

**LONGSHOT & GHAZAL**  
by Dennis Mahagin  
Mojave River Press  
Apple Valley, CA  
ISBN 978 1 63120 004 5

*Review by Susan Tepper*

When reading a book of poems, I believe the unconscious mind searches for touchstones that justify and reaffirm each poem's place in the narrative: or to put it more simply, when the poems hang together, and tell me a story, preferably in rich, abstract metaphor, with themes and tropes, phrases and voices that keep recurring, a la anaphora, to 'ring the bell' of a rapt reader.

I first experienced **LONGSHOT & GHAZAL** in galleys over the computer. The raw, honest beauty of this work, an almost frantic energy, elicits a skewed sense of humor, what I've come to recognize as a Mahagin trademark. He never skimps— be it pain, pleasure, what is lost, what's to be gained, what gets shoved aside, or mourned, as mysterious, relevant, absurd, profound.

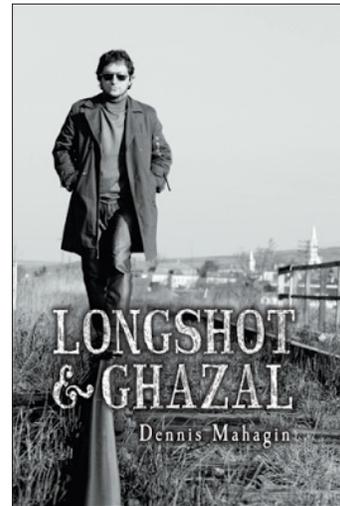
His skewed brilliance in two of the long poems, "Tumbleweed Suite" and "Absolute Longshot w/ the Seven Dwarves," particularly the latter poem, will have you shaking your head at the risks this writer is willing to take on the page, and the payoffs he delivers. Case in point is the dwarf, *Grumpy*, visited by a dominatrix; or *Dopey*, hanging tough within the sanctum of a 12 Step meeting.

My print copy of this book is rendered strikingly in grey tones. No other color could suit this book better. Holding it, re-reading the poems, it struck me that I was in possession of a modern, vernacular poetic vision of Romeo and Juliet.

Longshot is what that word implies, and more. It's the X chromosome taking risk, jumping ship, striding forward in these broken narratives; marching toward the wisp of Ghazal, whom I view as a nymph creature, female, flighty as the clouds— that he finds, loses, finds again ... infinitum.

Mahagin is one of the least sentimental poets working on the scene today. Yet a few of the poems in this new collection touch specifically on love themes. Is he a closet romantic, and did he also conjure up the Romeo/Juliet parallel?

'Schmarties' is a poem I'll remember. The title is of course word-play for 'Smarties' (the candy wafers)— and isn't he saying something else about this whole 'sweetness' gig? An excerpt recalls a Valentines Day long past:



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### Schmarties

"...Only eight weeks previous two of us conceived / in a state of Deep Winter, Eastern Oregon love, / how we'd plow through snow banks, arm in arm, / ... / ... From a corner of my lip, a handle bar / she kissed deep, said 'Malarkey,' reached for my V, / again and again... Now, alone on Valentines, ('why / are you crying?') out of time.../ ..."

Deep down in the darkest recesses of the functioning brain, we move closer or away from certain writings, depending upon which receptors the words engage, and light up. I found myself so emotionally invested in the doings of the Longshot, that I began to worry about the well being of the Ghazal. And vice versa. So it was with a certain trepidation that I approached a poem placed toward the end of the book, entitled "Longshot's Demise." It's another of the longer poems; here's an excerpt from the first stanza:

### Longshot's Demise

"Well, Jesus / if only it wasn't / another glorious morning— / clouds slathered on a blue dauber, / darling yawns, shaving cream lather; / orange juice, bird song, stench / of French roast / from the Starbucks, / and a gas powered leaf blower / going off too early, at the center / of town. / ... "

So what will become of the Longshot? Or the Ghazal? Mahagin's second collection is a tour de force in modern poetry, and most highly recommended.

\*\*\* This review first appeared in Black Heart magazine.