Rozga has a penchant for choosing themes and words that are not just personal but also important to the world of social justice. The poetry has a collective and personal voice combined skillfully. This is very hard to do without ranting and raving, but she does so quietly but firmly in many narrative poems of past marches, jail visits, and working for fair housing. I wish that younger readers could see all the work that many tried to do and the wish had happened faster and stabilized into a fairer reality. I recommend strongly reading the second section, The Last Six Miles are Hardest. Poems such as “History,” “Alabama Bound,” “Arrest the White Girls,” “Five Gestures of Freedom,” and “At James Chaney’s Grave 50 Years Later” engage the mind and heart.

A short excerpt from “Alabama Bound”:

Sit-ins. Boycotts. University Doorways.
Interstate buses. City jail, county jail.
Bull, the dog, firehouses. Jim Clark, his horses.
Deaths, more deaths.

I would add more selves to Margaret Rozga’s litany of identities: wise elder, lover of justice, brave guardian, and virtuoso poet. The collection is satisfying at every level. Those who love extremely challenging forms and styles to ponder will find them. Those who resonate with causes for social justice will resonate with those accessible poems. Lovers of the earth will find quiet garden poems. Those who seek spiritual connection in poetry will find it in these pages.

This collection is nothing short of a feast, a banquet of delicious poems, one after the other. It is an important book by an important poet.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Christine Swanberg is the first official Poet Laureate of Rockford, Illinois and widely published, awarded, and collected.

Posted July 1, 2021

Smoke the Peace Pipe

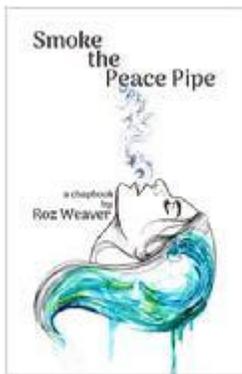
By Roz Weaver

Yellow Arrow Publishing, 2020

61 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1735023014

Review by Cynthia T. Hahn



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Creative writing is a well-recognized form of therapy. Reading poetry written by a poet-therapist aimed at describing and showing a path towards self-healing, can also be effective therapy for the reader. Roz Weaver, UK therapist, poet, social worker and spoken word performer, demonstrates the power of creative expression through poetry to heal from physical as well as psychological trauma in her first chapbook, *Smoke the Peace Pipe*. The cover, by Joanne Baker, illustrates the metaphor which is fully elucidated in the final poem of the same title.

Written in free verse, each poem hangs upon the use of complicitous duality, antithesis with an encouraging twist. In this way, Weaver takes us in, invites us to be part of the "I" and the "we" of her poems, both rain and rainbow. The sorting of the pieces of self comes through not as a puzzle but rather as an accounting, a series of declarations that question, that encourage, and that always recognize the pain, in alternating concrete and abstract terms. As she notes about the text's title, it expresses "...the intention of paying regular visits to the parts of ourselves that don't sit comfortably, how we can learn to bear what we thought was unbearable, and how by doing this we can make space for the possibility of a bigger picture" (61).

From the first poem, "How Trauma Dresses at Daybreak," duality and complicity are already present, communicated by an intimate, informal and knowing poetic voice: "I woke this morning in parts", "...washed my body in two minds/one mine, one a critical mother". The declaration of the damaged state, "I am missing whole pieces of woman" leads the rest of the work through the process of self-reconstruction. In the second poem, "Raw Soup for the Skin Soul", the "we" is present, inviting the reader to see the duality of body/mind, of conflicting emotions or voices, and also inviting us to participate in the struggle aimed at a positive end: "...I will get us through", "...joy wins the war in the end." What is inferred then is the 'chicken soup for the soul' cliché, reanimated here, both burning hot in its 'rawness' and also comforting in its description of what has been and what can be accomplished. It is the "Brainwork" of poem three that posits the idea, "I think I'll visit myself more often" and suggests that we "sit across from our fears" (9), brushing out the dust and the dark. Weaver urges us "home", to practice the "gripping" and the "letting go", to step into versions of the self, to unveil what has been in hiding ("Home is Where the Spirit Goes", 11). At the same time, rainbow and storm cohabit, and an important declaration is made "...to live/meant leaving" ("Double Rainbow", 13). The consistent use of physical and metaphysical imagery (e.g. "love coming home", 29, picking "my power up off

the floor", 31, creating "a map of my body", 33, laying the "groundwork", "and not seeing hope as a chore", 41) parallels the self-knowing and healing process mentally for poet (and inspired reader), and aptly described as visceral experience.

Peace comes to the self-healing process in the latter third of the text, through a coming to terms with memory scars, and honoring the self-body as "Goddess" (57). Weaver notes "...peace waves,/ where healing is a boat", 47; "There's a peace in the dawn that guides us all; an opportunity /for the heart to lead", 52, and finally, holding the self, "until every part is loved as truth" (59). In the end, Weaver reiterates realistically that this process, while love of the self is being regained, remains so much "unfinished business" as "We, wild spirits", "long lost siblings" find ourselves (59). In this final poem, "Smoke the Peace Pipe," Weaver clearly puts together the pieces of self ("you") and aligns them with others ("we") who have also unleashed the truth of their lived trauma and are fully awakened to life. Here she elucidates the communal sharing of the symbolic "peace pipe" of the volume's title, as a physical and spiritual processing, emphasizing both transcendence and connection. And so from the first poem, descriptive of personal pain ("the war I wear in my chest", 5), Weaver invites us in the final poem to "Welcome home each particle of your being," to inhabit a new wholeness of "our everything alive" (59), effectively bringing us with her through the raw process of baring the damaged body-soul and then reconstructing it within a poetic, loving conversation with the self.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Cynthia T. Hahn has been a Professor of French at Lake Forest College, teaching language, literature, culture, film, translation and creative writing since 1990. Cynthia is also the author of two poetry collections, *Outside-In-Sideout* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Co-incidences* (alfAbarre Press, 2014).

Posted July 1, 2021

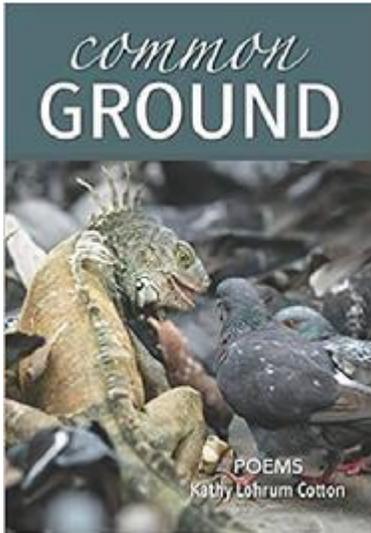
Common Ground

By Kathy Lohrum Cotton
Deep Well Poetry, 2021
103 Pages
ISBN-13: 97986111359884

Review by Michael Escoubas

As I write this review (late April) President Biden has just completed his first address to a joint session of Congress. Senator Tim Scott has given the Republican rejoinder. Listening to both men recalled poet Kathy Lohrum Cotton's latest collection, *Common Ground*. Whether you believe in Providence, Fate, Coincidence or just plain Randomness, you must admit these ducks fell nicely into a neat row. It seems that the most dominant theme in American life is healing divisions and finding "common ground," even though defining exactly what that is, remains elusive.

Originally published for
Quill & Parchment



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Enter Kathy Cotton, stage left. With quiet assurance and ripened poetic skills, Cotton offers a collection of poems which bear directly on what many are seeking. Remarkably, these poems were written “prior” to the advent of Covid-19. Which is to say that her theme is timeless and does not need a worldwide pandemic to justify its existence.

An epigraph by no less a luminary than Walt Whitman, sets the tone: “Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” It is the gift of language that humans alone possess and share. Appropriately, the poem “Finding Common Ground,” opens the door to Cotton’s quest:

Before the extravagant feast,
the flowing wine of words,

let me break bread
at the table of

a neighbor starving
on broth-thin bromides,

elders who chew
old shibboleth scraps,

the child choking down
force-fed fear.

I got the feeling early-on that this poem represents the poet’s life. Helping a person in need is more important than just setting words down on a page. Only then:

let my pen touch
the waiting page,

let the ink’s dark nectar
spill out

every ripened syllable
of words worth sharing.

Stylistically, Cotton does something I’ve never seen before. At the end of many of her poems, she adds key words in a delicate light-face font; subtly highlighting a theme she wants readers to consider.

The volume is organized in three sections: “Quiet Words,” “Shared Words,” and “Last Words.”

In an age of loud talk, street and gun violence, and folks insisting that it’s *My way or the highway*, Cotton’s wisdom is like a warm

cup of Chamomile tea slowly sipped.

In my youth I recall how the evenings took on a unique fragrance after a soft rain, Cotton took me back in her poem “The Scent of Rain,” where her old Lithuanian neighbor:

who stands in rain-spattered pajamas,

breathing, just slow-breathing
in the middle of his wire-fenced yard—

. . .

This cloudburst soaking
his drought-brown garden brought

him from his bed, quick like a child,
wordless with wonder at the scent of rain.

While Cotton writes primarily in *verse libre*, her skill in formal verse is evident in the villanelle, “Words of Peace”:

There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,
as both the mind and heart communicate—
a balance of withholding and release

through conversation shared: the centerpiece
of knowing when to speak and when to wait.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,

not toppled into dogma or caprice.
It chooses not to flatter or berate,
but balances withholding and release

to find a common ground where conflicts cease
to rage alone, a place where pain abates.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace:

both hope and understanding can increase
when empathy is speaking’s gentle mate.
It balances withholding and release:

a spoken and unspoken masterpiece—
consideration, rather than debate.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,
a balance of withholding and release.

Titles in Part I, entice me to reconsider my life perspectives, titles such as: “Quiet Friend,” “Gift of Your Silence-Keeping,” “Inner Balance,” and “Slow Thaw,” hang like medals on a service-member’s coat; commendations won on the battlefield of life.

Moving into Part II, “Shared Words,” I found myself focused on “The Sweetness of Doing Nothing.” This poem explores the tension between “busyness” as a virtue and *Dolce far niente*. (Translated in the title). This shared word is one your reviewer needs to hear. Perhaps I should emulate the poem’s protagonist and, “stretch full length on a Montana stone.” In this section shared words become “strands of simple kindness, a treasure to pass down.”

I recall special evenings tiptoeing into my children’s rooms to read stories and say their prayers. The ease of those moments, the quietude of being with them, things we shared before clicking off the lights, returned to me as I entered Part III, “Last Words.”

I lingered long with “Sweet Cluster” where:

I fell asleep to the lullaby
of a family’s last words
of the day, to soft sounds
of Mother and Father kissing.

As the section title suggests, the poet treats the subject of loss and death. Cotton does so with impressive tenderness and restraint. Many of these poems could be read as testimonies to loved ones who have passed on. While platitudes often accompany loss and death, the poet’s treatment is fresh and original. She remembers her brother, the “only shaved face in a little house crammed with petticoats.” Ed was, “the last of all who knew me from my beginning.”

In “The Last of Life,” death is compared to:

Winter’s longing to shed
the weight of every last leaf,
to stand proudly stripped,
wind-whipped to the marrow,
baring misshapen limb and scar.

The “welcome home”
rivers sing to scattered streams
and oceans whisper
to heavy rainclouds.

The ripple
of a zephyr’s soft breath
across ripened fields.

*So, this
is how it feels*

to love the last of life.

Indeed, Kathy Lohrum Cotton's *Common Ground*, closes with a blessing I wish for everyone who buys this superb volume:

Leave something
of sweetness and substance
in the mouth of the world.

--Anna Belle Kaufman, "Cold Solace"

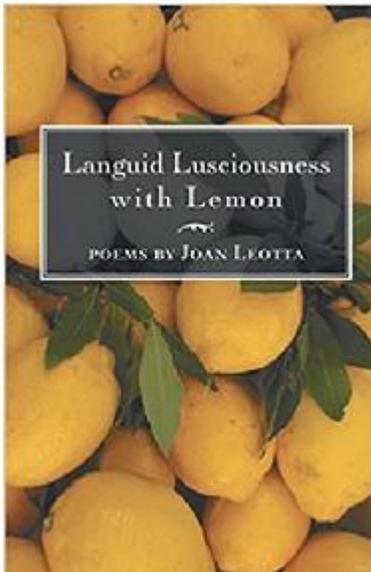
===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Michael Escoubas is editor, contributing poet, and staff book reviewer for *Quill and Parchment*, a 19-year-old literary and cultural arts online poetry journal. This review was originally posted on *Quill and Parchment*.

Posted July 1, 2021

Languid Lusciousness with Lemon

By Joan Leotta
Finishing Line Press, 2017
231 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1635341454

Review by Barbara R. Saunders



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Joan Leotta declares her stakes in a one-word line. It's near the center of the first poem of this collection, the title poem, "Languid Lusciousness with Lemon." This charming book of poetry is a meditation on *immortality*. Food, for this poet, is a metaphor for life itself—constant but temporary, and meant to be consumed with joy. Every harvest can remind us to be grateful for the living earth; every recipe, of our own agency; and every meal, of the possibility or the realization of love.

In some pieces, the narrator remembers how her elders imparted lessons. She marvels that her grandmother could "*summon birds from an empty sky*" with the "*tossed crumbs and crusts*" from breakfast toast. The older woman explains, "*Everyone hears when called to the table.*" On apple-picking trips with her father, the narrator learns "*apples taste better when you know them by name.*" And the narrator's mother demands an apprenticeship before handing over a cherished *pizzelle* cookie recipe because, she says, "*Words are not enough/You need to learn to feel/When the dough has just enough flour.*"

The narrator applies this wisdom about food and relationships to the family she generates herself. A bag of peaches from her husband, she observes, signifies the promise of a life filled with sweet adventures. "*We cook many into jam and pies together ... we dare all this and more -- together.*" Speaking of an afternoon of tasting savory bivalves with a daughter, she says, "*I savored the found pearl/of our togetherness.*" At the family dinner table, she notices, "*love is spoken -- loudly, and by all.*" A few humorous poems turn inward. The Turkish delight in a novel finds its sticky way onto the narrator's hands, and a session of

strawberry chopping discharges the anger from a marital argument.

There are a few poems unrelated to food. These fit squarely into the theme of family. “Kitty Hawk Hang Glider School,” brings us back to those wondrous birds as the narrator’s son takes “*A solo flight. The first of many yet to come.*” In another poem, only the smell of coffee shows up—a ghost, like her father, in a dream. This poem, “Dreaming across the Styx” contains my favorite line of the collection: “*Instead of Charon,/my own beloved father/waits, patiently, to/ferry me across the Styx/in his white 1960 Thunderbird.*”

Though domesticity is a focus, the poet’s heart opens to encompass the world beyond the hearth. Food serves as currency for bonding with fruit vendors, waitresses, and neighbors. When a young man in Istanbul angrily tells her that Americans don’t appreciate his culture, she tries to change his mind over coffee, “*talking across the Bosphorus of our diverse lives, until his anger waned.*” And she laments, in the closing piece in the collection, that breaking bread together can’t always save us. A young man who shares his Ramadan goodies with her dies at the hands of ISIS.

A solo performer as well as a writer, Leotta skilfully balances autobiographical elements, such as clues to her Italian heritage, with intellectual ones, including the references to T.S. Eliot that pepper the collection. The message, both exciting and comforting: Sweet meets tart, nature’s bounty meets human craft, stay-at-home mom meets Jordanian fighter pilot--such is life!

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Barbara R Saunders hails from New York and lives in Berkeley, California. Her poetry focuses on biography and myth. She’s at work on a memoir, *Dead Dreams*.

Posted July 1, 2021

The Kingdom of Birds

By Joan Colby

The Poetry Box, 2020

231 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-948461-60-3

If you have a dreamy, nostalgic notion of birds, be prepared to consider a darker, more complicated side of our feathered creatures in Joan Colby’s *The Kingdom of Birds* (The Poetry Box). In this last collection of poems published July 15, 2020, just one month before her death, Colby describes birds as a “calligraphy of the higher kingdom” as she contemplates crows, doves, geese, hawks, flamingos, owls, turkeys and more in a smorgasbord of observation and scrutiny.

Review by Caroline Johnson

“Be calculating as the cardinal,” she writes in her sestina (“The Life List of Birds,” 31-32), “who goes to the block unflinching.”

This is an apt metaphor for her observations of all the birds in this collection, none of which can escape the poet's masterful eye. Even the tiny hummingbird she sees as sinister, as it "hangs like a furious angel" attempting to prepare "to assault the hydrangea" ("Photograph of a Hummingbird," 33). In this short poem she compares the hummingbird's hunger to a rapist's lust, and to the moment when a poem "stabs into the corolla of the mind / And sucks it dry." In other poems she describes the merciless ravens (34) and the dancing cranes, who cannot escape their animal nature.

Colby was a prolific writer and this collection was her 25th book of poems. Throughout this collection Colby deftly weaves bird imagery with thoughts on human nature. "I have fashioned your nests in my mind," she writes. The book also doesn't skimp on contemplations of our mortality, as she writes, "The object / has to die / so we can see its / utterness, its suspended miracle," an allusion to Audubon's photos of birds (38). Colby seems to be on the lookout for the real bird, not the illusion, as she scoffs at the "lawn fakes" of flamingoes, "sluttish as five inch heels," and hallows the dignity of Canada Geese--"Look. Their necks stretch true" (46)--which she also compares to war veterans. In "Swallow," she makes another brilliant comparison, comparing the act of swallowing to the namesake bird:

"Soaring at dusk, to feed on the wing,
Forked tail like a serpent's tongue,
Every year returning
To the steep loft, harbinger
Of a thousand summers...

In a lonesome bar knocking back
Shots of Jack Daniels
Swallowing the hard words
Left unuttered.

That reflex, the last to fail,
You refused the tube while
You could still speak...

...your last breath
Coalesced to a lump of sorrow
In our throats, unable to swallow this." (52)

The book has several poems about hawks, and Colby approaches each with a different lens. "What the camera sees is beauty," she writes in "Redtail", "What the hawk sees is blood," (55). Later in the book she describes a red-tailed hawk whose predatory nature is "written in wingspread / In will and heart" ("Hawks in the Morning," 87-88). Colby has created a tribute to birds, which she calls a citadel: "I can't decide whose side / I'm

on,” she writes, describing a hawk eyeing a fledgling robin, and the crows that carry the hawk out of their territory (“Sunday Birds,” 67-68).

Throughout the book, we see birds as scavengers, sometimes as graceful friends, but always with the same complexity that humans have. The poet understands the rules of nature, the “sense of grab, / the rules of blood.” Her landscape is stark, real, like that of the painter Georgia O’Keeffe, and her vision is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” only she covers many species of birds.

In “Parrots,” she discusses domesticated birds that have been “caged for a half century,” and asks, “How can I keep / Birds that could outlive us?” Most of these poems, however, were inspired by Colby’s keen observation of wild birds she saw at her horse farm outside Elgin, Illinois. Then, at her feeder, she writes, “In the new Jerusalem of my backyard, I aim / The telescopic lens to frame / Who shall be singled out and saved” (“Myself as Jehovah,” 70-71). Indeed, to Colby, birds are almost a religion, if we look deeply enough. She also calls them symbols, omens, or harbingers, such as crosses and anchors.

In one of her last poems, she comments on the musicality and shape of birds and their flocks, with their *melody on the treble sky*: “Birds in chords or trills resound / Autumn fugues of sky” (“Bird Theme”, 78). And don’t forget the wisdom of the owl, who “infects your dream” like a greedy capitalist, and swallows, “The world you sought,” (“Contemplating the Owl,” 85-86). In the title poem, “The Kingdom of Birds,” Colby continues to compare birds to human behavior: “We’re / Just like this, grabbing and getting / ...Our hands are made for grasping” (84).

Colby ends this collection with a prose piece, “Bird Watching,” which is a two-page description of a woman preparing for end-of-life arrangements with her spouse, all the while observing birds outside her window. Despite her breathing machine, respirator and hospital bed, “Susan kept watching the birds.” In the end, she says to her husband, “Don’t forget about the damned birds” (89-90). Rest in Peace, Joan Colby. Thank you for your gift of poetry. We won’t forget you or your poems, either.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Caroline Johnson serves as president of Poets & Patrons of Chicago. Her first full collection, *The Caregiver*, was published by Holy Cow Press in 2018.

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