

**A Quantum Poet (Dos Madres Press)
A review of Tiny Kites by Lucien Zell**

Reviewed by Aidan Andrew Dun

*I flew home—
then I flew from home—
having found my home is flight.*



Translocating Plato's cave of shadows to the modern world we find its exact analogue in a movie-house. Here self-incarcerated prisoners are installed in a large darkened room in which pseudo-images flicker on screens of consciousness.

Here is the domain of relative reality. But outside the darkened room is the absolutely real. We, however, have forgotten about its existence. We sit in the 'cinema' of the world with palms sweating and heart racing almost completely submerged in the relatively real. We edge forward in our seats with hands clenched in response to artificial images, utterly engrossed in false appearances, completely involved in 'preloved' emotions. In some dim corner of consciousness we know there is a world outside the movie-house but - while a good film lasts - we willingly conspire with illusion.

Visionary poetry engages with the absolutely real and yet this artform must find its resources in the relatively real, in the concrete images of this limited world. Music, as a more abstract artform, does not have this bimetallic quality. Yet no matter how much literature may concern itself with shadowlands, with endlessly interesting juxtapositions of dualities, with shiftings of perspective and persona, with self-referential exercises, with conditioned responses, the greatest poets are all metaphysicians of the absolute. Relative reality may be a highly-combustible fuel but the fire itself is of another dimension. I believe Picasso was closer to the truth than Leonardo when he said: The artist does not seek, he finds. (Da Vinci had famously - and erroneously - stated In order to love we must know.) In all visionary artforms a mystical state of unknowing and non-seeking should precede any given process of expression. Visionary artforms are the by-product of an inclusiveness so vast that it annihilates all difference.

Lucien Zell is a visionary poet working inside gnostic and cabalistic traditions. He is a maker of verses which entrain a metaphysical approach to poetics. Yet he conceals his seriousness behind images both playful and sensuous, making the coded word accessible. A large number of modern poets concern themselves with encrypting subjective formulas in shrouded language incapable of conveying universality. Zell skillfully avoids this pitfall and offers us significant concepts in simple language. But his simplicity should not be mistaken for a lack of sophistication. After all, Racine constructed his literary universe using a stripped-down vocabulary of only a few thousand words, always heeding Aristotle's dictum: Too brilliant diction frustrates its own object. To be moved by a poem is much more important than to be impressed by literary pyrotechnics, and Zell often moves us in this, his first American collection, *Tiny Kites*, published by Dos Madres.

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Take the double helix of a poem like *Wind to Wind*. Here is the literary equivalent of a Moebius strip where one easily negotiates interior and exterior dimensions without any sense of transitioning between the two. Zell transports his reader from the elemental to the emotional and back again in the space of two elegant and breathtaking stanzas. This piece represents unity deconstructed and resynthesized, and as the opening statement of *Tiny Kites*, pilots us confidently into the skies of theopoetics.

The same theme of interchangeability pervades many of Zell's verses.

*To be so grateful for poems
that you honor both the cracks in the poet's heart
- from which they've emerged -
and the cracks in your own heart through which they've entered.*

Once again, with a quick half-twist which echoes the structure of our own DNA, Zell has introduced his reader to the never-ending surface of a unity which escapes perception. He is commenting on that equivalence also expressed in an ancient Maori greeting which says I am in truth another yourself.

Another poem, *Involved in Autumn*, is concerned with the alignment of fate's windows. Here, acceptance of existential loss is framed in a classic autumnal trope. But the poem kaleidoscopes towards a Blakean fourfold construct in which the seasons are superimposed on a map of consciousness, a mandalic diagram of poetic ordering. These are the colors true to so many of the sun's wishes of the first stanza. A problem faced by esoteric verse is that formulas may seem didactic, but any such tone is avoided as *Involved in Autumn* builds to its climax since while the poet attributes birth to spring, life to summer and death to autumn he leaves winter's attribution blank:

*as a mysterious country
anyone can visit when they want to forget time.*

If art is an attempt to inoculate all people with spiritual disenchantment, then quatrain XXXVI - in a sequence of quatrains - is true to that objective. In four lines the coordinates and certainties of the relatively real are capsized. A measurement of things invisible is being attempted here.

The ghosts! The ghosts!...

We seem to be counting the sum total of the dead of all time. Some kind of census of astral multitudes is being taken. Are we numbering the aggregate of the deceased of all possible worlds? The poem goes on:

*The ghosts! The ghosts!
We think that they're our guests
while the truth is
they're our hosts.*

Eliding ghosts into guests the poetic experiment in cosmology shifts into phase two, referencing standard anthropocentric myopia. (Dostoyevsky says somewhere that ghosts are shreds and fragments of other worlds, the beginning of them and of course apparitions play an im-

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portant role in the redemptive experience of Raskolnikov, catalysing his conscience when nothing else will.) The use of hosts in the final line is interesting since the word has both biblical and military resonance. It implies that a superior force is laying long siege to hearts and minds. The assumption has always been that human-beings are in charge but the territory actually belongs to a secret army. This understanding leads in turn to the idea of ghosts as guerillas, an underground organization fighting unconventional warfare, triggering psychological explosions at subconscious levels, awakening obscure truths (as with Hamlet) stirring up self-analysis (as with Raskolnikov).

*She danced me to the edge of the cliff
Broke my heart into a thousand birds
Then leaping off without a word
She taught them to fly.*

In the sequence called Threshold Poems (Threshold is the poet's name for the city of Prague where he is based) poem VI betrays the bitterness of the unpublished poète maudit. In the context of Zell's powerful present collection perhaps this voicing of distress might have been omitted so as to avoid any atmosphere of self-commiseration. But any such mood is quickly exorcised by an adjacent poem which discusses a friend's solitary confinement, and where the closing couplet runs:

*Are there wings we can't lift
till we drop our hands?*

A chain of haikus finalizes Tiny Kites. These are small-scale poems which say a great deal without wasting breath. (The kites are only tiny because they fly so high!) In fact this form was invented by Buddhist poet-monks who wanted to democratize an artform reserved for those who could afford paper and pen, aristocrats with the luxury of time on their hands. Who can forget that the affluent Lord Byron told the working-class Keats to go back to his metier as a chemist because the writing of verses was only for gentlemen?

*reading in the rain
a good book is destroyed
by how good it is.*

If rain here means adversity and reading signifies experience refined into art then the formula implies that acts of literary creation are transcended at some point. To illustrate: if one looks at the work of Rabindranath Tagore - the laureate of Bengal - and compares his poetry with that of his lifelong friend, the enlightened master Paramahansa Yogananda, one immediately detects a significant difference. Of course Yogananda's Autobiography of a Yogi is a great masterpiece but the beautiful poems of the realized saint are quite bland compared to the vivid utterances of Tagore. So Zell seems to be saying that with the complete acceptance of suffering comes the state of having nothing more to say. Another great renunciate - Arthur Rimbaud - in a sense took a vow of silence and 'destroyed the book' at the age of seventeen. But his case is mysterious and unique.

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*once showing her her
a mirror cracked in moving
shows the street the street.*

Now we return to the Moebius strip, tracing a crack which runs through many dimensions, binding all in a brokenness which is irreparable until difficult inclusiveness is acknowledged. In the third line of this plangent haiku the ability of the street to look at itself is a charming invention, highlighting the sentience of the dust we describe as inanimate. But deeper layers of meaning emerge with further reflection. If the mirror cracked in moving signifies a broken relationship, now the sense of the final statement alters accordingly. To show the street the street is to reveal the episodic nature of the relatively real. Where bewildering change entrains further confusion the street is symbolic of the human condition. Here is a lovely gem of poetic compression.

An initiation rite in ancient Tibet apparently involved loading a large box-kite with monks and flying it from a mountain directly into a thundercloud. The experience would confer enlightenment on those who survived electrocution or simply hung on for dear life. *Tiny Kites* is replete with gold won from grim times, with auras of hard roads, with electricity harnessed from dark places. The essential signature of Zell's first collection is something like reverence in a setting of timeless melancholy. Reverence for this universe and all it contains cannot belong only to quantum physicists (though such feelings may have been abandoned by post-modernists). Such reverence belongs also to quantum poets. And Zell is one.

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Aidan Andrew Dun made his debut on the literary scene in 1995, when his publisher, Goldmark, decided to launch his epic poem, *Vale Royal*, at the Royal Albert Hall. Allen Ginsberg was invited over from New York to participate in the launch, and sadly this was one of the great American poet's very last readings. *Vale Royal* (which took twenty-three years to write and is concerned with the psychogeography of Kings Cross) has been acclaimed by Derek Walcott, Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair and many others.

AAD has gone on to publish five more volumes of poetry with Mike Goldmark, one of the most visionary publishers in the world today. Their collaboration continues, though Dun has also published with Skyscraper, who put out *Unholyland* (in 2014) a verse novel in 1,000 sonnets set in the Middle East and surveying the rap-culture of the region.

In 2012 a triad by AAD was carved in granite along one side of London's newest open space, Granary Square. The poem runs 70 feet in length under a grove of miniature lime trees in front of the University of the Arts, the largest arts faculty on the planet.