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June 2019 Exemplars: Poetry Reviews by Grace Cavalieri

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A monthly feature that looks at books of and about poetry.



Little Glass Planet by Dobby Gibson. Graywolf Press. 88 pages.

Hybrida by Tina Chang. W.W. Norton & Company. 144 pages.

Night Angler by Geoffrey Davis. BOA Editions. 112 pages.

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Scattered Clouds: New & Selected Poems by Reuben Jackson. Alan Squire Publishing. 130 pages.

All Its Charms by Keetje Kuipers. BOA Editions. 112 pages.

Navigating the Divide: Selected Poetry and Prose by Linda Watanabe McFerrin. Legacy Series, Alan Squire Publishing. 320 pages.

Tribunal by Lyn Hejinian. Omnidawn Publishing. 80 pages.

Little Glass Planet by Dobby Gibson. Graywolf Press. 88 pages.

“No matter where we move the glass vase, / it leaves a ring,” says Gibson because he knows this world is just a hologram and he’s in charge of its beautiful changing colors. Yet, he can also get mad (“Elegy for Abe Vigoda”): “the most horrible person/ has been elected president. / The hardest thing to fathom/ is the present...” Even then he’s praising something else because of this, and we wind up feeling just fine by the poem’s end. He’s conversational about the miraculous and his surreality is real; his non sequiturs make perfect sense because Gibson’s tone is everything — it’s clear to me why we love to read him — word choice, tone, wonder, plus sweet bemusement, tone again, diction we used to call it; and when he titles a poem “Why I Don’t Have Any Tattoos” and ends with “*What I thought I needed/ seems so far away and harmless,/ there isn’t anything/ I’d throw away or get back,/ and the nights are getting shorter now,/ which is a start,*” he’s talking about the real skin, and everyday language just for a minute becomes holy.

April Light

The movers have arrived, terrified of books.
Maybe spooked by the bird feeder on its side,
spilled champagne coupe of a sodden god

abandoned at the curb with a mattress,
 as if someone outgrew sleep. The last snow
 retreats into the earth to wait us out, or does it?
 We can't be sure. Swim lesson registration is full.
 Raise the window sash enough to allow in
 the present tense: where are the cowards now?
 In the park, they pull the tarp off the carousel.
 Our dreams don't change much.
 A purple elephant chases a pink seahorse in circles.
 Four white stallions pull an empty chariot
 to a spot where the youngest know to wait.

Hybrida by Tina Chang. W.W. Norton & Company. 144 pages.

Chang writes her son as history — his brownness/ blackness — in a race-colored world, traced through the birth cells in her body to her soul. I didn't know the imagination could reach so many places with such various surfaces and depths — fearing for her son's future, projecting scenes from the past with their injustices, writing the violence of young black men, fear for him, love for him, willing to take the sword for him. What a versatile original sound she has, "*I'm afraid for vocabulary and its presence in the struggle...*" But vocabulary is exactly what she commands with fierce love, such fierce love it makes tears spring to your eyes. These poems are passionate, transcendent, beautifying pain with words that know what they are: There's great mastery here, and in the poem "He, Pronoun," she writes: "*Everywhere I look I see him, / I have a right to fear for him, / though I have no right to claim his color. / His blackness is his to own and what will / my mouth say of that sweetness. / Am I colorless worn like a veil, invisible / but present. He is a word grown upright / and some claim he is journalism, media / around me, so much light filtered through, / so much video of him, I shut it out...*"

At the End of the Road Was Sun

Once there were three children, all with different fates.
 One was bound to say yes all his life, head in books,
 hand open for blistered discipline. When the slap
 came down, he looked out the window towards a country
 he couldn't name. The second child spoke of the dream state
 where nothing could be held down; he headed out at morning,
 worked till his sweat made an ocean of wonder, something blue
 but never forgotten. He was the wild earth, growing without limit
 or reason. The third child ran away, writhed and cursed at history.
 He was nothing if not righteous. I can see him now, standing
 in the field, ready to run but not ruin, ready to wrap his fists
 to throat to be free. I loved this son more than anything,
 now my son no longer.

Night Angler by Geoffrey Davis. BOA Editions. 112 pages.

Davis weaves a world around a mother, father, wife, and son. The speaker's own father motivates the message and is central to love's struggle. These poems are about inheritance — how a son, and then his son, are implicated by birth to the journey of change with its societal issues, dangers, and fearful passages. Race is stage-managed well within a texture of geography

and location, because nature is safe, sane, and always there for this poet. Bright energy illuminates every page for an emotional odyssey; and sometimes these poems read aloud, because of the right language, become hymns.

Poem in Which My Son Wakes Crying

- *for dead blk boys*

when there is no exit wound

his life matters

when there is only the dream-wound

his life matters

when I still run with all my panic against his hurt sound

his life matters

when I wrap his finger's non-wound in the undivided dark

his life matters

when he has been soothed and I lay him back inside the casket of sleep

his life matters

when I still linger to watch him rest with all my worry against his calm

his life matters

when he rises with and into and as if the easy miracle morning

his life matters

when he smiles bright like no more fires need setting

his life matters

when he asks to have the bandage removed

his life matters

when my hands shake too much

his life matters

Is, Is Not by Tess Gallagher. Graywolf Press. 160 pages.

Tess Gallagher is an American classic, and this book is one more reason why. There are people on every page, characters that are cinematic with stories that rasp with truth. This is how we know her mother's hands on the speaker's hair, the perplexed love her father gave. The poems point to friends, too, the power of forthright actions — but I go back to the stories in Ireland, gripping with epitomized individuals who were just living beings until poetry made them mythic. Gallagher's voice is so clear, graceful and unstoppable — and it ranges so greatly from large matters to small — she makes poetry's dreams come true.

Three Stars

looked down on me

with so much dark

between, the word

“together” would be
trespass, except for
the greater dark
that gave their light
an intimacy of
multitudes. And if

I shut my eyes, I was
a memory of
multitudes until
I opened that dark on
just those three
the instant before
they took me
in. And though
I tell you this
we are unspoken.

Notes from the Dry Country by Ellen Aronofsky Cole. Mayapple Press. 88 pages.

This country is anything but dry. Cole proves it's not enough to have a “voice,” you have to have something to say with an inimitable tone, even if it's about your own mortality and its near miss. She can showcase a hospital ward, and cancer as if she's starstruck with life's surprises — yet everything comes through on a high note. Cancer is one big lie unfurled in this unforgettable effortless set of poems. She doesn't stop there, and takes us to her younger life, sisters, brother, mother, and her own motherhood. There's sadness to be sure, and a sorting out through narrative, but this poet keeps us with her every moment, with flavor that goes from chic to adorable to winsome to terrified; every bit connecting to a true writer with an art that streams from a true life. Each page is a command performance jamming to Cole's own special music. We're lucky to be there.

After 2 Weeks of Rain

when sun fills up the room with yellow
I'm so happy I stop cleaning
Rocky Raccoon checked into a room,
& I'm Back in the USSR all over
the kitchen, my back twisted about 800 times
giving me a twinge but now I'm thinking
how my roommate Kathy & me listened
to the White Album every night,
lights out in our dorm room,
blackbird singing at the edge of night,
me thinking of that time we saw them perform
in Detroit & how I screamed as loud
as the girl who ran up the aisle yelling
I touched him! I touched Ringo's thumb!

The Skin of Dreams, New and Collected Poems 1995-2018 by Quraysh Ali Lansana. Calliope Group. 152 pages.

To read this is to know a man. To read this is to see memory sharpened with age — an historical present at the center — where we learn, for blacks, about their country’s rancid Bill of Rights. Yet there’s triumph everywhere, demonstrated by the fact that we have such a collection to read. Lansana has a story, a monumental one, recalled in eight books, majestic accounts: growing up to manhood; what his people felt and saw — strong emotional chords in every poem tying this life together. Read it with your heart and hear the beautiful elegy to Gwendolyn Brooks in four parts, ending “...at dinner. *Your mortality/ stiffened me, / ...in your absence, sobered/ by the bone of your words.*” This reminds me to say how Lansana brings each poem home with strong bearings; I’m thinking of “altar call,” its fourth part: “...attended church with daddy twice/ both were funerals one was his.”

Elegy is predominant, and the poem “a way of listening, for *galway kinnell*,” is high up here among them: “*Because you gave me compass/ a bus token and spun me toward/ sun, a boisterous light as charmed/ as your wide smile and solemn grace...*” in the book *Reluctant Minivan, 2014* (let’s stop and praise his titles), there are many memorable testaments to the men in his life — he’s a father himself and looks to men speaking to the ideals he would like; The writer also shows influences acknowledging Richard Pryor and Oscar Brown Junior, among others. There are reasons why this book should be put in a capsule and sent into space so everyone in the next galaxy could see, hear, and understand, what it was to be black in America. Heritage. Heritage. Heritage, from the poet’s great-great grandfather; to the poems in Harriet Tubman’s voice. No wonder the final poem in the book *Bloodsoil, 2009* is titled “pilgrimage.” Tubman’s poems are followed by a horrific/specific prose piece about enslaved Jacob and plantation owner Mister Crockett. But Jacob is vindicated, via intelligence, perhaps a metaphor for this book. There’s a lot of pain here, and truth, and you’ll find a lot like love went into it.

descendent

I am holding my brothas hand
he walks ahead of me centuries

resist sixteen nineteen coffles
& whips in a sick society

resist eighteen thirty-three crackers
& furious dogs in a sick society

resist nineteen twenty-one noose
& mob in a sick society

resist nineteen fifty-five judge
& crow in a sick society

resist nineteen years of burge
& socket in a sick society

resist two-thousand thirteen cages
& apathy in a sick society

I am holding my sistas hand
she walks centuries ahead of me

Documents by Jan-Henry Gray, foreword by D.A. Powell. BOA Editions. 112 pages.

Documents is a visceral history of America’s failures with its immigrants, but from this comes a big presence, a poet who chooses to write differently with powerful originality. The author is presented as “queer undocumented Filipino” — and

even if this adds to the tenor of the poems, the work, without it, stands as a testament to the inadequacies of this country's legal systems and its raw consequences. Jan-Henry Gray creates a series of "Maid" poems amplifying the service class of the underclass. The persona is sad, tender, vulnerable, and hopeless. The poet's background has forged a powerful present with strong conversations that make us shudder with their fierce predictions. This book is an investment in reality; it's a *condition*, and perhaps, with time, a commencement — but in all cases, a work to be read, respected, and realized for its unrelenting strength.

egress

you are the red dot
on the glass over the map
your fingers trace a path
from entrance to exit

you are the sound inside
a sleeping body
a family of six
a car stalled
the hazards blinking

we never don't look over our shoulders
every form, a trick question
every map, a trap street
we huddle to inspect the smoke
rising from the engine.

Guinness on the Quay by Richard Peabody. Salmon Pub Ltd. 88 pages.

No one can turn a phrase exactly like Richard Peabody. That's why he's known for the fresh air he brings to the page from an environment of wit, curiosity, and mercy. He's a man with more than affection for the world, and his family — with a sardonic view, always searching, and finding our humanity. He's watching the young mother at the liquor store; or finding the books *Tropic of Cancer* and *How to Tell Your Kids About Sex* in his father's top drawer (under handkerchiefs) — or how about his love of music and his litany of bassists; "*Jazz all-star gigs are/ like all-star baseball games./ / Somewhere between slow pitch/ and the 6th grade class picnic...*"

He's hip. He takes his girls to "Tea," while moving like greased lightning on the page. Peabody shows what a wasted life this would be without poetry because everything commands his attention. His clear precise rhetoric captures you by the ear while exposing life's peculiarities. Through a restrained emotion and taut performance, there's lots of love in these poems that showcase his talent. Peabody's a natural born storyteller with perfect pitch revved up.

Rules for Experimental Writing

Visit a slaughterhouse

Drink Kerosene

Eat Darvon and mothballs

Burn your math books

Handcuff a lover to the bed rail

Add bacon

Watch an autopsy

Tour the Holocaust museum

Catch an Anaconda in the Everglades

Have a C-section

Dig up a coffin

Oh wait,

these are the rules
for writing realism.

Commotion by Karen Sagstetter. Finishing Line Press. 74 pages.

Brighten your day, and sparkle up your dreary mind because Sagstetter writes partly from a star planet. There's sadness and heartbreak enough in this book, yes — loss, a tragic brother who shows up in her dreams, a grandmother who is drifting from touch — but even these cannot shade delight as Sagstetter weaves her dream-states to daily life. In the poem “Morning in Rock Creek Park, our Speaker starts out in “a stupor,” “a terrible day,” until encountering a debonair gentleman offering peach-colored roses; she sees red pandas, flitting butterflies, “dozens of rabbits munching clover.” Her world changes on the page making ours change too. At times, there's a little *Alice in Wonderland* peeking through a responsible writer, where each poem has its own dynamic of imagery and insight. What I like best is the belief in magic (and no fear of the nighttime mind), which she levels masterfully to tell her stories.

Not a Harvest Moon

This isn't a full strawberry moon
or a full corn moon. Not an egg or milk moon.
Not a full sturgeon moon, a beaver, buck or wolf moon.
Nor is it a hunter's moon, a snow moon, a full cold moon.
I wish it were a harvest moon, but it is not.
If it were a flower moon, we'd be skipping
on the patio but no, it's a new moon,
barely visible the first night out,
just a sliver in a black sky
until it waxes buoyant and dazzling,
tempting us with the idea
that light follows darkness
every time.

Coconuts on Mars by Indran Amirthanayagam. Poetrywala. 64 pages.

Amirthanayagam's prose pieces are as lyrical as his poems. This is notable. The entire book is one of political commentary, racial insights, and family affairs in live settings with skilled, decisive writing. This author writes in five languages so it's always interesting to see the firm grasp he has on English prosody, cadence, and phraseology — good poetry chemistry. This poetry is better than many with English as a first language so there's much to be admired. I hear a classic tone to his stanzas and a movement that shows the poet is comfortable with his words. Talking to us from another culture, we learn more than ever about our own, and in this poet's intimate sensitive speech are stories and attitudes that will lift you up.

On the Other Side

*You remember the blue and white cups
bought at Target in which my coffee
is served today in Haiti? I did not*

*envision attachment then to every
day in china, not stone or willow-ware,
or filigreed in gold, but ordinary*

*made in China coffee cups, chipped,
stained, by five hundred days and
counting of waking up in this house*

*on a hill, looking over the valley,
airport in the distance, blue sea beyond,
and you on the other side of all the islands.*

Scattered Clouds: New & Selected Poems by Reuben Jackson. Alan Squire Publishing, 130 pages.

This whole book will give you a big love attack. Every poem is angelic and sexy, executed perfectly with Jackson's own deity of words. He writes of human needs with sweet energy — there's sadness, longing, racial injustice experienced; somehow this independent-minded poet aspires that we all be better than we are, and that shows up with feelings that connect just right with the lyric. It's interesting that his poems are uniformly lean, narrow, often the size of a pocket comb, yet the meanings are rich enough to envelop the page. Jackson's themes are family; his love and knowledge of music; the women and friends in his life; his own young self — all these are ordinary you might say, but you've never heard them treated quite this way. Let's call it style, or a phenomenal spirit, or the power of the voice realized in simple line breaks. Whatever can be said about this book, Jackson makes words his own, and every page is a 10.

potentially yours

(for jeff cole)

you goddamn fool,
there was always beauty within you.

your wit and
nervous laughter,

bouquets for the rainy winters
of your friends.

you who spent so much time
cursing the mirror,

envying jim rice, sonia braga,
duke ellington's lady killing charm.

Why?

I think of those solos of laughter
that heaven is hearing so soon.

All Its Charms by Keetje Kuipers. BOA Editions. 112 pages.

You'll love the way she moves, line to leaping line; this works because of a high skill level — never once does she fall. The stories are about being a single mom, pregnancy, motherhood, same-sex marriage to a former lover — just for starters. I never knew a child spilling orange juice in a poem could lead to such a splendid sequence of thoughts. That's the way she is, and what this poet's capable of. There's no end goal in Kuipers' poetry. She begins, and lets it unfold like silk rippling down the page. There are tough subjects beautifully portrayed. How could we ask for more?

First Trimester

Pulling plump ticks off the dog, imagining
how the late-day rain must make the ink

caps grow, even counting fireflies who rise
from my lawn like the reluctant sparks

of resurrected campfire — every act
is an act of waiting. But when I go

inside to turn the fan on my damp body
or stand dizzy at the kitchen sink

to fill a glass, I have no flickering
yet to conceive of. It's in my room's dim

mirror I find the girl, my mother, every
thing I'm afraid of not becoming.

Navigating the Divide: Selected Poetry and Prose by Linda Watanabe McFerrin. Legacy Series, Alan Squire Publishing. 320 pages.

McFerrin is author of poetry, travel essays, prose, and stories excerpted for this compendium.

The travel essays got me started. The first that I read, "Strangers," was the hook. McFerrin has the gift of dialogue and character. She's also a sexy writer, and a good soul wrapped in a hot body. Her characters are the kind of humans who seem to travel just to meet, and every paragraph is a psychological encounter in visual explorations; also, some social norms get destroyed. This is a compelling edge to the stories. We feel every word she says, because she knows that the details we can taste, smell, and see, are impossible to turn away from. Each essay is a relevant cultural experience with all the intriguing values of a foreign place. I read her as I often watch TV in search of sights I'll never see otherwise. The added pleasure with

McFerrin is she's "Sex and the City abroad" — fun, chic, with special effects. It'll take a while reading this book and so it goes on vacation with me — nowhere as fantastic as where McFerrin takes us, however. She's mastered her art. To be a beautiful hypnotic writer is not a bad thing. She's a front runner. Check it out.

Alan Squire publishers had a terrific idea here. Why not publish a kind of book no other literary publishing house seems to do? And so we have the Legacy Series that presents writers who write in more than one genre. The value of this publishing enterprise is that it brings America up to what Europeans and others have been doing for years — crossing genres is common for some writers who want to stretch beyond the normal glide, but we were apparently still "Publishing Puritans" in this country, insisting on packaging *types* of writing within single covers. Alan Squire jettisons this and is contributing to the industry and the national literary canon.

Stranger

Strangers

Intoxicate me

when, too close,

the current of their lives

streams into mine.

friend or foe,

I want to let them in.

You, I have met before,

staggering under

the impulse of acquaintance.

Lines of composition,

my eye traces

the path of your egress.

The sparsity of our

communion beckons.

Trying to push

flesh into flesh,

thrusting toward

a moment that crumbles,

disintegrates,

before it can complete,

suggesting only

that other entering

when all the outlines

are erased.

Tribunal by Lyn Hejinian. Omnidawn Publishing. 80 pages.

"*The head is a northern orphan without an itinerary*" begins poem 38 (of 52 poems in the section "A Human of Mars"). Lyn Hejinian writes as if everyone were as smart as she is and as if everyone can be trusted to understand her. Her story is not a traditional narrative but has ideas, images, rhythm, diction, and intelligence. She's always been true to her own form and her own taste and never bowed to poetry trends nor claimed her own style was a poetry standard. I describe the work as radical formalism. Her structure depends on abstract forms creating allegories, ordinary moments changed by semantic shifts.

While disrupting the social order of logical rhetoric, we get something better — a highly intuitive set of paradigms that we can interpret or just go flowing until we hit something we like. The more you read, the more credible the meanings. Predominant are the poems of tyrants and tyranny. This is a book for our time in history and she writes out of this particular cultural fabric. The social impact from this voice is not ideological and not opinionated — it is neither male nor female, black, or yellow, or white. In this way Hejinian is breaking the monograph with textual revelation; and revolution is her achievement.

Time of Tyranny

1

Anxiety, ambition, energy, and sleep are caretaking
fish in the deep black sea, my sweet, the black deep sea. Yes
and I tossed a twig the x, y, z, of unrest and loss of privilege
they never had, the vanquished Inca
at the sharp angle of a perfect rainbow and afterwards Jupiter appeared
of which the Rocky Mountains are like mules hauling oats
perceived by senses, words, a set of names
in music. All this should scare the legislators
noble and real and we are crazy and smell smoke
for entertainment, social bonding, and great anxiety,
that trinity of apricot, scalp musk, and gas
of life where light first falls on the passenger
who is briny and upright, but like a dwindling cornflower.

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Grace Cavalieri is Maryland's poet laureate. Her latest books are [Showboat](#), a chapbook, and [Other Voices Other Lives](#), a compendium. She produces "The Poet and the Poem from the Library of Congress."

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