

## Line Dance

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BARBARA CROOKER. WORD PRESS: CINCINNATI, OHIO. 2008.

Barbara Crooker writes the way the French Impressionists painted — she gives you some of what you expect with exquisite color and detail and then polishes it with her own technique. She splashes realism with movement, human experience and odd interesting angles of perception. The viewer/reader begins to see the everyday as something wondrous, intimate.

From dancing at her daughter's wedding, to helping her son with homework. From loving and being loved in middle age, to losing a first born but later having grandchildren. Crooker lets the reader in. A woman's life here is significant.

Crooker's accomplishments are numerous: book awards, prizes, numerous Pushcart nominations, features on Verse Daily and NPR's *The Writer's Almanac*, and probably more poetry publications than most could keep up with. All these come richly deserved, as Crooker's voice is strong, relaxed as she pulls you in visually and does not let go.

In "Blues for Karen," Crooker begins, "The season of your death, morning glories trailed / along the wire fence, one tone deeper than the sky." This calls to mind Monet's impressionistic and obsessive skies, sometimes moody, sometimes cheering.

"In the Knot Garden" we discover (regarding the narrator's autistic son) that "Autism's a labyrinth of false twists / and turns, blind alleyways, spirals that lead / nowhere." We begin to understand the circuitous route a child's mind might take and how a mother must follow organically.

Crooker uses the brilliance of color like Renoir's girls and Berthe Morisot's intense greens to describe birds she sees. She describes the junco as "The Slate Gray Junco / with his immaculate bib, sooty jacket / bobs in the snow for sunflower seeds." In "Hummingbird," she sees that "He comes every day in his crushed-emerald cape / flashing in front of the kitchen window, quick / as a thought and just as elusive; one blink, / and he's gone."

I think of Morisot's intense whites, too, when in "Les Effets de Neige," the narrator asks, "How many different tubes of paint / are there for white?" I particularly love how Crooker can mine the dead of winter for a meaning of white in "Zero at the Bone," beginning by saying, "The scouring light of winter / scrubs whatever it falls on, / the bright whiteness revealing / all the small incursions, / marks and stains of another year."

Yet Crooker has an American versatility in gospel-y, bluesy and jazzy poems such as "The VCCA Fellows Visit the Holiness Baptist Church, Amherst, Virginia" where she acknowledges that "We are the only light faces in a sea of mahogany, / tobacco, almond, and this is not the only way / we are different." I admire Crooker's jazzy list in "Janis," a tribute to Janis Joplin in which Crooker begins, "She sang to all of us who never fit / in, too bony, too fat, too weird, wired / all wrong for the cliques of a Texas high / school, the religion of football, cheerleaders, / jocks; longnecks, pickup trucks, Madras / A-lines, bubble cuts, penny loafers."

The impressionistic and sometimes jazzy nature of this collection makes this line up of poems a literary dance.

— Mary Jane Ryals

## Sex at Noon Taxes

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SALLY VAN DOREN. LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS: BATON ROUGE. 2008.

Poet Sally Van Doren's Walt Whitman Award winning collection offers the reader 59 not-so-traditional sonnets. Yes, the volume definitely reflects her fascination with that fourteen line style of verse. These poems are quirky, but intriguing with their unexpected leaps and turns.

*Sex at Noon Taxes* is titled after a painting by Ed Ruscha. The title is an oddity for two reasons. The word sex, with its hints of pleasure, is juxtaposed with taxes. The latter certainly elicits more feelings of dread than anticipation. We are already wondering what this volume is going to reveal.

Then there is the second quirk, the palindrome form, which predicts an emphasis in the poet's work. This emphasis blooms in her playful use of language. In "Preposition" she writes: "By my above and your below, the wheres and whens retreated, leaving time and space stranded, in off, and out." Again her humor crackles through in the phonetic spelling of "Primur": "Bedder not tew admit that the author of the pome, whos vois has not bin perjered, ... hs mor to say than the vegetable berger sizzling ovur charcoles..."

One more example of the writer's preoccupation with grammatical forms jumps out at us in "Pronoun/Punctuation":

...Commas shadow us; brackets enclose

our parentheses. See the slash  
in this title? I have left her out and you.

She erases the hyphen, and all of you,  
condensed in apostrophes, blow your

quotation marks into my dreams.

Experiments with the shape of the sonnets along with this free-spirited use of language pervade throughout the text. A colorfulness definitely splashes through to the canvas of her words, but it all seems almost light and dancey.

Visual arts are also a prevailing influence in Van Doren's work. In fact some of her painterly images may offend. In "Marriage" she visualizes "sentimental phlegm" and "fart-spattered walls." In "To Become World," she writes: "With a pair of tweezers, she plucked out every pubic hair and affixed them to her chin." Some readers might find these disturbing, but she brings a brighter pallet in "Easter": "Hyacinths come first here, forsythia close behind. Jonquils and daffodils sprouting up before we are ready to receive the light of April." Still her vision remains personal, and readers may be struggling to find an interpretation that doesn't leave them to their own realizations.

In order to uncover a more serious line of thought we can look to her "Equinox." Here her images bring the struggle of life versus the passage of time into play:

How to measure the space between  
the bed three nights ago and a car pulling  
in the driveway? And what did Time sound like?  
It was iambic, a rising beat hidden in the trope,  
Turning at the sight of him. Someone had given  
permission to isolate them from the closure of a day.

But for me the poems primarily reflect a manipulation and experimentation with language. Each one is packed with word-paintings from the writer's imagination and fashioned into fourteen lines. Certainly well-crafted and skillfully arranged, her collection surprises the reader with its inventiveness.

— Margaret Howard Trammell

## Shimming the Glass House

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HELEN PRUITT WALLACE. THE ASHLAND POETRY PRESS: ASHLAND, OHIO. 2008.

The work in *Shimming the Glass House*, winner of the 2007 Richard Snyder Prize and a Bronze Medal recipient for the Florida Book Award series, pierces the reader with a profound sense of loss, a forceful burrowing into the core of human existence. But these poems are more than meditations on the irretrievable: the intense attention to language, line by line, word by word, makes these pages hum with a thrilling music.

In “Gift We Forgot How to Accept” a physically shattered glass snake leaves the poem’s characters with “fingers outstretched / staring at loss.” The piece’s striking images, such as “violently he snapped / in half” and “Bits of him // reeled toward a hedge, organs bulging like jewels,” stick in our minds on a visual level, but the subtleties on an aural level make the work truly sing. For example, the poem’s embedded rhymes resonate:

We saw him as a gift, a glass snake lolling in the yard  
like a bike tire abandoned in sun. He smelled us  
with a flick of his tongue. . . .

The combination of image and sound coalesce to give these lines their power.

Attention to sound and form is one of the collection’s strengths. Wallace plays with both the villanelle and sestina form and variations on these. The villanelle “Missed Calls” captures the tragedy of the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Her lines recall the dreadfulness of “phones ringing, ringing from the dead” and “a baby’s white shoe / intact in the horror of trains exploding.” Again, the balance and contrast of the gripping images and the music the villanelle creates give the poem a vital energy.

Two side by side poems about the passing of a brother especially wrestle with the book’s theme of loss. “Epilogues for a Brother” and “After Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts*” strike with quiet power to unearth the painful core. The first poem gives two epilogues: in the first, a rewrite grants the tragedy a happy ending; the other offers a bitter sweet meditation on love and desire. The first one supplies a *what-if*: “You . . . eject / just before the plumed crash, your white chute // floating like milkweed.” A young child provides the last acts of the rescue: “. . . you . . . bruised / barely enough to need her soft shoulder // as you hobble to her house for soup.” This first epilogue contrasts sharply with the second, in which the lines focus on a Chinese tradition. The tradition is to search for a recently killed young woman, a bride in the afterlife for a dead son or brother. Here the narrator brings the brother back to life another time, but through ritual instead of fantasy:

I, too, would offer gold, 10,000 yuan: a dowry  
for the dead, if you, brother, wanted a bride.

Who’s to say desire won’t out live us?  
In the Loess Plateau the poorest parents weave

the wives from straw, trusting the chemistry  
of dirt. There’s wisdom in a match like that.

The next poem, “After Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts*,” revises Auden’s meditation on the painting that reveals Icarus’s fall. The narrator’s brother becomes Icarus, and the parents become the figures in the painting’s foreground. However, unlike the painting’s characters, the parents are profoundly affected by the tragedy, despite the ways they try to

hide it: “Your mother folds ... the white sheets / but see how her corners don’t line up, and your father, / out raking leaves, notice his grip on the rake, how tightly he tries / to hold on.”

These poems will hold tightly to a reader’s imagination and offer true insight into pain at the heart of loss.

— Michael Trammell

## Solace of the Aging Mare

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DAN STRYK. THE MID-AMERICA PRESS, INC. WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI.  
SECOND EDITION. 2008.

The poems in Dan Stryk’s *Solace of the Aging Mare* feel the pull of the natural world captured by the imagistic traditions of poetry from the Far East, and this influence informs Stryk’s work in ways that surprise and satisfy.

In “Still Life” the reader is granted “wild parsnip, dried in umbelled reach”; “the husk of cicada bows”; “the soft translucent glimmer / Of a sparrow’s weathered skull”; and “the jeweled grain / Of the red-ear’s burnished carapace.” All these glimpses of nature set up an extended simile: “Like a hillock, where the fragment of a Roman pot-- / The fractured lip--lies lofty in grey shadow.” These things all combine to form the “Slow dust between” that will endure.

This connection to Eastern philosophical beliefs on impermanence and repeating cycles also allows the poet to embrace similar Native American values and images. In “Symbol” a primitive picture “in the middle of the tawny / swell of a Zuni ceremonial urn” works as the poem’s guiding principle: “the / keen black form of a lone stag.” This hand-drawn animal inspires Stryk to make a proclamation:

All gathering  
in one black stag to form our

last motif: to linger here on Earth’s  
wide sphere alone. To swallow

death into our pulsing hearts.

The transience theme, here and elsewhere, strongly resounds.

But it’s the focus on nature, not philosophy, that makes many works in this collection burst from the page. In “Six Images of the Farm Turning to Spring” the lines flash and color: “Seedling dandelions spark rank grass”; “cattle regain a wild stealth, / Hide from us like deer”; “the starling hovers / Flailing wings, / Screams down at hissing cat”; “We see the algae eel / From silt-browned rocks”; “clear / And ringing cricket-crisp tonight.” The poem “Mayflies of Ferry Landing” also startles the mind’s eye with “the glare / of Old Miss backwaters”; “tunneled buzz / of Mayflies’ dance”; “line sludged / in the leaping shoals / that fish, now blind, / take in”; “the brittle mounds of dawn.” Stryk shows a true mastery of crafting poetic lines that capture the essence of things.

This expertise powerfully exhibits itself in the piece bluntly titled “Delivering a Pig.” Here the words work hard to flesh-out the scene: “A boomerang of hiss & grunt”; “A light ooze / trickles leg. Blind rage / of born piglets, beating air”; “Shrieks / split wood, the barn’s / a rocking din.” Despite all this chaos, the poem’s narrator calmly helps deliver the last baby and is startled by sensation: “the burning sac’s / small heartbeat / thuds my palm.”

*Solace of the Aging Mare* frequently startles with its sharp images, but this shock will push the reader into places he or she has never ventured.

— Michael Trammell