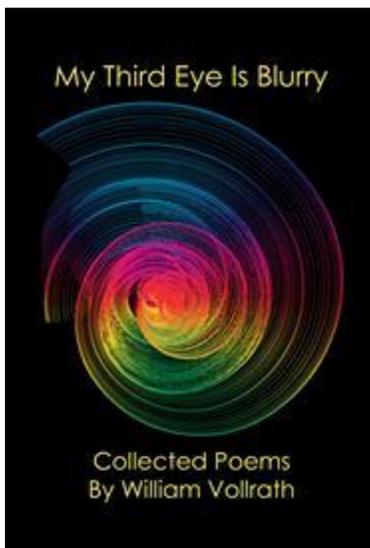


My Third Eye Is Blurry: Collected Poems

By William Vollrath
Highland Park Poetry Press,
2020
74 Pages
ISBN-13: 979-8681078173

Review by Arlene Gay Levine



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Like the glorious multicolor helix gracing the cover of William Vollrath's collection of poems, *My Third Eye Is Blurry*, the text itself is a fascinating kaleidoscope of the various experiences, musings and growth the poet encounters on his journey. The book is divided into two sections, *First Vision* and *Second Vision*, with a roughly equal number of poems in each. This presages the work's dominant theme of seeking that flows beneath the words, as if the poet himself is on a quest for equilibrium, some method to weigh life's questions and answers in order to find a balanced path.

A frequently jocular tone hides secrets, glimpses into mysteries both human and metaphysical. This is accomplished so suavely you will hardly recognize the depth these short, often amusing poems provide until you take time to read, reflect and reread. Of course, this is what the poet in his affable way, urges us to recognize as needful in understanding the day to day book of our own lives as well. The very first poem, *poem-o-matic*, provides a glimpse into Vollrath's creative process and introduces another motif, cooking, whether it be a meal or a poem.

It is a concrete poem in the shape of a bowl holding varied "organic ingredients" such as "temptation, joy, anger, meter, beat and voice" with the direction to "mix/ and hope your muse steps into the kitchen." It speaks of what will be recurring and intertwining subjects of creation and nourishment. The next poem, *My Muse*, awakens the poet at 4:00 a.m. with "Brain now boiling joyously/Twitching from her planted seeds/Nascent ideas nourish me." The second stanza foreshadows the element of forthcoming spiritual concerns in the lines, "Inspiration on god's platter/My Muse brings kisses from afar."

Levity in the title *Deep Fried Twinkies* with the delicious metaphor in the first line: "Truffles for a weary soul" soon recants this mood with a list of woes including "weeds in the yard/ticks on the dog/foolishly lost love" yet once again returns to humor with the wonderful last line, "I'll take a dozen to go" and who wouldn't want to try those deep fried Twinkies, at least once? By the way, the dog with ticks makes for

one of my favorite poems in section I, *Taking My Dog Fishing*. You feel the poet's joy from the "sparkling sun, champagne air" and how the "clear water at the county park/begs for our presence/for our absolute focus/on the shimmering movements gliding just beneath."

First Vision also contains the moving *Pieces of My Soul* that seems to me to be a synthesis of the human drama of the poet's life and his plea for intervention of numinous forces to set things right. He speaks of "forgotten triumphs/hollow victories" that are "stacked in dim crawlspaces and/cobwebbed corners of the mind." Poignant, the last few lines explain "pieces of then/anxiously waiting/a caretaker's /healing broom."

Section 2, *Second Vision*, more serious in tone, builds to a crescendo toward the growth of the soul through trial and tribulation toward wisdom and understanding. In *Pregnant*, Vollrath shares "I surrender myself.../servant to suggestion" who is "peaceful in my solitude" and closes with "I shall bear an idea." Other stand-outs include *Kill the Buddha*, which speaks to the search for enlightenment, the eloquent *Jade bi at the Freer Gallery*, asking if the jade disks might "suggest the secret/to our sacred cycles/ of birth and death and birth" and the closing poem of the collection, *Connected*, which offers the pearl of wisdom the poet has won from his journey on earth thus far.

A seeker of answers, trying with his words to parse the duality between the real world and The Real, William Vollrath is at his best when he mulls over life's paradoxes with the eye of an experienced traveler. *My Third Eye Is Blurry: Collected Poems* would make a fine guide and provide food for the mind, heart and soul of any reader.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Arlene Gay Levine is the author of *39 Ways to Open Your Heart: An Illuminated Meditation* (Conari Press,) and *Movie Life* (Finishing Line Press). Her poetry and prose have found a home in *The New York Times*, numerous anthologies, and journals including *Chiron Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Quest* and *Frogpond*.

Posted December 1, 2020

Rites of Paradise

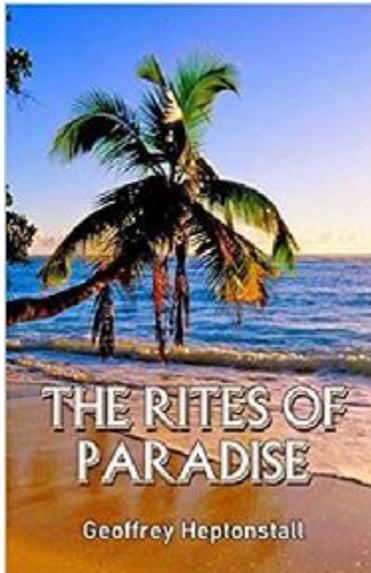
By Geoffrey Heptonstall

CyberWit.net, 2020

78 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-9389690491

Review by Barbara Eaton



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Geoffrey Heptonstall, in his new collection, *The Rites of Paradise*, offers poems that are a comfort in these trying times. These poems are meant to be read in quiet solitude, and read more than once.

The Rites of Paradise is dedicated to Debbie, who served as inspiration. The first poem, “The Second Time I Saw You,” is a touching tribute and a wonderful introduction. But Debbie remains a shadowy figure. Most of these serious and learned poems deal with the arts: music, sculpture, and literature. As the poet claims, “There is no death in art.” His work quietly affirms his faith in a life after death.

While the poems in the first section, “The Bird of Paradise,” recall the Victorian poets, the second section, “Oceans and Islands,” brings the Romantics to mind. References to Odysseus and *Moby Dick* make clear that the oceans he speaks of are the strife of life. The islands, similarly, are islands of the mind, and we are “lovers in a storm.” But Heptonstall is confident that “life will last forever,” and the faithful will be guided gently home.

Curiously, the last five stanzas of “An Island in the Mind,” (pp. 29-30) are repeated in “Memento Mori” (p. 70). The poem, “Not Every Thought,” also appears twice (pp. 64 and 73).

The third section, “More Songs for Her,” is reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly the Rossettis. These poems are melancholy, but they resonate with understated emotion. In Heptonstall’s austere language, his well-crafted images come as a welcome surprise.

The Rites of Paradise is highly recommended for poets and anyone seeking solace in a storm.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Barbara Eaton is a poet and semi-retired community college instructor.

Posted December 1, 2020

Star Gazing: Poems of Astronomy

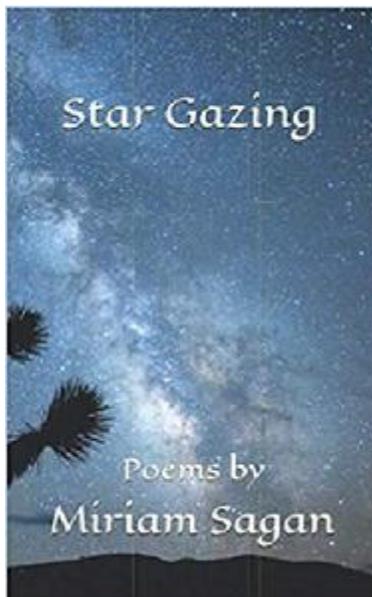
By Miriam Sagan

Cholla Needles Arts &
Literary Library, 2020

136 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-8651830473

Review by Jan
Chronister



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What most impresses me about this collection of poems by Miriam Sagan is that she could write so many that connect to one subject! Sagan literally takes on the universe and presents it in a way that is as awe-inspiring as the subject itself. There is a cohesiveness to the book that feels natural and comforting. One device that helps link the poems together is the repetition of certain elements: boats, water, moon, darkness, eclipses, telescopes, and, of course, stars. Recurring images such as the woman chained to a rock and keys to locks also tie the poems together.

Sagan presents straightforward experiences, often related to astronomy, and turns them into philosophical statements. Despite the warning we have all been given not to look directly at the sun (or similar blinding objects), she does just that and comes away with revelations she shares with readers. One of my favorite poems in the book is “The Astronomer’s Wife.” It is a college experience I definitely relate to.

Many poems seem to be written in some form, but only one piece is actually identified as a pantoum. The poems with repeating lines seem to reflect the nature of celestial events—they recur as predicted and often mystify the viewer. A table of contents (and even a page of “notes”) would be helpful, but then it would be hard to deal with the numerous haiku-like pieces that appear on a regular basis, usually several to a page. I personally do not care for poems that begin lines with capital letters when not starting a new sentence, but I know it is done by many poets. I find it difficult to follow the thought, but sentence style has always been a strong preference of mine, though other readers are not bothered by it. I do appreciate Sagan’s short lines, a style I also prefer.

Sagan deftly references her Jewish heritage without making it obvious. Her skill in doing this adds an important personal element, as does the poem “Cosmos” in which she answers the question about Carl Sagan that is sure to be on every reader’s mind. I find the strongest part of the collection to be the series of three poems titled “Star Axis.” Here is where we learn that Polaris is only our North Star for 2,000 years, and

then things change. The collection ends on a masterful note when Sagan pens a poem for each of the planets. I especially like “Jupiter: Patriarch” where her voice emerges loud and clear: *it’s never too early, or late, / to learn to say: / fuck with me, you die.*

After reading *Star Gazing*, I found myself wishing for more personal, subjective details. The poet has been to many fascinating and exotic locales, but her reaction to them seems to be more scientific than emotional. In a way, this does allow the reader to step up to the telescope with her and stare directly at the sun, so to speak. In the end, Sagan proves to be a likeable, competent guide to the practice of star (and planet) gazing.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Jan Chronister is currently serving as President of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Her chapbook, *Target Practice*, was published by Parallel Press in 2009.

Posted December 1, 2020

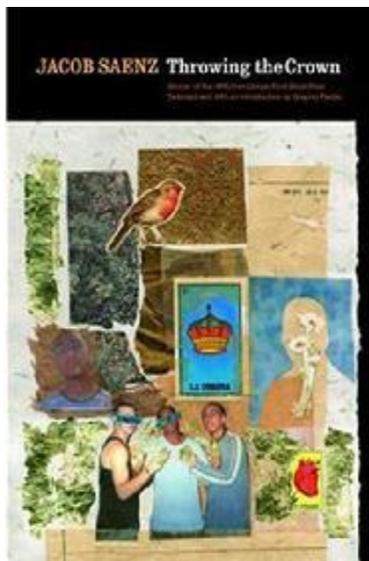
Throwing The Crown **Jacob Saenz**

*APR/Honickman First Book
Prize winner*

Copper Canyon Press, 2018
80 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-0983300861

Review by Mike Freveletti



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What does it mean to be a poet of place? The best example, at least for me, is Paterson by William Carlos Williams. The poet Jacob Saenz with his collection, ***Throwing the Crown***, has given us poems of a place, Chicago, and of the self. You see, what Williams gave us in Paterson was the connection between man and the city but Saenz, if I can continue with the comparison, tells a story about the evolution of self with the city as backdrop. This is a beautiful set of seemingly autobiographical poems, an exploration of what it means to grow up a young man of color in circumstances that not every reader will understand from their own history. That's okay. Saenz is a welcomed Virgil, our poetic guide, through this beautiful collection.

It's hard not to see this book in some ways as a guide to the poet's Chicago. Poems like the "Blue Line Incident", a reference to the "L", puts you right there on the train headed through downtown. The poem kicks off with a startling line, "*he was just some coked-out/crazed King with crooked teeth/& a tear drop forever falling*", an arresting image that prepares us for a poem not really about this 'King' but what he stands for. They speak in a language, the language of street gangs and develop a mutual respect even if it is a sort of facade. The unexpected violent lines at the end, "*I was wishing for a life-/saver & he took, hooked him in/& had him say goodbye like we was boys/& shit when I really should've/gutted that fuck w the tip/of my blue ballpoint.*" The contrast between the narrator pretending to be a gang member and the violence considered once the man has gone away not only takes the poem in a surprising direction but also says a lot about what situational awareness means for this young man. He's both a pretender and not. What decision will he make next time?

Saenz is clearly a born storyteller, but he is not without formal poetic strength. The poet gives us a sonnet, "Sonnet of the Dead" that boasts the camp of a horror movie within the framework of a sonnet, all with a subtitle referencing Dawn of the Dead. A neat juxtaposition that will have some formalists both scoffing and slightly frightened at the same time. It's

important to point out that this is a perfect example of what Saenz does so well in this collection, fun and serious together. A poem about masculinity might sit right next to a poem entirely about baseball.

My favorite poem in the collection is written about a mother-son relationship. "Poem for the Mother" struck me emotionally because of its simplicity. It's a lineage of moles and freckles that get passed down from generation to generation, *"as a kid I grabbed hold/of the moles on your face & neck/handled them like pearls of the earth/you said it was payback for the times/you play w grandma's when you were small."* I know as a kid I was pulling my Mom's hair, her necklace, her skin, and you know what she did? Nothing. Just kept on loving me. How lucky we are to be reminded of the unconditional and really, unquestioning, love of a mother.

I can recommend this book for a lot of reasons. The historical sketches based around the city, the story of growing up as a boy of color, the formation of that boy's body and beliefs, the family narrative as a through line throughout the collection. Any of those would do. Saenz is a poet of place and this unique book is a debut to remember.

===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 December 1, 2020

Get Up Said The World

By Gail Goepfert

Cervena Barva Press, 2020

124 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-950063-24-6

Review by Caroline
Johnson



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“How do we persist in this living?” asks Gail Goepfert in the opening lines of her first poem in this collection. Now, more than ever, do we need an answer to this question, which Goepfert attempts to answer throughout the 121 pages of narrative and lyrical poetry.

Each poem is preceded by a carefully chosen word and its dictionary definition, giving us a template and theme to the poem before we read it. In “What Keats Knew,” Goepfert explores the term “*élan vital*” and asks what matters. “There is risk in thinking / I have anything to say,” she writes, but in the end relies on Keats’s answer: “*The poetry / of the earth is never dead.*”

The narrative poem, “*Tête-à-tête at Trader Joe’s,*” describes the poet’s encounter with an elderly woman at a grocery store. Both are plant lovers and Goepfert describes their poignant conversation about flowers beautifully. “Do you know the secret to getting peonies / to bloom?” the narrator asks the woman by way of introduction. This is followed by a heartfelt conversation and attention to detail about a stranger who becomes almost a friend on the page by the end of the poem.

In “*Life Lists Not Just for the Birds,*” the poet describes an abandoned robin’s egg and other birds, relating them to a violent Chicago weekend. The word “*incredulity*” precedes that poem, “the quality or state of being unwilling to admit or accept what is offered as true.” Other poems touch on witnessing a suicide, fishing, and a touching elegy for her coal miner grandfather.

In “*Cold Calling,*” a prose poem that starts out describing some unpleasant jobs, Goepfert writes in detail about having to call one of her older students who is falling behind. She describes the litany of real life problems the student talks about and we, as readers, are drawn into his personal tragedy. Similarly, Goepfert describes her mother’s double mastectomy in “*While Spooning Jelly on Toast*” with touching details that make us feel her compassion.

In all of these poems, the poet adds a human connection that is reminiscent of poets such as Philip Levine and his portraits of people he knew, especially workers. In “Salting Ash,” Goepfert describes her mother’s instructions for her funeral:

“I don’t want a casket beneath the ground.
Strew some ash of me
with the couch and crab that ride
the steady clout of wave--pain-free
I’ll tumble in the foam.
Let the gulls cry and the terns squawk
making tattoos in the sand.” (p. 57)

Goepfert also includes some ekphrastic poetry in the collection (“Sisters”), and many poems containing sensual language, such as this description in “Easing in”:

“...The bicycle bell’s jingle
breaks through,
clear and clean
as picked bone
like the luminous cells in me.

Can I settle
into the stretch of skin
I was given at birth?
I refuse to hush
the beebbox
inside me.” (p. 71)

And in “In the Glass of My Eye,” she writes, “How is it possible / that I taste with my eyes?...I gather light / coming and going.”

Indeed, like Goepfert’s other books--the chapbook *A Mind on Pain* (Finishing Line Press, 2015), and *Tapping Roots* (Kelsay Books, 2018)--she explores human connections as if through a glass lens, each poem a prism of light. In one of the final poems in this collection, “The Practice of Gratitude,” Goepfert thanks her body for waking, for the dawn now before her: “*Thank you, I repeat / these word to my body.*”

Thank you, Gail, for offering up such a beautiful collection to the world.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Caroline Johnson is currently the president of Poets and Patrons of Chicago. Her first full-length collection of poems, *The Caregiver*, was published by Holy Cow! Press in May 2018.

Posted December 1, 2020

Little Kings

By Peter Kahn

Nine Arches Press, 2020

231 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-911027-97-3

Review by Elizabeth Joy
Levinson



I am heading into year fifteen in the classroom, except I won't be in the classroom this year, at least not to start. And while I am relieved that this is the direction my district decided to go in, I am heartbroken at the same time, missing those first few weeks of community building with new freshmen, and reuniting with students I taught last year -- though our time together was ended abruptly, our reunion will be all the more poignant. Which is probably why Peter Kahn's *Little Kings* has me feeling some kind of way. The bittersweet nature of many of the narratives throughout, and the overall narrative effect of the collection, so closely mirrors my own bittersweet.

The poems in the collection are narratives, each a snapshot, a quick peek at a man's life, his memories, the people he has loved, the people he could not love enough. And together, these poems build a life, but like memory, they do not move chronologically, rather, they move back and forth through time. They flow like recollection, that one time reminds you of another time, and so on. Something meaningful when you are six may inform something you need to learn at 36.

For instance, the title poem, which appears early in the collection, recounts a pre-teen's experience getting drunk with friends, unsupervised "cautious/ then, as now, listening to the retching." The narrator learns from his friend's mistakes, pacing himself with the maturity of memory. But this poem is juxtaposed with the poem, *Tuesday Mornings at Neon Street Center for Youth*, in which we see young people who did not learn from their friends' mistakes, and while the poet does not pull his punches, his lens is compassionate in its honesty, the recognition of someone who wasn't quite there, where these youth are, but maybe nearly, maybe adjacent, as the previous poem intimates. "Do not look into the white eyes/ of the future or you will hit snooze/ until the sun puts itself back to sleep." The narrator keeps showing up, despite the fatigue, despite the secondary trauma. This is the lens we all need right now, Kahn's lessons in compassion a reminder to keep showing up for each other.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Elizabeth Levinson is a Chicago based poet and high school teacher. Her second chapbook, Running Aground, is available for advance orders from Finishing Line Press.

Posted November 1, 2020

Late Night Talk Show Fantasy

By Jennifer Dotson
Kelsay Books, 2020
86 Pages
ISBN-13: 9781952326035

Review by
Gay Guard Chamberlin

Late Night Talk Show Fantasy
& Other Poems



Even before you open Jennifer Dotson's delightful full-length book you may find yourself captivated by its inventive title and boldly colored hand-drawn caricatures. The cover practically invites you in to root for her imagined famous talk-show-circuit poet. Take a look at the opening lines in the collection's titular first poem: *The world famous poet / chuckles with the late night / talk show host and the two / trade dazzling word play...* Indeed, this book is filled with "dazzling word play" - and more that will entice, entertain, educate, and fulfill experienced lovers of poetry as well as newcomers.

Smartly divided into four sections corresponding to a late-night talk show format (*The Opening Monologue, The House Band, The First Guest, The Non-Sequitur Comedian*), Dotson's 48 poems range from quirky to deep, funny to philosophical, like a quickly shifting array of talk show guests. This is a poet who doesn't underestimate the intelligence of her audience. Her writing is accessible, smart, and chockful of the tiny vivid details so essential to making a poem come alive. Here is a slyly sensual short poem called "Cooking Together":

*It wasn't my first BBQ.
When we met, I feared
I was just a crust,
a shell, a broken yolk
but your savory attention
set my broth to boil.
You whisked my batter
to a froth and I quickly
flipped my outlook on
life and love.
You didn't sear me
with your flame*

*leaving my insides
raw or frozen,
instead you braised
me with wine and herbs
and I've been simmering
your spicy stew ever since.*

Dotson excavates both the historical and the personal past through pieces like “Edwin Booth’s Dagger” and “When My Mother Met John Travolta,” and imagines the future in “Space Tacos” and “Dear Future Self at 99” (and aren’t those four titles just deliciously intriguing?). Evocative memories from childhood and of family life, rural and urban, abound. Of special note is “Driving Lessons,” a 7- sectioned poem. Each part is titled with a car engine part or function relating to her first experiences learning to drive through the years until her own children are learning. Notice how adroitly the poet builds tension in this excerpted from Section II titled “Pressure Plate”:

*A College junior at eighteen,
I am determined to learn
on my summer break.
Sears Driving School sends
Mr. Johnson to instruct me.
Today we're going to learn drive-thru.
Not as simple as it sounds.
Pull the car close enough to the
menu microphone but not too close
to damage the mirror or door.
Mr. Johnson orders himself lunch.*

*I repeat the close but not too close
lesson at the windows to pay
and to retrieve his food.
Mr. Johnson has an appetite.
Our next session ups the ante.
My first time cloverleafing into
Beltway traffic, Mr. Johnson purrs
You would look fine in a pair of
black leather pants. My hands grip
the wheel, focus flits to the cars around me,
my mirrors and pressing
down on the gas. Is this a test
or calculated distraction from the*

*crushing rush of other drivers?
Nervous, I say nothing—not then,
not later—too afraid to lose
my chance to learn agere—to drive.*

Dotson is clearly not afraid to tackle big issues such as aging and Alzheimer's, climate change and sexual harassment; yet the book is full of humor and affection. Her rich sense of the comical comes through even in her titles like "Dionysus Has a Crisis." (*To this reader, there is a bit of Erma Bombeck in Dotson's Erato!*)

At times she plants small and effective electric jolts within benign imagery, such as here in the start of "Living With a Beanstalk Boy":

*Teenage boy knows everything
so he takes our only cow to sell
at the market and returns with
some magic beans and shrugs
whatever when I yell and scream
and choke on tears and bitterness.
I am back to my endless chores
of dishes and laundry, pausing only
to stare hungrily at the empty
pantry and wonder when the
power and the phone will be
turned off for good.*

A few pieces seem prescient: "How to Prepare for Disaster," "Pathogen Rampage," and "Demeter Mourns" speak eloquently to our current pandemic times yet were written earlier. Take a look at how skillfully Dotson juggles tragedy and comedy in this passage from "How to Prepare for Disaster":

*The end of the world is near
and you are getting ready
just in case the Mayan calendar
is accurate after all and
Nostradamus knew a thing
or two about Arab Spring.*

Later in the poem, she wisely encourages us to:

*Make sure you have some
reading matter along with
your matches and duct tape,
your can opener and your candles.*

Her poetic control and careful attention to detail are evident throughout in her expert handling of alliteration and assonance, rhyme and rhythm. She writes free verse and prose poems, list poems, and formal ones as varied as the Sonnet, Pantoum, Villanelle, Ghazal, Cento, Etheree, Golden Shovel, Luc Bat, and the Gwawdodyn. If you aren't familiar with these terms, not to worry. Dotson includes succinct and friendly footnotes explaining them, which fits with her dedication to advancing the craft and community of poetry as Founder and Program Coordinator of Highland Park Poetry. (You can learn more about her at www.JenniferDotsonPoet.com .)

Well-known poet Ellen Bass always encourages her audiences to buy two copies of a good poetry book; one for yourself and one to give to someone interested in poetry who might not know where to begin. *Late Night Talk Show Fantasy & Other Poems* is just such a book - accessible enough for beginners, but complex enough for poets and experienced readers of poetry. The latter will especially appreciate the high-wire acts Dotson performs with such challenging forms. There is truly something for everyone in this fine collection.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Gay Guard-Chamberlin is a Chicago artist and writer whose first book of poems, *Red Thread Through a Rusty Needle*, was recently reviewed on the Highland Park Poets site by Lennart Lundh. She and her sister, Anara Guard, perform poetry together as Sibling Revelry.

Posted November 1, 2020

Asylum

By Elizabeth Marino

Vagabond Press, 2020

71 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1-936293-45-2

Review by Elizabeth
Harper



What do you think of when you hear the word “asylum”? I think of a type of total institution, regimented confinement for the outcast and out of luck. Then there’s the other meaning of asylum: political asylum for folks fearing persecution and violence, seeking sanctuary and opportunity.

Elizabeth Marino’s title poem, “Asylum,” touches on both meanings. An encounter with a child at St. Vincent Orphan Asylum in Chicago is juxtaposed with images of children in Texas detention camps and Pakistani children after a drone attack, both “stacked up like cordwood.” The last two lines of the poem get me in the gut and make the book for me: “I must go out the door/ and decide to be alive.”

The themes of courage, abundance, and integrity reoccur throughout the book, along with historical, pop culture, and Chicago-specific references intertwined with personal history. There are also calls for peace and the meeting of human needs. The words “Grace,” “Abundance,” and “Peace,” all have their own capitalized line in the poem “Abundance.” In “On the Cusp of the Big Moon,” we are reminded “that courage/ is feeling fear/ and acting anyway/ again and again.” In her signature poem, “My Mother Loved Spanish Rice,” Elizabeth Marino tells us, “My mother was abundant in a puny world.” Referencing Chicago neighborhoods in “Branches,” she mentions some of her roots: “I was born in Englewood,/ before we branched into Humboldt Park/ and Logan Square, and out again.” A standout poem for me is “What Keeps You Whole,” with the title repeated in each stanza. This is a poem for our time with lines such as “Deliberate distraction is everywhere.” and “This is a time of change and choosing/ how and when to let go....” Marino’s poems tell stories of family, of activism, of human need and human dignity. “Litany for Peace” includes the line: “We each have a right to exist.”

“Foul Fern” is a sympathetic portrait of a street woman. “In Amsterdam” features another woman character, a brief portrait of prettiness and joy. “The Direct Velvet Route” and “Body Language” deal

explicitly with the topic of violence against women, providing the important insight that the lives of individuals and what's possible in personal relationships are damaged and limited by this kind of nauseating, gender-specific violence in our world. One of my favorite poems by Elizabeth Marino, which I've heard her read, is "Performance Poet with Daughter," a lovely description of trust between an adult and child.

The collection includes different forms, including haikus and a villanelle, and also humor and wit. In "A Man Walked Into Our "EL" Car," we are treated to an inner monologue: "*Great. Socially engaged performance artists are the new mimes.*" And in "An Otherwise Uneventful Sunday in March. Chicago," our protagonist muses: "Perhaps/ casinos in vacant CPS school buildings,/ learning being such a crap shoot."

The book ends with two important autobiographical poems, "A Safer Place" and "The Days of Bobby's Passing." One of the many strengths of this book is its descriptions of individual experiences and reflections inscribed by culture, bureaucracy, infrastructure, and history.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book. Many of the poems will stick with me and be worth rereading.

===About the reviewer: Chicago poet Elizabeth Harper is the author of several books and chapbooks including *A Mercenary Girdler* and *No Solace in Memory*. She writes for the Literate Ape website.

Posted November 1, 2020

The Eden of Perhaps

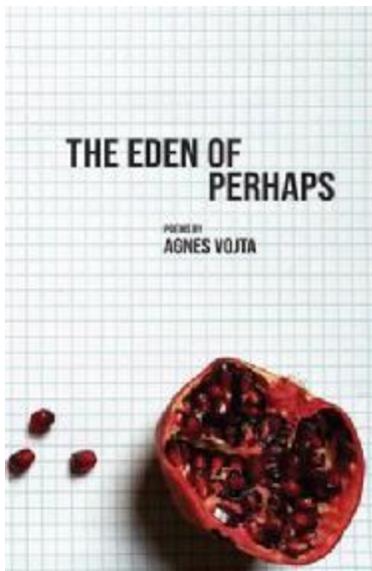
By Agnes Vojta

Spartan Press, 2020

74 Pages

ISBN-13: 978-1952411007

Review by Jacqueline Stearns



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The Eden of Perhaps is a sensitively written volume of poetry that chronicles the feminine journey as it pertains to a woman's place in the world.

Muse takes a reflective look at a woman who discovers a new, vibrant side of herself. She doesn't know whether or not to embrace these personality traits that could "Wake her up" and give her a broader view of the world.

Questioning talks about a woman who finds solace in Library books. She keeps her writing a secret. "The stacks of Library books reveal what torments her" and "The computer does not judge." The woman is relieved to find the "Librarian has an unfamiliar face."

Greeting Cards They Don't Make deals with the horror of domestic violence: "May only peaceful thoughts touch your heart today doesn't cut it when you're dictating your statement to the prosecutor." She couldn't write because her abuser beat her so badly she suffered a concussion.

The World Split Open, depicts a group of women telling the truth about their lives. They have teetered on the brink of suicide, have lost children, and/or have been sexually assaulted. This particular poem made me think. Women prevail, overcoming tragedies and obstacles, to seek and find love, peace, happiness.

We Live In A World Of Right Angles begs the question what if people broke with tradition and didn't always do what is expected of them?

One of my personal favorites in this collection is *Never Too Late*. The character in this work begins her life's journey in midlife. Vojta implores younger women not to mock her, explaining that life experiences will make this traveler's adventures richer.

Agnes brilliantly weaves Greek mythology and classic fairy tales, into a seamless tapestry that asks what if our existences as we know them can change? Is fate really pre-ordained? *Sisyphus Calls It Quits* jokingly asks what if the gods didn't have a right to punish

Sisyphus? What would happen if Rapunzel and Aurora (Sleeping Beauty) struck out on their own, rather than waiting for their respective princes to rescue them?

Vojta also uses natural wonders as a plot device. *Peace of the River* depicts a woman yearning to cast off the shackles of an everyday routine to live by a river, becoming one with its seasons. *Trip Tych On Highway 28* is a lovely tale of a person driving toward a beautiful magical rainbow. What is life without romance?

Unconditional is disturbing because one person wants to erase all traces of herself from her relationship so that the components will focus on her partner.

That Summer We Rolled Around In The Grass, tells a tale of piquant first love and innocent sensuality.

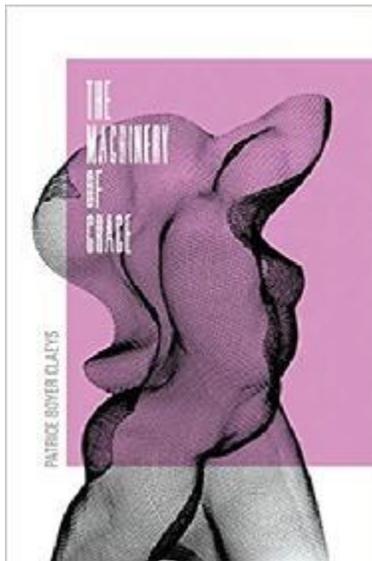
The Eden of Perhaps encompasses life and its citizens slogging through attempting to find their place in the world.

===ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Jacqueline Stearns holds a B.A degree from William Patterson College (Now University). She was a feature writer for Clifton Merchant Magazine. Stearns has had been published in *The Millstreet Forward*, *Grapevine Christian Magazine*, and *Highland Park Poetry*.

Posted November 1, 2020

The Machinery of Grace
Patrice Claeys Boyer
Kelsay Books, 2020
64 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1950462735

Review by Gail Denham



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The Machinery of Grace, an amazing poetry volume, by Patrice Boyer Claeys, is entirely written in the Cento poetry form, using lines from a large number of works, all credited in the back of the book. Ms Boyer Claeys changed little besides tenses or plurals to singular, adding none of her own words.

To have amassed this enormous amount of lines from so many poets shows a skill and attention to detail that many of us wish we could master.

However, it's not just the skill of compiling these lines into poems which have form and extend a theme - the book is a revelation of how the author viewed grief over her mother's illness and passing. Then how she progressed to a renewed look at life. The book is both comforting and a book of encouragement.

To point out a few poems - "The Beginning of Forgetting" talks of her mother slipping away: "Her childhood streets, those old recipes she'd been saving,"..."All this time, and it comes back like this - the end humming along." The poems are put together in such a way as to make complete sense, using a variety of lines.

"after all these years I can still ...taste the morning rush, ...keep reaching into the past for that muscle memory of love." Then the book moves into healing: "Just when you thought your history complete, the peach trees blossom." And "Thank God some things stay the same."

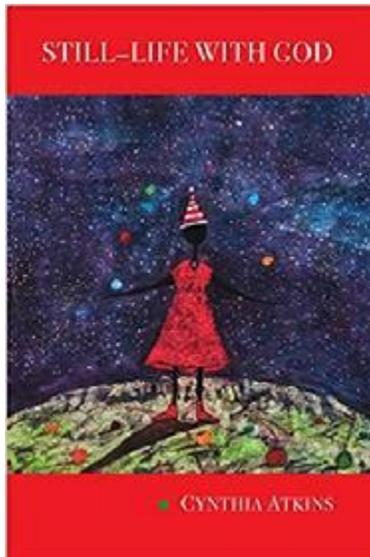
So much to absorb in this book of poetry, published by Kelsay Books Inc. and also available through Amazon.

===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 November 1, 2020

Still Life With God
By Cynthia Atkins
St Julian Press, 2020
112 Pages
ISBN-13: 978-1733023306

Review by Tina Cole



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In *Still-Life with God*, Atkins takes us on more than an exploration, it is a quest. These are poems that pose questions and present a still life arrangement for us to consider. What are the relationships between objects, what is there and what is not and what about the gaps in-between? The poems probe the possibilities of something sacred in the now, the everyday, a relationship with God in many guises, *A wishing well/ A medicine cabinet/ A bullet/ An alibi*. We are drawn into dialogues and disputes about gender, body, illness, gun violence and mental health. Conflicts of inner and outer worlds, the personal and the communal including up-to-the-moment challenges of the twenty first century are brought out of dark closets. These are fragments gleaned over a lifetime, what has been taught, what has been learned and a reflection on the world and womanhood in all its facets chaos, struggle, triumph.

The 46 poems are arranged in four parts. Atkins' voice is loud, bold even fierce, she assaults the reader with imagery that explodes like soap bubbles, like fireworks, like missiles. Layer upon layer of filo pastry allegory and metaphor, focus and re-focus her painful, apposite and over-arching themes.

Part one begins with the sonnet, '**God is a Wishing Well**':

lit-up in the parking lot of my heart,
which kick-starts us immediately into the landscape we are to inhabit. Following on, '**Hello Stranger**', calls us to reflect on human isolation.

*it's me the voice inside a tin box
inside the intention to be a voice
...we are lonely
in our cars, we are little cubicles.*

I particularly liked, '**Imaginary Friends**', ...

*because you needed to belong
you sought the debutantes who flaunted their
fixed prom dates. See how they build their houses
with bricks of silence.*

A head butt of a poem that fixes us clearly in our

twenty first century world.

Part II moves on to a younger self, a lighter perspective and begins with, '**God is a Treasure Hunt**'

I am a gawky kid jumping into a pile of leaves.

Atkins pulls us along those perplexing adolescent tracks of who am I? These are poems of identity and self-discovery. **My Persona** - is a teenage rant, a listing of the positive and negative, a shouting out of self-belief and self-doubt. The obdurate nature of self-reflection and trying to make sense is well forked over.

*my persona has a pecking order ...
is filled with yearning...
is behind the curtains where loneliness dwells.*

Part III takes us beyond the reflected self into the harsh realities of adulthood, where God might be found in a medicine cabinet, or in a library. There are powerful poems in this section that grapple with adult themes, grab you with heavily concentrated meaning. In '**House and Home**;

*where I've left so many arguments in lamplit
rooms... my archive of scars..
a shantytown of loneliness.. we tell ourselves
to face the music of our grief..
it is a constant assault.*

And equally strong, '**Domestic Terrorism**'

*every action has a terrible twin
every dictator knows there is power in fear.*

This section also contains three insightful exploratory self-portrait poems. '**Self Portrait with No Spare Parts**'

*this is how
everything is fine until it is not.*

The final pages contain a kind of modulation - moments of quiet reflection - a Goddess appears, '**The Goddess in Purple Rain**'

*and stars allow me to follow her..
rooftops are hunkering down to sing lullabies.*

There is a feeling of some reconciliation with the self, that some kind of still-life can be attained after facing one's own demons and the demons of society. That a search for the authentic self may bear fruit despite everyday contradictory evidence. This is a brave collection that ends with, 'God is the Myth' prompting again the question if he is or not?

*Every day..
we mark the calendar with one more hangnail of
grief*

These are complex poems, a roller coaster of themes, written with skilful imagery and conviction. The still life we are asked to observe and meditate on is sketched out in bold colours. Atkins language is sensitive, emphatic, and impactful, every poem seeking the divine in the everyday. The power and the passion in these poems and the journey that you are taken on as a reader leave you in no doubt that God can be found in who we are, what we do and how we do it.

=== About the reviewer: Tina Cole is a U.K. poet who lives in a rural area near the border with Wales. She has been writing poetry for many years, her collection - *I Almost Knew You* (2015), focussed on dysfunctional relationship themes. She has won a number of national Poetry competitions and her published poems have appeared in many U.K. magazines, collections and one in *The Guardian* newspaper. Her second collection, *Nothing but the Strength of Names*, will be released by Yaffle Press in 2021.

Posted October 1, 2020

dancing a dizzy holiness

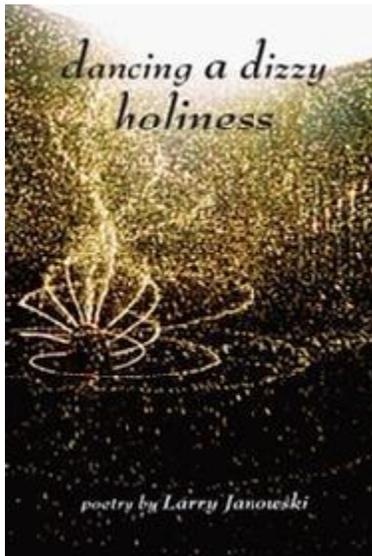
By Larry Janowski

After Hours Press, 2019

91 Pages

ISBN: 978-0-578-56655-9

Review by Ed Werstein



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It was with a bit of skepticism that I started reading Larry Janowski's recent book, *dancing a dizzy holiness*. After all, Janowski is an ordained Franciscan Friar and I'm a former seminarian and a recovering Catholic. However, I am happy to report that I have absolutely nothing negative to say about this collection. I thoroughly enjoyed, and was frequently amazed by it.

Right from the opening lines of "Religious Poem," Janowski lets the reader know that he's not going to be preached to:

I hear you secretly groaning, *Jesus-- not religion!* Well, yes, but not a sermon in poem's clothes, but the thick Latin root of religion, the *lig* of it-- as in ligament...

And near the end of the poem the word *ligature* creates a nice echo with the opening. These are poems for word lovers. Poems to be read aloud.

If you like poems with titles that point the reader down a path that ends in an unexpected place, you'll find plenty to enjoy here as well. For one example, given some of the history of the Catholic priesthood, one might cringe before diving into a poem titled "Abuse." It ends, though, in a decidedly pleasant little turn. And which of us has ever read a confessional poem written from the priest's side of the screen? The last poem in this section, "Severe Thunderstorm Warning," is a narrowly constructed poem of abrupt line breaks evocative of the poetry of Todd Boss or Eavan Boland. Many of the short lines could stand alone as poetic prompts.

The book's 45 poems are grouped into seven sections. As if planned that way, the shortest section (two poems) is titled, *Coming Up Short*. Both poems are quite humorous, self-deprecating riffs on the author's own diminutive stature. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Short Guy," is a series of backhanded insults, each in its own particular style:

Diffident
Sorry.
I didn't see you.

Optimistic

When it rains,
you're the last to know.

The six poems in the section, *The City*, make up a collective ode to the place Janowski calls home, Chicago. They take us from colorful descriptions of pedestrian-watching while stopped at red lights, through the city's fickle changing seasons, and ends with election night 2008. Like many poems in the book they are full of creative metaphors. Have you ever heard slow traffic described as the *thrombosis of arterial streets*?

Family is a section of poignant, often tissue-grabbing poems that venture from the author's childhood to the parenting of his own parents in their old-age. The evolving relationship of boy and father is especially heart-warming.

The poem, "Life Expectancy", which opens a section called, *The Waning Crescent*, is a thought-provoking read for those of us living under the delusion that the longevity of our parents has given us a free pass into our old age. But my favorite poem in the entire collection is one called, "Skin: A Letter". It is a dreamy, speculative tribute to the authors two poetic heroes, Gerard Manley Hopkins (also a priest-poet) and Walt Whitman. In it Janowski imagines an afternoon of skinny-dipping with his heroes.

These are accessible poems written for everyone, writers and readers alike. So, leave your dictionary and mythology encyclopedia on the shelf, grab your favorite beverage, and sit down for a thoroughly enjoyable read.

===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 October 1, 2020

Body Falling, Sunday Morning

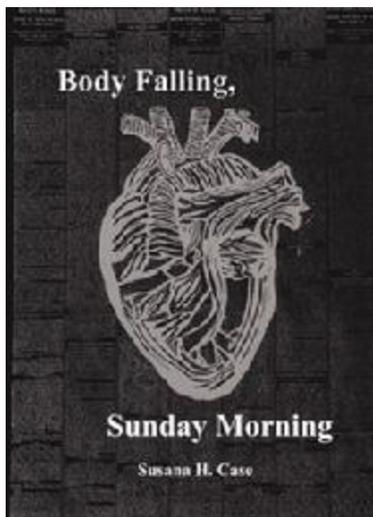
By Susana H. Case

Milk and Cake Press, 2019

34 Pages

ISBN: 978-1-7341066-0-2

Review by Joseph Zaccardi



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*Every day, the shoe factory and then,
one day, inevitably, the shotgun.*

With these startling first lines from the first poem, “No Sign of Activity,” from Susana H. Case’s, *Body Falling, Sunday Morning*, the reader begins a journey filled with mystery and revelation; from the cover art, whose background of newsprint is set in reversed type, that is, light color text on a dark gray pallet, to Frances Glessner Lee’s photos taken of her crime-scene dioramas, reproduced here in black-and-white, from the originals done in color. This stark rendering, along with the text of the poems, adds a cinéma vérité feel to unveil truth and highlight the horror of murder, either because of passion or revenge or greed.

Case gives voice to Glessner Lee’s dollhouse-sized dioramas, created by her in the 1940s and 50s. Although the crimes depicted were composites of actual cases, the characters and decorations of the dioramas’ interiors were Glessner Lee’s invention; she disclosed the dark side of domesticity and its potentially deleterious effects--many victims were women led astray from the cocoon-like security of the home--by men, misfortune, or by their low stations in life.

In this collection, Susana H. Case, the poet, shows her mastery of the ekphrastic poetic form when she connects the extraordinary with the ordinary; she redefines perceptions with linguistic agility. Few contemporary poets of ekphrastic poetry, in my opinion, can so effectively accomplish such artistry. It would not be accurate to label her poetry, and Frances Glessner Lee’s dioramas, merely as artwork paired with words, for the poems in *Body Falling, Sunday Morning* are seamlessly controlled, and, because of Case’s attention to detail, the reader can envision the subtle nuances in the scenes that ask: is this murder, suicide, or accident? Case employs metonymy

and drumroll by her deftly chosen words and phrases to place us at the center of crime scenes, and guides us through the case study of the murdered, and fingers those suspected of murder: from the poem "Body in the Closet," she writes: *Her neck is slashed.... // female sexuality / begets violence; the hooker / always gets it in the end.* And this from "End of the Affair," *He bent over and shot himself / his mistress insists.... No matter that the gun's not under him....* This is not poetry for the faint of heart, one must stand awake, eye on the photographic images, ear attuned to the sound and significance of the words on the page, for they will not stay still; readers may find themselves turning back pages to re-read and re-view what has transpired. Where is the truth, one may ask; you the reader become the chief inspector and coroner, perpetrator and victim.

Case goes a step further in her placement of the black-and-white photos, assembling her poems in six scenes, each scene foreshadowed by one of Glessner Lee's dioramas. The poems explore in detail not only the dead bodies, but also the décor of the middle class and the ne'er-do-well; there are the dotted curtains and floral wallpapers, the spill of dark blood on carpets and bed sheets, a woman lying on the floor with a knife in her body. Here's four lines from the poem "Bite Marks," *A pervert, one she knows / has bitten up her torso and legs... She's cut, mis-loved, teenager / in ballet shoes, knife in gut.*

It is the mission of the poet to find the primitive understory and bring to life, with quiet force, the victims who suffered this fate. Yes, a picture is worth a thousand words, but words, especially in the hands of a poet with the acuity of this poet, resurrects the deceased imagistically to reveal their story. She further explores the relationship of the real world to its encapsulation in rooms (stanzas) via the

dioramas, and effectively melds the distinction between the actual and the perceived.

What we have here is a poet who shares her heightened appreciation of art, for her language underscores the most consequential subject matter; in the last line, in the last poem, "Wallpaper with Fish," she shows us the devastation in its summation:

You don't know what to think.

===About the reviewer: **Joseph Zaccardi** served as Marin County, CA poet laureate (2013-2015), and during his tenure published and edited *Changing Harm to Harmony: Bullies & Bystanders Project*. He is the author of five books poetry, the latest being *The Weight of Bodily Touches*, from *Kelsay Books*. www.josephzaccardi.com

Posted October 1, 2020

Wild Fruition: Sonnets, Spells, and Other Incantations

By Christine Swanberg
Puddin'head Press, 2017
98 Pages
ISBN: 978-0981975634

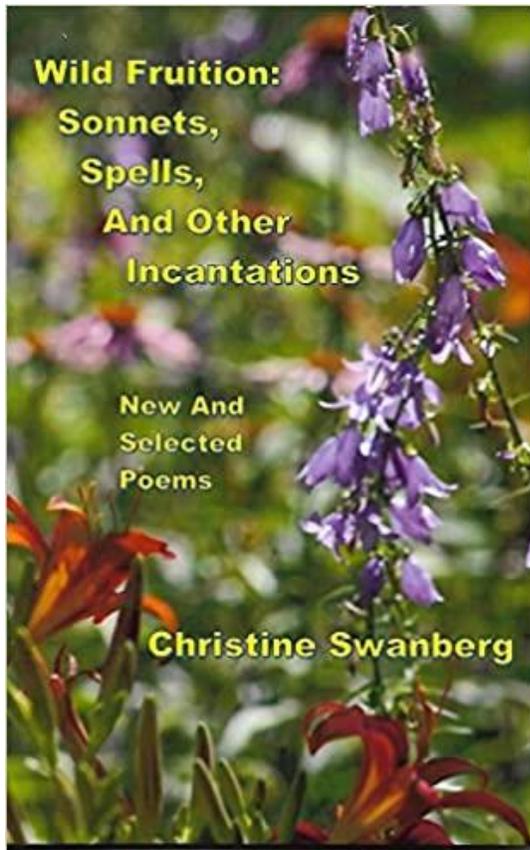
Review by Barbara Eaton

Christine Swanberg's *Wild Fruition: Sonnets, Spells, And Other Incantations* starts out as a journey, illustrated by her husband Jeffrey's well-chosen photographs.

The first photograph, a dark interior of what appears to be a covered bridge, revealing a vista of trees, is particularly apt, and the first few poems, "Something So New," "Great River Road," and "Bridges," create the excitement every new journey presents. Swanberg is especially good at satisfying and surprising last lines, and "Great River Road" contains an

unusually fresh last line: "spring green promise now springing forth."

"Black Mesa Magic" and "Dangerous Woman" also have great last lines: "a thousand miles from home again," and "a woman with chemicals, Marlboros/and a lighter that works. Watch out." A little disconcerting was the error of "ice sickles" for "icicles," which occurred twice.



The book also traces a journey through the seasons, and a journey through life. Many of the poems celebrate the simple joys of life in one's later years, such as "One October Morning Past Your Prime," and "One January Morning Past Your Prime."

"Spell to Enchant a House," luckily, the spell of a good witch, is both entertaining and amusing.

Lovely garden poems follow, and "The Joy of Unimportance," sings praises of life after one's sixth decade: "We no longer have to please all people!" "The Sweet Spot," too, ends with a wonderful line: "the sweet life--/the long, luxurious meander,/mid-afternoon for no good reason/whatsoever."

These poems are very welcome to readers in their later years who are ready to slow down and simply enjoy life. This book is a pleasure to read, and the pleasure deepens upon rereading. This book would make a thoughtful gift for a recent retiree. Well done, Christine!

===About the reviewer: Barbara Eaton is a poet and semi-retired community college instructor.

Posted October 1, 2020