

Moonflower

Gianna Russo. Kitsune Books: Crawfordville,
Florida. 2011.

Moonflower, Gianna Russo's first full-length poetry collection, is a compilation of poems that revels in an honest venture into human nature. Russo threads life's healing process into her poems through an intimate reflection on lingering past moments, "thrash[ing] in a sarcophagus of memories." Russo's poems expose lost places as a mosaic of "memory room[s]" and sensual slices of time. She is a two-time Pushcart Prize winner, and *Moonflower* continues to reflect Russo's eloquent language and tactful use of sounds and images.

Russo opens with her poem "Angel of Drought," where she delves into a void in the natural world:

Something with an august thirst has drawn
up the Hillsborough as if through a straw.
A tawny tannic trickle
inches the empty riverbed.
The cattails have gone brown and brittle,
the lily pads, under some dark spell,
are reduced to the size of dimes.
Something with the drive of life-force in reverse
Has stolen away our lake—

As nature's "desperate refugees" extend their "draining touch" to Russo's own voids, the infectious outer world "draws closer to [her] door." This poem defines the tone of her deepest inner yearnings expressed in the poems that follow.

Voyages into past darkness rest at the heart of her poetry. While poems in *Moonflower* carry a heavy sadness, they sing resilience, as the sadness is juxtaposed with

illustrious grace, strength, and beauty. This notion is expressed in her poem

"Approaching Infinity," as the figs and the bees anticipate new beginnings:

This world means to quarter bliss,
slice it to a sheer fraction.
Yet figs grow round from the thinnest curve
and bees tending their simple house,
take death for what it gives
and line a bed for birth

Vivid imagery coupled with fresh phrases set Russo's poems apart. Lavish detail does not clutter her poetry; instead, her tight lines carry the simplicity of a true wordsmith.

Her images are intriguing and spike curiosity and deep contemplation. "Corona of sunrise, nimbus of belly, / scintilla of thighs, throat-lit hollow. / Nipple and aureola: / mountain ascending its shadow. / Everything could be something else." The unpredictable nature of her diction coupled with her ability to create artistry in the mind's eye is an accomplishment that is infrequent in modern poetry collections, and should be celebrated in *Moonflower*.

The latter half of the collection moves through a string of more personal poems about her mother's death. In her poem "My Favorite Curse Word," Russo exposes the gruesome experience of observing cancer treatment:

Fuck the radiation chamber
where my mind took a snapshot fit
for Amnesty International:
my mother strapped onto a table
thinner than her back,
balancing all of her 70 years on that ledge.
Over her face, they placed a mesh mask
molded to fit her very skin,
then screwed the mask down and imprisoned
her face inside that cage.

Russo is able to release her mother's spirit with a cathartic mediation in her poem "Meditation to a Crystal Bowl: A long Slow Train." She acquiesces to a new world without her mother, "and at last I saw that I should stop wishing. / So I thought, *you can go.*" While facing the reality of her mother's death, Russo grants her perpetual immortality through the vivacity of these powerful poems.

Gianna Russo has outdone herself with this collection. Her poems are edgy and refreshing. Beauty blooms from misfortunes as she transcends "the cupboards where loss looms inside the cups," and turns her attention to the fall of evening, finding the moonflower:

When shadows sculpt star-points out of thorns,
a lacy perfume spills from the trellis.
The moonflowers turn their porcelain faces up
and open themselves to the dark.

Like moonflowers, Russo is fearless in her exploration of her own existence in the past and present while considering the natural world that surrounds her. She understands, "Nature trots out such omens," as a deep experiential wisdom radiates from each of her poems. Russo has rightfully claimed her place in the "ring of moon-poets." *Moonflower* closes with perseverance and hope, "Even the vultures spiraling see the gleam of sweet sun / on my eyelids and the mournful moon on my heels." This collection is a gem, as Russo brings grace to longing, through an arrangement of lines that dance.

but I myself rise and shake out
the waist-length hair of my soul,
and it sets all the bells to ringing.

--Kristina DiPano

How to Live on Bread and Music

Jennifer K. Sweeney. Winner of the 2009 James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poets. Perugia Press: Florence, Massachusetts. 2009.

In Jennifer Sweeney's remarkable collection of poems, the reader is invited to pay attention. The world is unfurling in mysterious ways and the evidence of its birth and decline are everywhere. The natural world is a presence whose sensual details help steer the reader to deeper understandings of his or her place in it. Awareness comes in bursts, not necessarily when we are expecting it. In the poem "Presence," she writes:

Maybe it comes when you catch the queen
bee mating in the boxwood

Or the afternoon you realize
the rosemary has taken the path.

You wake in moments

And even then, how limited are our perceptions of the world's vastness. Even when we find (unfortunately rare) delight in noticing, "There is little life / you can fully witness. / Even your own you drift / in and out of seeing."

The poems in this collection reverberate with the rumbling of metaphoric freight trains and passenger trains; in them, the poet considers how much of life is departing and returning, traveling to unknown places, hoping for safety when we get there. In "The Arcata and Mad River Railroad," the speaker discovers in a collection of depot artifacts "how our things speak for us / and what you've left behind (tree house, sister, tradition, ambition) / is continually arriving as it is found and found and found."

Many of Sweeney's poems offer empathetic visual renderings of ordinary people who grieve, who feel afraid, who want to be elsewhere. Her subjects include passengers on the five o'clock train ("these people how hungry they look / and not nearly as guilty as they feel,") businessmen who "lean like a pack of trench coat angels" and "two college girls who've nowhere to go." Sweeney's voice is embracing and compassionate. "In Praise and Apology" is a song to those who search and struggle:

For the man who wakes from his surgery
and wails in the cold *Am I alive?*

For my students searching in silence
the alley-cracks and gutters for haiku in their composition books.

For the greater strength it takes the woman
who has been pushing an immense rock for years
to walk in the opposite direction.

But her subjects are often capable of transforming themselves and their conditions, or at least she hopes so; in "Erie Central Station" she writes: "I'd like to think every night contains a fissure / where a couple of strangers are cast / in the grand light of an approaching train... / and they choose something for which / they are totally unprepared." In "Lesson: Landscapes," she paints a portrait of an art teacher who "would

have preferred a job at the academy” who instead instructs second graders to avoid rainbows and a “bottom inch of green.” She tells them “*We don't draw suns in our pictures.*” Thanks to her guidance, “the children's landscapes begin to appear holy / stick figures and boxy red cars illumined with haloes, / airplanes flying through a wash of honey, / curly treetops giving off an aura of gold.”

In many of Sweeney's poems, she explores the complexity of family dynamics and the relationships of girls. She writes of a twin who died before birth and the living sister who “came like a searchlight.” Of the intricate interconnectedness of three sisters. Of the impact of sitting in a scoliosis clinic, waiting “in a room of skeletons / while men reshaped the architecture of my sister.” In “The Silence of Girls” her language is at once sharply observant and poignant:

They are invisible as the inside of a locker
amidst the swarm of strut-walks
and octave-dropping voices.
This one is hunkered behind a pinched mask,
living off her defenses.

Another uses her shoulders as a cape
pulled up and over her chest
so her blade bones grow rounded as a shell.
How the body becomes artifice, accomplice, artillery.

“The Listeners” is a long, lyrical evocation of the power of popular music of a certain era to define one's experience. In her rumination, Sweeney deftly and rhythmically captures the ability of well-known melodies -- emanating from the vinyl records played over and over on a father's “polished phonograph” -- to help us realize that “the trick of listening” is to “find the song that is autobiographical.” The poem is a

meditation on the role of song in our lives:

sail on silver girl...

the song is in the crack

what is a crack if not empty space?
what is a song if not beautiful time
portioned aside
by vagabond saints?

echoes in the well of silence

Jennifer Sweeney's second collection of poems is generous and sympathetic, melodic and transforming. Her playful yet incisive language, rich in imagery and metaphor, serves the larger purpose of helping us see our relationship to each other and to the natural world with fresh eyes, reminding us, as she does in "Nocturne," to strive for a life that is fully engaged: "Maybe you hear a song or maybe you don't. / That is a choice we are always making."

--*Anne Meisenzahl*

Wunschkind: Child without a Country

Leisel Appel. *Grateful Steps*: Asheville, North Carolina. 2009.

A nine year old child's world is shattered at her home in Bottrop, Germany in 1951 when a former neighbor returns seeking to meet the man who saved the life of his infant son in 1938. Hearing the man's story of how his baby had been dropped off a

second floor balcony by the people next door, Leisel Appel immediately decides that her deceased father, whom she idolized, was the baby's savior. But when she happily brings the handsome Jewish man into her home, her mother's reaction changes her life forever. Her mother is shocked and banishes Leisel to her room. The writer describes the scene which implies that the man was thrown out of the house:

Mother pointed to me. "Leisel, go to your room." Her harsh voice left no doubt that I should obey right away. But why? My heart raced. My feet stayed planted still.

"Do as I say," she said.

Confused, I ignored her command. I looked at the foreigner for support. He seemed ready to leave.

And then from the window of her room the writer continues:

....Just in time, I caught a glimpse of the man's back. "Where're you going?" I shouted. "Come back."

He did not hear me. He kept rushing towards Sterckrader Strasse and was gone around the corner.

Her mother reprimands her and states that her father would never save a Jew.

Leisel continues to insist that her father saved the man's son. It is only after her mother continues her tirade that she realizes the truth.

Ms. Appel has written a coming-of-age story deeply entrenched in the hidden evils of the Holocaust. This memoir, though young adult-oriented, certainly offers enlightenment for readers of all ages.

This enlightenment begins in the early chapters as the narrator describes her current life as a grandmother in North Carolina, conversing with her granddaughter, as she prepares to write the story of her awakening to the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Leisel's early childhood portrays her as a *wunschkind*, German for coveted child. She lives a nearly idyllic life with her older, doting parents. It is only after the horrifying

incident in 1951 that she gradually discovers that her father was a German Nationalist and one of Hitler's loyal supporters.

The nine year old begins her struggle to accept the knowledge that her parents and countless other citizens of Germany stood by as their neighbors were stripped of their rights. Patriotism became an excuse for non-dissent.

Unfortunately, the burden of guilt weighs heavily on the young Leisel. She becomes increasingly rebellious. Her anger is directed at her mother as well as herself. Withdrawing from others, she performs poorly in school and, as a teenager, eventually attempts suicide.

Only after her mother sends her away to boarding school does the author begin to come out of her shell. There she meets her roommate and the two bond. Although both continue their rebellion in mischievous ways, Leisel is able to share some of her angst with her new friend. But the girls are separated after a year when both are dismissed from the school for misbehavior.

Ms. Appel's story has been compared to Anne Frank's. Reviewer Jessica Jahnke states, "Both of the stories are told by ordinary girls--one at the time of persecution and one looking back upon the time of persecution. Leisel Appel was born as a gift to Hitler. Anne Frank died at the hands of Hitler."

In the book Appel explains how and why she left Germany after her school experience. For some years she lived in England, but her travels eventually brought her to the United States where she lives today. In the final chapter she reveals the conclusions she reached after the awakening she experienced that destroyed her relationship with her family.

Do we have the right to turn our back on our families like I did if the cause is a just cause?

You decide.

We are responsible only for our own actions, and if we go wrong, the consequences may be harrowing....My father did not live by what he taught. I used his teaching to reject him. Not only him, but also my mother and all that my country stood for during the time of my birth.

Living taught me that we have to be who we say we are, otherwise we lose self-respect and the respect of others.

Leisel Appel's book portrays her themes in simple language. Themes of love, betrayal and deception are played out in a narrative especially designed to engage "tweens" and adolescent girls, but still offering mature readers a glimpse of the pain the author experienced, when her idealized view of life in Germany in the mid-twentieth century was destroyed. *Wunschkind: Child Without a Country* clearly captures the vulnerability and eagerness of a young girl, caught in the realization of one of history's most grievous eras.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

Wait Until Tomorrow: A Daughter's

Memoir

Pat MacEnulty. Feminist Press: New York. May
2011

Wait Until Tomorrow is an emotionally heartfelt memoir about a daughter who is

faced with the challenges of caring for her mother as she slips into the physical and mental restraint of old age.

Pat MacEnulty's experiences remind us of the velocity of life: how roles and perspectives constantly change. Through this we see fragility of life, how a moment can turn from good to bad in an unexpected instant, reminding us of the importance of each instant as we come to realize "the instant" as the only real pertinent thing, timely as it may be. Throughout we are reminded of the strength of mother-daughter bonds as this is the memoir's driving force. She is both mother and daughter, and we see her two roles in juxtaposition. She displays this relationship as annular: ending up where it started, perhaps realizing on a deeper level the state of life as humans have found it.

Throughout, MacEnulty is balancing loss and gain with everyday life, and we are happy to experience it with her in this emotionally rich, yet sarcastically witty text. The person who is speaking is real, feels, and is rational enough to be genuinely benevolent with purpose. But the speaker here is no saint. She admittedly gets annoyed with her needy mother though her quirky analysis builds her up to be the character we care for. Readers can't help but respect this woman for her complex persona. Not only is she filled with playful scoff, she is also earnest and a pillar of strength.

I am broken, and my mother's old age is what's breaking me, I think while standing naked in my bathroom, one foot propped on the sink, clipping my toenails. The bathroom is dirty: hairs everywhere, beads of mold in the corners. Cleaning the bathroom has become a luxury. Someday I will spend one afternoon a week scrubbing my bathroom, but for now I wipe the sink with a dry Noxema pad, scrape some loose hair from a corner, and hurry out.

My next thought is: it is not a bad thing to be broke. When something's broken you get to see what's inside.

Apart from the distress of losing her mother as she once knew her, MacEnulty

faces the adversity of loss in many dimensions. She faces death, divorce, personal illness, and even “empty-nest” syndrome when her own daughter goes off to college to begin her life as an adult. Again and again we see life as a full circle, if not a complimenting dichotomy, evoking a sense of inspiration to live in the now so that it may have a chance of mattering later. Happiness here is a moment, a sheet of music even honoring her mother’s life long passion, leading to a greater composition.

— *Amanda McCormick*

Heredities

J. Michael Martinez. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, Louisiana. 2010.

J. Michael Martinez contorts language into twisting trapeze artists who shock, delve, and lure you into *Heredities*, winner of the Walt Whitman Award in 2009. Haunting and humble at once, Martinez describes identity as a proclamation of declared self—while the self is in turn disintegrating. Words, too, then, transform ideas into a notion that is never quite what the idea once was—we embellish them, we forget truth: “Embellished language is for the poet who seeks to forget.”

But if anything is the truth, it is a configuration of a heritage and mythology that carve into the malleable notion of self. Martinez crafts Latino heritage with fresh poignancy, combining a collage-like arrangement of pathos and logos: streamlined arguments with images growing rapidly around them with appropriate splendor and

simplicity. Even his prose poems, like “Heredities (2) *Corporeity*,” which are among a very broad assembly of forms throughout the book, collect narrative functions of mythology that contain a certain inertia that penetrates the reader even with the simplest images of blood and river. We don’t receive anything embellished; we don’t forget this woman.

Yet, this woman has become a general part of this story that describes it’s whole. Pushing fragmentation to all levels of form and method, appropriately concerning the staggering sense of identity throughout, Martinez includes drawings of bones that are labeled and described by what they would once hold. For example, in “The Sternum of Our Lady of Guadalupe,” Martinez describes her chest as “an Osseo-cartilaginous garden, contain[ing] the principal contemplations of the turquoise serpent, causality’s unlimited sway. It is melody in shape, being a hymn of praise above and of marigold below.” There is a sensation that surrounds the image and corresponding images to describe it that denote feeling in themselves—regardless of reality or a set notion of self. This chest has become a garden that holds the songs and beauty of the Lady; but most of all, an awareness of sensitivity that inks through words and drawings and descriptors, embellishments even.

Everything becomes it’s own image and not itself—“The Weaver Gods speculate that they themselves are merely images—heaven itself a tapestry from a wall that is a tapestry itself.” This metaphysical, linguistic play often stands at the forefront of attention; Martinez even delves into a language feeling directly, such as in “Portrait of an Iris,” telling us exactly how “porcelain pretty one” feels to him:

“You are porcelain pretty one *little word cupshaped* tracing seasons still holding

to branches.”

Smart and often quick, Heredities winds the self, heritage, and culture into a tight weave. Martinez constantly constructs—the cracked edifices of identity become structured in their many elements that we cannot forget.

--*Jacquelyn Juaristi*

Killer of Crying Deer

William Orem. Kitsune Books: Crawfordville,
Florida. September 2010

The Ocean, vast and insistent, is both heroine and villain in *Killer of Crying Deer*. This entity is equally fierce and sustaining to all, no matter religious preference or cultural position, so much that it is the backdrop and stage for this 17th Century view of Key West, Florida. William Orem creates a picture of the concerns and duties of a life at sea that is both compelling and mysterious.

Henry, a young boy abducted and shipwrecked, becomes entwined with a thick plot of pirate adventure and wayward love. Through his eager perspective, Orem creates a fantastical illustration of the Spanish and indigenous people Henry interacts with. We gladly join Henry in his psychological journey because it is filled with drama and excitement.

The novel is broken into sections developing a pieced image of indigenous life

through Henry's novice eyes. A large part of Henry's development as a character can be attributed to his romance for Speaking Owl, a touchingly lovely native girl. Readers can't help but applaud Orem for his splendid display of such tenderness.

The form of *Killer of Crying Deer* further emphasizes the fantastical nature of the plot. Frequent changes of points of view create a shifting state for readers—both nightmarish and dream-like—though Henry's adventure certainly keeps readers invested. We can't help but feel for him, and this is amplified by these dueling perspectives.

Overall, this novel is exciting and bona fide; Orem writes in a way that is both informational and vivid in his portrayal of such an unreachable world.

— *Amanda McCormick*

Angles of Approach

Holly Iglesias. White Pine Press: Buffalo. 2010.

Holly Iglesias presents an intriguingly uncanny chronicle of American existence in *Angles of Approach*. This exceptional collection of prose poems is the 14th volume of the Marie Alexander Poetry Series. As a recent recipient of the Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Iglesias has proven herself to be a true master of her craft, a notion reiterated in this collection. A tessellation of histories reverberates from each section of this work, thickening into a dark emptiness saved by humor and glimmers of hope.

While Iglesias anchors her poems in history, it is her ability to create a voice so astute and cunning in just a few lines that sets her poems apart. In “Nostalgia,” the first section of the work, her poem “Mr. Merrick’s Mother’s Rose,” tests boundaries between civilization and wilderness. The poem opens with a rose, “Modest, it keeps to our side of the fence, the fence, as much a joke as George’s tiny wife swatting mosquitoes with a tea towel.” Here, George Merrick, the man responsible for designing Coral Gables in the Florida land boom of the 1920s is referenced. The poem possesses the inherent American value to take over space:

First it was grapefruits, then the cootie starch,
and now it’s land, pure and simple, little plots for the common man, the
New Man with his celluloid collar and factory wage hoping to buy a piece
of the City Beautiful on margin.

The motif of taming and owning the wilderness, “a malarial swamp,” is put on display. Morals of the “March of Progress” are called into question, as man and wilderness don’t coexist easily.

Iglesias juxtaposes serenity and the grotesque, making for a gut wrenching sense of awe. This phenomenon is both satisfying and terrifying. “Menace,” the second section of the collection, opens with the poem “Middle of Nowhere.” The poem’s imagery pans with the camera of the film, *Capote* (2005), inching through the calm Kansas landscape, a “November, windbreak of trees,” only to end at the house of the murdered Clutter family:

Were there a scarecrow or stalks of corn, we could
not be more certain that we had arrived at the great middle, the plain, awful
core of it all. Or that we are about to happen upon stains, small pools of
extinguished life darkening the floorboards.

She creates fluid lines that work from the inside out to illustrate her scene, allowing both history and humanity to speak volumes through understatement. Her poems are “narratives free of consequence.”

“Confession,” the final section of her collection, turns to poems concerning a fleeting sense of youth. Her poem “Theory of Flight,” opens to a scene of anticipation:

We watched frat boys chug can after can of Dixie beer, waiting for them to puke so we could kiss hope goodbye, get into cars with them and drive along the levee till the gas ran out. Our parents no longer asked where we’d been, and we no longer told them our bodies were battlegrounds beyond consecration.

Both generations share an understanding of this right of passage. Instead of selectively remembering youth, we witness the hopelessness that is often forgotten in the recollection of reckless freedom. As she captures the clash between adolescents and older generations, progression is not seen as linear, “No one weeps for the young; they’re too beautiful to need our tears. They bear what they’re given and sleep like stones.” Instead, it appears to be a cycle of trial and error where both have fallen for the same tricks as they cross the line into adulthood.

Angles of Approach is captivating, an extraordinary accomplishment in anthologizing the humanity of American culture. Iglesias presents us with “shreds of dreams” and moments as they are, untainted by her own sentiments. We see the world through “the peephole glowing like an unnamed planet,” as a wide spectrum of intrigue evolves. This collection artfully balances tears and laughter on a fingertip. Humming a tune both heartfelt and grim, it houses “the tempest between its covers.”

--Kristina DiPano

Transistor Rodeo

Jon Wilkins. University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, Utah. April 2010

More than a prize-winning collection of poetry, *Transistor Rodeo* provides readers with a sharp view of ordinary life. Throughout the collection, Jon Wilkins creates a world in each poem that is vivid and earnest. Love here is something unedited, worthy of examination as it exists in a world of battling power and competing questions about religion, art, and the construction of society.

Transistor Rodeo is broken up into nonlinear sections. In the first section we are presented with the idea that the state of the world is amiss:

Only astronauts and
angels know how
difficult it is and how
improbably to run
across true love once
you learn to fly.

The second section is more meditative, presented as prayers, keen to time and physical details. This is where Wilkins really invites the reader to chew on the idea of the spiritual self. Through his somber view of religion, we can't help but feel optimistic:

And the hope that burdens future generations,
let that lie forever in the desert as well,
and water all around your feet, standing
water all around your feet.

As the collection reads on you can't help but admire how Wilkins, through seemingly mundane scenes of life-stuff, considers the world as the inevitable factor of life. Questions will remain unanswered yet continue to be asked, but still life is lived.

and Memphis,
dirty as a window

or a plate
of grits.
Buicks melt

into the city like
butter and the man
unlocking the pawn

shop is happy because
someone is dead.

In each line we sense an un-urgent sense of importance, a respect for how things naturally fall into being.

Through his light, yet sharp and strikingly analytical verse, Wilkins's poems allow readers to stop and readjust long enough to notice life's invisible landscape and emotional grain.

— *Amanda McCormick*

The Alphabet Conspiracy

Rita Mae Reese. Arktoi Books: Pasadena,
California. 2011

My promotional packet for Rita Mae Reese's *The Alphabet Conspiracy* contained a copy of the book, a dozen promotional postcards, and a button. I began reading the book at home, reading poems to my wife (always a good sign), and decided to take the promotional material and book to my college poetry workshop. I told them that Rita Mae Reese had attended *this* university, perhaps sat around *this* very conference table and read, *perhaps*, some of these poems published in this book. I fanned the postcards and told them that if anyone was interested, have a postcard, and please, go buy the book.

"Rita Mae Reese..." I said. No one was taking postcards, but I said it again in case someone was writing it down.

They shuffled their poems they were about to hand out to the class. I sat the book on the table so they could see it. "Rita Mae Reese," I said again and waited.

* * *

Many of the poems *The Alphabet Conspiracy* have epigraphs, such as "Spurious Entry" which begins the poem with the fact, "'Ghost words' are usually the product of misreadings or of printers' errors in previous editions of the dictionary, or simply misbegotten words that have otherwise achieved some spurious existence." In "The Sin Eater" the poem is introduced with the epigraph, "one hired to take upon himself the sins of a deceased person by means of food eaten above the dead body." Ms. Reese never fails to take us several levels beyond what we expect from such gems. The speaker in

this poem, a sin eater, describes the taste of individual food as sin—“pride is like molded bread...”--but then toward the end the poem suddenly says, “I used to follow him / the old sin-eater, asking him questions: / Was it always the same meal?”

In all the poems, there seems to be a delightful world lurking behind meaning—in words, in the litany of saints (alphabetized), and the painting “Watson and Shark.” Meanings of words is of special delight. The perfect *zeitgeber* shows up at the end of the poem, “This is Not True”: a doe at the edge of the cornfield that the narrator sees. She is in her bridesmaid dress, driving the 93-year-old aunt of the bride to the reception, the doe “pulling us gently back to the zeroes of our clocks.” Age difference and meaning, experience and understanding.

* * *

After showing the book to my class, trying to get some takers, (I even fanned my hand Vanna White-style around the cover), I got nothing. I showed them the button that said, “Part of the conspiracy.” One student (the teaching gods smile sometimes) said, “What’s the alphabet conspiracy?” I immediately flipped and found the title poem and read. The last lines: “...as the letters of the world rise up / and, forming a single word, / eclipse our world and fill our mouths with shadows.” Around the table there was silence. They had been stunned, knocked off their feet. It’s a great poem.

One student finally said, “I’ll take one of those postcards.”

“Me too,” said another.

What was it that got them? The description of the lulling of the sixth grade classroom during Mrs. Bradford’s (the teacher) showing of the filmstrip about grammar, an Alice in Wonderland theme of letters being chased down “rabbit holes of grammar,”

or Mrs. Bradford falling asleep in the window ledge, "...her blue polyester pants gapped / to reveal her white socks / and pink spotted shins," or the beautiful description of how the film-strip time in the classroom is the absence of adult supervision while at the same time an attempt to teach them the rules of grammar?

"Without words," the speaker says, "no one could tell us what to do."

--*Russ Franklin*

Non-prophet Murder: A Grit and Grace Mystery

Becky Wooley. Resource Publications: Eugene, Oregon. 2010.

Becky Wooley's murder mystery title, *Non-Prophet Murder*, hints at the satirical nature of her novel. She paints a light-hearted picture of religious hypocrisy in full swing. The author begins with a lengthy description of her characters, many of whom are borderline caricatures of church pastors, their wives, secretaries and parishioners.

We learn that four men of the cloth in Bennettville have received threatening letters from someone who identifies himself as "the Prophet." Each letter stresses the need to repent. The warnings remain totally unheeded.

Three of the pastors are technically dead by the following Sunday. One suffers an

apparent heart attack on the air, another is electrocuted in the baptismal font, and the third meets his demise with a type of food poisoning that leaves him brain dead. Only Grit Griffin, the twenty-three year old main character, survives. He's injured in an explosion at his unconventional fellowship gathering, but gradually recovers.

Grit, who has been pursuing a career as a newspaper journalist in addition to his religious calling, becomes the investigator of the strange sequence of deaths. Early in the book the deaths are considered coincidental by the police, which is quite a stretch for the author to suggest.

Ms. Bishop's humor goes a bit over the top at times, but has some laughable moments for sure. Character names, such as, Reverend Bishop Bishop, and church names, the Greater Bennettsville First Methodist/Baptist/Episcopal/Holiness Alpha and Omega International Tabernacle reflect one aspect of her satire.

On the other hand, it's the humor in her writing that I liked best about her book. Her wit becomes macabre in a sentence that describes the final day of one pastor's hospital stay on life support: "No one had stuck a fork in Reverend Bishop Bishop, but every other test proved Bishop was done."

Although the line might be described as unsavory, it's typical of the mocking tone of much of her novel. Still the author's belief in a higher power is never really in doubt. It all appears to be her way of pointing to the hypocrisy and corruption that are evident in many Christian churches.

I especially enjoyed her portrayal of some long minutes of accidental hilarity that occur in one pastor's eulogy given by the governor. An inexperienced crew in the sound booth, when setting up for the broadcast, has placed a wide open microphone in front of

the choir. The speaker's mike, however, hasn't been adjusted properly, and he can only be heard mumbling in the background. The result is that the listening audience hears the alto tenor in the choir stall, as he whispers to another tenor: "...I can't believe they asked that old windbag to speak,' and the tenor's response, 'We'll be here forever!' As the governor waxed eloquent in the echoey distance, the "chorus" as in classic Greek theatre, added uncomplimentary comments. The Griffins settled in for an hour and half of high comedy."

Humor aside, I had difficulty following the plot of Ms. Wooley's mystery. She introduces an unusually large number of characters in this two hundred and twenty one page novel. There were so many in fact that I couldn't keep up with who was who and what they had to do with the story. Her scene changes are numerous, and most involved a different a set of characters, further adding to the confusion.

Finally, I have to question her conclusion, which reveals a highly unlikely murderer. This choice seems forced. The complex knowledge and skill required for the implementation of three murders and the one attempted murder just doesn't fit the description of the character that the author has given us. Charges and confessions are made, however, and, although I don't agree with the author's choice of endings, the absurdity of this last revelation may be an attempt by the writer to add a final comedic statement.

-- *Margaret Howard Trammell*

Coffeehouse Meditations

Nina Romano. Kitsune Books: Crawfordville, Florida. 2010.

In her new poetry collection, *Coffeehouse Meditations*, Nina Romano inserts intimacy and verve into life's humdrum moments through a careful dissection of her surroundings. Whether she investigates a “*creepus crawlus* free / in the softest patch of turf” attempting to escape “the sweeper, / cleaning and dusting that little critter” or an intimate moment between lovers “made in such a public / display / so easily expressed,” she is successful in communicating the emotion of each moment with simplicity. This close examination of life's interactions, memories, and natural grandeur leave her poems “oozing with pride and hope” for possibilities of an acquired wisdom and contentment.

The first half of Romano's collection grants readers a comfortable seat in Starbucks, luring them into the vitality of their surroundings, “Come in! Be welcome both stranger and friend, coffee drinkers, tea lovers, / people watchers.” Romano widens the scope of her poems to the outer world in the second half of her collection—beyond “the coffeehouse of coffeehouses,” placing the reader “under a latticework of sky vine” or at the “last eventide before Corsican starfall” as she explores sensual experiences of the natural world and the human experience.

While Romano's style is lyrical and versatile, it is largely experimental. Her lines drastically range in structure and form. Poems comprised of loose prose blocks are inserted between poems with tight tercets and repetitive phrases. While this variation in style feels counterintuitive at times, it grants appeal to different readers' preferences.

Romano's genuine ability to produce an inquisitive and melodic voice is what ultimately allows the collection to congeal. Rhythmic tones buzz through her lines, easily observed in her poem "Crucible of Yearning," as she explores the "specters of [her] thoughts, "wanting total recall":

Into a carafe, I decant the ache
to hear the snap & slap
of flags in bay breezes
and heed the ring of bicycle bells
that navigate makeshift wharves,
the ting and ping of rain
on metal siding of garbage scows.

Many poems contain a reoccurring "you," serving as a catharsis in the quest to define love:

and finally I cry,
the tang of ashes
in my mouth
yet lingers,

but the sores
have scarred over.
The cicatrix of you,
edges of this curled
photograph I took,
are whorls of growth, remembrance...
mere lines on a cockleshell
I trampled in the sand.

Past experiences and memories expressed in these poems explore a spectrum of love though constant questioning, "What is love? / A force that looms large above us? ... If you're lovesick, is there a cure? Or is it pure- / ly mental."

While some titles are bland and structure can be unappealing, Romano's constant exploration blooms intrigue and provokes a desire to contemplate a deeper understanding

of everyday life. She sifts through lost love and memories by way of the “Mystical Body” of meditation, “hum[ing] a hymn / knowing the world”—moving forward while “throw[ing] kisses to the past.” This contagious inspection of the world is undoubtedly valuable, “yielding a prophet of changes.”

--*Kristina DiPano*