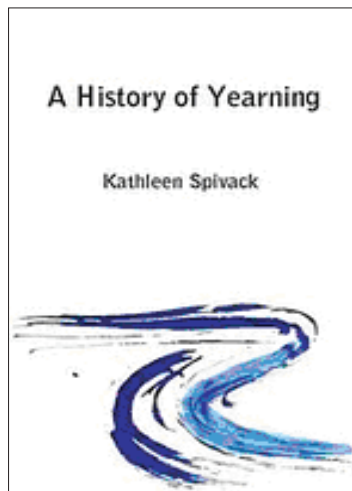


**A History of Yearning, by Kathleen Spivack**



A History of Yearning, by Kathleen Spivack  
The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, 2009 (\$15)  
Order at: <http://amazon.com>

*review by Kirk Etherton*

**K**athleen Spivack certainly has all the credentials of a distinguished poet. Not only has she been published almost everywhere (The New Yorker, The Paris Review, etc. etc.), she has also received numerous prestigious fellowships and grants. Heck, she was even a student and friend of Robert Lowell!

Ultimately, of course, the only thing a reader can really respond to is the work. In the case of *A History of Yearning*, the work is—to put it very simply—terrific.

This modest volume, published as The 2009 Sow's Ear Chapbook Competition Winner, contains a total of 19 poems, organized into three sections: *A History of Yearning*, *Earth's Burnt Umber*, and *The Lost World*. Subjects include the experience of great art, war, personal and societal loss, and moments of transcendent visual beauty that may never be captured on canvas (but are perfectly painted and framed on the page by this exceptionally gifted poet). If we sometimes read human history as a book of yearnings that are derailed, thwarted or otherwise unfulfilled, Kathleen's beautiful little chapbook is a huge achievement in the opposite direction: every page succeeds in giving us new angles and insights, a deeper understanding of the worlds that lie within and without. As readers, this is what we yearn for. As a writer, Spivack never lets us down.

It is always a luxury to read someone like Ms. Spivack—someone who has both a unique, masterful touch with language and a true intellectual's grasp of several significant subjects. I'm reminded of Seamus Heaney's work dealing with "the troubles" in Northern Ireland, or with the unique pleasures and trials encountered in a small farming community.

"After Night Hawks. Hopper. 1942." is the second poem in *A History of Yearning*; it combines beautifully wrought observations of one work of art (the Edward Hopper painting) with images of World War II and its psychological aftermaths, plus a profound understanding of American culture during this time. The result is a multifaceted work of poetic art. In the concluding stanza, all the people in the painting

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...viewed from outside  
as from heaven, are frozen  
before their perhaps  
untarnished destinies.  
The color 'blood,' its sharp  
metallic smear, is yet to  
appear in this picture. In  
Edward Hopper's painting,  
Night Hawks 1942, the man  
with his back to us, waiting, half-  
lit, has already figured this out.

In Part Three of the three-part poem "Photographs Already Fading," Spivack recounts her 2003 visit to an exhibit at London's Imperial War Museum, which features World War One Poets. Here, work by famous survivors of the trenches, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, can be listened to on rented headphones; it is all "...read beautifully by contemporary actors." In another section of the exhibit, presented behind glass and resembling

...perfectly sliced limes in aspic, letters  
to their mothers are preserved in cases,  
as when photographs are taken underwater, idealized,  
the scholar-warriors made more luminous by time.  
They wave to us, frond-like, going down,  
as if telling us something urgent, moving away....

I could give additional quotes from the book, but I'm fairly certain you'll get much more enjoyment from reading the poems—and this collection—in their entirety. (In a similar vein, it's always better to be told by a friend, "You will really love this movie, because it deals with (X), and (Y) and (Z) give great performances," than to be subjected to a bunch of five-second fragments which have been plucked from the whole film and then edited into a three-minute trailer.) So, I'll end with two thoughts that may be of use.

1) If, for some reason, you do not enjoy the poetry of folks such as Heaney, Richard Hoffman, Galway Kinnell, Grace Paley, and Jim Schley, then you probably will be less than thrilled by Kathleen Spivack.

2) Buy a case of A History of Yearning (if chapbooks are sold by the case), and whenever you're invited to a party, present a copy to your host. After all, there is always plenty of wine around. It's great to open something that leaves one feeling clear-headed and invigorated. with senses heightened rather than dulled.

2009 was a very good year.