

At the Threshold of ALCHEMY

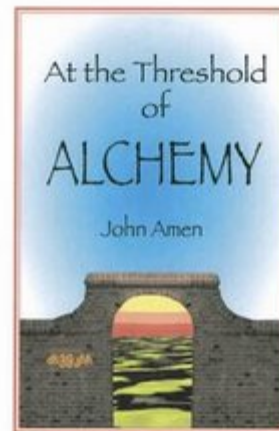
by *John Amen*

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Review by Zvi A. Sesling

Raw. That's the word that comes to mind when I read many of the poems in John Amen's *At the Threshold of ALCHEMY*. The other thought I have is that when he writes about subjects such as death, divorce, masturbation (during a wake) there is a sense of the merciless, unending sledgehammers pounding you as in *After the Funeral*:

The floorboards exhaled,
walls slept for the first time in years.

Grandma slouched in the foyer,
her belly mounding in her lap, makeup streaked.
I distracted myself in the basement, thinking
of Ms. Gilham, my face in her cleavage.

Upstairs, aunts and neighbors – the mercenaries
of resilience –cooked, cleaned, scrubbed
until the house could have passed for a delivery room

I reemerged,
and his brother gnawing the gristly silence.
No one noticed the stain on my corduroys
or saw me put a silver spoon in my pocket.

Amen's visuals are explicit, his meanings an opposite of what a good wake or shiva is all about. The mystery is his age at the event. The final result can be fascination or revulsion.

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In the poem Martin Amen writes directly to a friend:

You were seriously fried, Martin, when you got back from Ecuador,
demanding steak fajitas at the Dairy Queen, asking stranger if they
planned to vote for the messiah in the next election.

There is much more to this poem, more of muscle and gristle Amen is
best at portraying.

His poetry is a mirror of the underside of life, poems that reflect visions
of the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, bad dreams that crawl into the brain
and come out the eyes. A pen – or computer – that tries to record it all
while it's fresh as a dandelion still yellow. His surrealism is Dali in
words, Picasso in thoughts wrought in short, raw poems.