

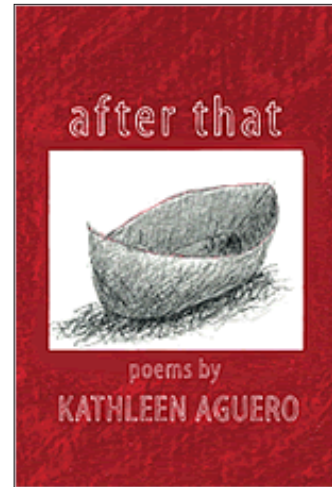
## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

**after that**  
**By Kathleen Aguero**  
Tiger Bark Press,  
Rochester, NY

75 Pages

*Review by Myles Gordon*

Kathleen Aguero's exquisite collection, *after that*, begins with a devastating punch: a dozen poems focused on a mother's dementia and eventual death. The pieces are unflinching, forcing the reader into the illness's visceral circle of despair.



*When she chews the napkin mistaking it for hors d'oeuvre,  
when she eats the teabag that rests by the side of her cup,  
I want to be the one to gently take the plate away,  
to give her something tastier for lunch...*

begins "Leftovers," capturing the stark, physical reality of the psyche's diminishing. The title poem, "after that," presents a laundry list of worsening symptoms, ending with the knock-out:

*She ripped her good dress into pieces  
and cut her father's photograph in half.  
We didn't know how to think of her after that.*

So powerful is this opening series, one wonders how to approach a book that has hit its emotional peak in its first fifteen pages – the rest of the poems musings on more standard fare such as motherhood, growing up and literally wrestling life's mysteries in a section devoted to pubescent sleuth, Nancy Drew. But that's precisely the genius and point of the book: we can't pick and choose when life's devastations will occur, and often have to maneuver through the relatively mundane aspects of our experiences "after that."

The book, then, covers largely common, and shared experience. It succeeds because of Aguero's facility with the language. There are no wasted words, and conversely no lines thirsty for nourishment. Her delightful "Aubade" wakes readers to a magical, lyrical landscape of a morning.

*Sheen of wet sand,  
smooth back of a whale the world rests on.*

*Pearl gray, blue gray,  
the mauve tinged gray east.*

*Gray thread of bird song  
spinning clouds overhead*

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*where the mass, gray underside  
of a vast bouquet of flowering white...*

This is fine free verse, tinged with an almost Zen-like Asian descriptiveness. Many of the poems spring at us like lyrical gifts, as in the start of "Landscapes."

*How pleasant to imagine a figure in a Chinese scroll  
spending a summer's afternoon among the mountains and mists.  
I could be the man standing in a boat dwarfed by the cliff,  
my large hat flapping as I let down my net...*

This dreaminess isn't just confined to descriptions of far-off vistas. It penetrates close to the heart. In "Inward Dive," the protagonist is a mom at her son's diving meet. Watching him test the board with a few mild bounces she must now prepare herself for the part of the launch for which she's never prepared: the diver's need to descend with his head just inches from the board, to receive the highest total of points. But, as always, she can't look, imagining the worst:

*In that instant I could glimpse  
the soft moon of your face  
just before it goes under, but with eyes closed  
I see you unconscious, bloody, in the water.*

That mother's protectiveness lurks everywhere in the collection. In "Bird Seed," birds "contra dance" on a table that serves as a feeder, angling position for scattered seeds. Soon, the scene turns grim as two birds

*...face off.  
She's standing her ground  
though that jay must seem big as Aeneas  
who said to Achilles:  
Our parents – one pair or the other will mourn  
a dear son today...*

Then the conceit is lifted. The poem pulls back to reveal a literature professor who has just learned that one of her students, a member of the military, has just been called up to serve in a war overseas. The professor impotently muses:

*Hey! We have a syllabus!  
I wanted to shout, flapping  
like that small bird at the feeder.*

One can almost see her, like a slow pull back in a film, grow smaller and less significant as the student departs to a dangerous, uncertain future.

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Perhaps this realization of lack of control leads the book to its second, and final section: twenty poems focused on pre teen girls' detective hero, Nancy Drew. Life, by nature, can often be unbearable, and eminently unsolvable, but maybe Nancy Drew can set things right. In "Mystery Of The Girl Sleuth, a poem written on Drew's fiftieth birthday," a confident tone acknowledges the mystery, though painful to tackle, can be figured out:

*Although you wish you'd never started on this quest  
for the missing map, you must follow it  
to the message in the hollow oak, across  
the haunted bridge to face the wooden lady  
and the statue whispering what you do not  
want to hear.*

But as the sequence continues, the pain remains, but the confidence diminishes. Toward the end, the book comes full circle, as Nancy Drew is drawn into the riddle of a mother's dementia, in "The Case Of The Impersonator."

*Another clue –  
I tell her I want to talk  
about something important.  
Sex? she snickers. My mother  
never used that word with me.  
But when I say, Going to the doctor,  
no, she snaps, in my mother's voice.*

Sadly, this is a mystery that neither Nancy Drew, nor the poet, can solve. A beloved mother sinks into dementia before diminishing into death, and, "after that," she must still live the life that unfolds.

Myles Gordon is author of *Inside The Splintered Wood* (Tebot Bach), and the upcoming *Until It Does Us In* (Cervena Barva)