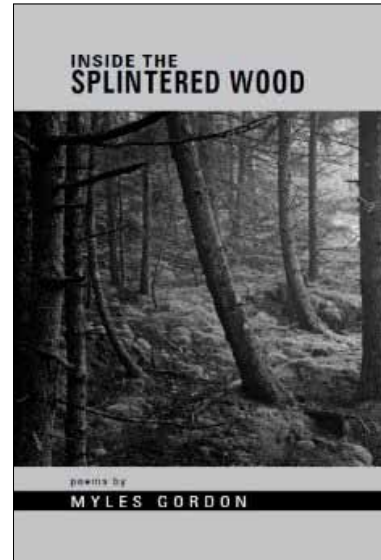


**Inside The Splintered Wood**  
Poems by Myles Gordon  
Tebot Bach  
Huntington Beach, California  
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*Review by Dennis Daly*

Nothing makes sense in this unfathomable, brutish life. Nothing. Still one must bear the ultimate burden of individual responsibility. Existentialism never worked for me as prose literature. Well, perhaps there were a couple of books—Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Words*.

Other books by these same authors, not so much. Myles Gordon, however, using this same existential mindset of free will in the face of absurdity, makes poems of a consistently high quality that matter. The details of his book, *Inside The Splintered Wood*, are mostly confessional and not for the squeamish. That said, Gordon has a knack for odd personal memories and irrational humor that propels one through his pieces.

Strangely the collection opens with a lovely meditation, a love song of sorts, brought on (absurdly, of course) by a wash rag that the poet's persona uses to scrub his kitchen floor. The rag had been cut from his dead wife's nightgown. The poem concludes this way,

*The cloth is supple and  
soft as I dampen and squeeze it  
over the bucket,  
water running  
down my fingers  
to my wrist,  
a warm trickle to my elbow.  
What part of the nightgown  
was this? Where did it press  
her body night after night?  
Is it the same swatch I stroked  
lightly so many times,  
the curve of her hip, so  
lightly, so lightly as she slept?*

The poem *Beyond Joy* troubles with its litany of suicide attempts and then blooms into a full-fledged terrorist fantasy. As disturbing as it is, the emotional honesty shines through. The mention of the shrinks and the CIA lets some of the pressure out and serves up a bit of comedy winking from stage right. Here's a section best described as homicidal paranoia,

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

*is the CIA  
scouring criminal  
dossiers files  
from shrinks  
the summer  
air separating  
in my nostrils  
I could buckle  
into something  
beyond joy  
taking  
you all with me.*

In the poem *Passing Another Patient On The Staircase On The Way To The Psychiatrist's Office* offbeat humor takes center stage. Gordon's persona conducts a one way conversation both making use of psychiatric jargon and at the same time mocking it darkly. Consider these laugh-out-loud lines,

*...I  
want to tick off for him  
the indicators  
for borderline  
personality disorder  
and see if he and I combined  
can create one really  
frightening self.  
I want him to know  
The therapy is working—  
I'm learning to  
hate outwardly  
as efficiently as I've  
done inwardly.*

Sometimes formality in verse allows the poet to better capture the informality of life as it careens along its incomprehensible trajectory toward death. Gordon seems to buy into this and uses structured verse quite well in *Recite Every Day*, his sonnet sequence and the centerpiece of the book. The sequence is made up of 32 poems chronicling his mother's death, as well as the poet's emotional state during this trying time. In the opening sonnet a visiting rabbi asks how both the poet and his mother are handling this situation. The mother has come to terms with her mortality. Gordon's persona describes his state of mind thusly,

*...I'm fine with it, and all  
the rest of it at forty-seven is ancient history.  
Skipping work to go to Costco, buying  
her a high definition TV,  
hooking it up, teaching her the clicker, crying  
all the way to the car. Bullshit. History  
is one teetering log from flooding in.  
Here I am reliving it again.*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Pathos, for sure; but the purchase of the high definition TV is pretty funny in a quirky way and also telling.

The seventh sonnet in the series continues with the offbeat humor. The poet's mother needs to make her bank account a joint one because she is dying. Her poet son, handling complex feelings about home and hearth, accommodates her and then the scene turns absurd. The poet explains,

*My mother tries to change her mind, afraid  
the seventy five dollars the bank gave her to entice  
her to open the first time would be null and void  
if my name were added. The manager offers solace,  
pats her hand, tells her: don't worry.  
Nothing is going to happen to your money.*

Not exactly looking at the big picture! But, is this human to a fault? Absolutely.

Looking into the abyss the details of life have a way of intruding. In the twenty-eighth sonnet Gordon relates how their cat ran away and the ensuing marital strife that followed. We aren't following the rules of rational thought here. The opening lines make that perfectly clear,

*Our cat ran off a week before you died.  
My wife forgot to close the kitchen screen  
after handing a toy out to our son. She cried.  
She knew that I would yell and make a scene.  
I did...*

The penultimate poem of this collection, The Running Gag, connects the dots of Gordon's existential view of humanity. He says,

*...what ripples  
Through one of us ripples through us all  
but of course we deny it because we are born members  
of the Mobilization for Denial  
unable to comprehend this connection and go  
about our daily lives*

But we do go about our daily life—most of us. Gordon gets us through this contradiction by keying open life's door with a poetic combination of high art and oddball humor. It's a combination I thoroughly enjoyed.