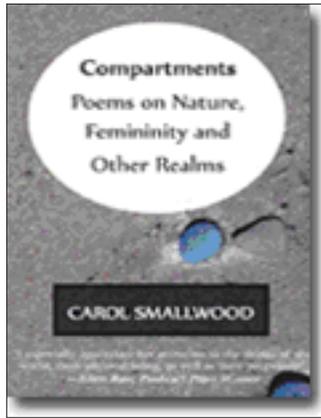


Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2



Compartments: Poems on Nature, Femininity and Other Realms

by Carol Smallwood (Paper, \$15, ISBN: 978-1-937-53600-8, LCCN: 2011912611, 146 pp, 6x9, August 2011, Anaphora Literary Press Anaphora Literary Press

Review by Carol Hawkins

Carol Smallwood's poetry exposes the active inner life of a curious observer. In her collection, "Compartments," she reveals the mind and heart of a poet who knows how to unravel mysteries with sensory details and probing questions.

Structured forms, like the villanelle and the triolet, frame fluid topics. Smallwood invites visitors to share her vision of her thoughts. Elements of time and place ground the reader to a particular setting that allows access to the poems. This poet likes to grasp at ordinary things, turning them around in her mind and then translating her ideas into strict lines that reveal truths about unknowable things. This poet desires to know all, and to share her intimate vision with her readers.

For example, in the poem, "By the Barb Wire Fence," Smallwood takes on the villanelle to corral the passing of time. Lily, the protagonist, seeks refuge among the birds and bees, but not in some silly romantic sense. On the contrary, she hides her tears, weakened by some weight of memory and regret, perhaps a gripping need for something permanent, but the recognition that nature doesn't hold still. One dominant image in the poem, a stone foundation, reveals a mystery. The poet writes:

*Lily went where bees made blossoms fall,
near a stone foundation too old to recall.*

Even the stone foundation shifts from an assumed place of permanence to a place unknown, an inner mystery, the awareness that nothing is fixed, not even our desires or intentions. No one knows what the foundation once held up. Yet, this place of decay holds life: "bees make blossoms fall," and "birds built nests without trepidation," shifting scenes that allow the narrator to turn inward, to seek further refuge, near "the barbed wire fence."

The triplets within the villanelle create a context from which to describe the natural world, while the reframe and conclusion in the closing quatrain leave the reader in a setting of peace. The center line in each triplet begins to reveal a conflict: the narrator's need to break from "obligation" and seek out an old tree in a quiet spot to "linger as the sun sank."

The rhythm of the poem echoes the rhythm of life, always moving but seeking pause. "The Barbed Wire Fence" opens up a Pandora's Box, a bundle of different meanings, each dependent on the reader's own associations. This reader sees a narrator, who appears trapped, yet the fence is down, she can run if she chooses, a breach in the enclosure allows her to leave, but she stays, and settles for a pause. Why? "Family obligations"

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

that make her wonder how it all turned out this way? Did she ever really have a choice?

The poet writes:

*Lily wiped her tears as the kids still small
returned from a game of interrogation*

Explicit tears for implicit reasons, except for her close reference to “kids” as they come back from a game of questions that must seem difficult to answer. Lily’s mission, “to see the oldest tree of all,” opens and closes the poem, as she resonates with her surroundings:

*Lily went where bees made blossoms fall
and birds built nests without trepidation
near a stone foundation too old to recall.*

Another concrete scene, this time “A Vision Triolet,” contains a doctor, a stain, a reality check, and a photo. Again, the impermanence of life, the passing of time, aging. More lines of tight rhyme, eight lines per stanza, the repetition of entire lines, like the villanelle. The length of lines matter, tetrameter, ABaAab, as in “quick, case, photographic; quick, Geographic, space,” followed by AB, “quick, case.”

*A Vision Triolet
A digital fundus photo is quick,
recommended for anyone just in case--
each eye must stare till photographic;
a digital fundus photo is quick,
the results rival a National Geographic
glossy spectacular of outer space.
The digital fundus photo is quick
recommended for anyone just in case.*

*The optometrist pointed to murky stains
“Due to common aging,” he explained
fed by vessels deep in my brain.
The optometrist pointed to murky stains
foreign as a NASA Mars terrain--
the exposure, dull red, self-contained.
The optometrist pointed to murky stains
“due to common aging,” he explained.*

Just in case of what? Those questionable “murky stains” may “be due to common aging” but what does that say about life ahead . . . a red stain, a void, a “dull red, self-contained.” The poet found the whole scene strange, although the image seemed quite familiar to the optometrist. The poet’s confused. Isn’t the poet’s job to make the strange . . . familiar?

This tricky triolet, a quirky form meant to grasp what is slipping away, the poet’s most valuable tool, sight. The repetition of “stains” in the second stanza work well to drive home the point of over exposure, in this case, to time, “the dull red” left behind. A moment of vision, indeed, of the mystical kind, and the repetition of the line: “the digital fundus photo is quick” liking the sound of these words and the image of *National Geographic*, the

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

“result rival” a lyrical quality with tight rhyme—“glossy spectacular.” The artist works here, in and among these forms, such as the villanelle and the triolet, to craft common themes, like aging and regret, in mirroring reframes.

Many poems, like the earliest triolets in English, were written as prayers. This collection of *Compartments* could hold the same intention, like chants of extreme repetition, limited rhyme, limited lines that allow the structure to disappear, even though it dominates. These qualities of form, combined with the simplicity of content, convey a shared understanding, to make *Compartments* a good read. The personal becomes universal through images and sounds, and meaning moves closer, with each carefully constructed line.