

**Woman in Red Anorak, by Marc Harshman. Spokane, WA:
Lynx House Press, 2018,
ISBN 978-0-89924-161-6. \$17.95.
Winner of the 2017 Blue Lynx Prize.**

Review by Gary Metras

Of the dozen-plus poems in here that warrant a second or third reading because they are that good, that moving, my favorite is the third poem, "Restless," that opens "In spectacular sunlight the old woman's fingers / never stop: knit and purl," and closes with "Hands / that once could mend anything / if there was enough yarn, enough light, enough time." The passage of time is a universal theme and Harshman combines this with World War II, a foreign war, as have been all wars for Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries, where the old woman's brother and son, "Richard nineteen," are killed out there, in the wide world, so far from the security and safety of "rural Ohio." And the old woman keeps knitting, perhaps "only a pair of socks, / practical, simple, what the boys needed" as if a pair of new, home-made socks could save them from death in a foreign land.

Harshman wisely takes the action a step further and deeper: "her hands are simply searching another pattern, / that one we all reach for / wishing to bring the dead back from dying," as if in the act of knitting the son is not really dead, that a warm pair of socks is waiting and ready to clothe his cold feet.

We sense the futility of it all. The hopefulness of it all. Knitting, war, time become its own tapestry, its own metaphor.

This poem could have all sorts of personal history, or family stories for the poet. He does not say or hint of such within the poem. The old woman is an incomplete portrait, impersonal, almost, and the brother and the son are just two names in a single line. Are they thus symbolic of all the mothers, brothers, and sons during a war? There are no knitted sweaters, or hand sewn quilts that are handed down generation to generation as personal symbols of one's forebears as many families so honor. There is just these old hands knitting in the moment of the poem.

Whether or not the poem has personal meaning for the poet really matters little to the reader. This reader, for example, while first encountering this poem envisioned his own mother knitting socks, hat, and sweater for her baby girl as they awaited the father's return from the war in the Pacific. I wasn't yet born. But I wonder what my mother and older sister's life, their emotions, their love were like for those years of fear and hope. She was a young recently wed mother and not the old woman of the poem. But their hearts connect just as their hands connect in the physical motion of knitting.

The poet has carefully hidden family biography, if any, from the poem so as to elevate these people and their situation with the thankful result that the reading experience becomes personally meaningful on both an individual and a universal level.

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So you see my reaction to just one of the forty-eight poems in this book. I could say as much about a dozen more. That is how good these poems, this book, *Woman in Red Anorak*, and this poet, Marc Harshman, touch me. I'm certain most readers will have their own moving reactions, the mark of a special talent with words. I highly recommend *Woman in Red Anorak*.