

**Little Creatures**  
by Julia Carlson  
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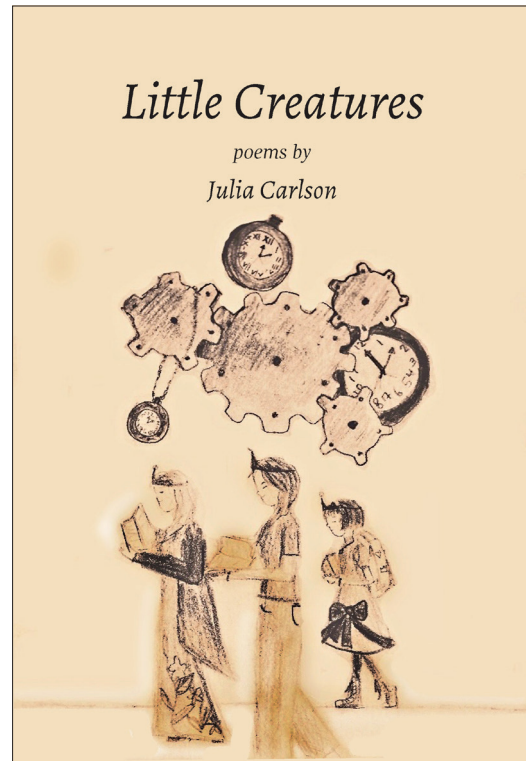
*reviewed by Neil Leadbeater*

**T**his generous collection of 62 poems captures life in the raw with some strong images to match. Carlson doesn't flinch from telling it as it is. In addition to episodes from her own life, she writes with an honest compassion that is tempered with realism about children caught up in war, the young who 'worry about darkness,' modern families today, a girl giving birth in her room while her parents watch TV, a girl puking in an alleyway after dark and old men who 'spit on sidewalks' and 'ignore their doctors / who tell them to / quit smoking and drinking / and start exercising.' There are crackheads and drunks and homeless people but there are also poems that celebrate the tenacity of nature and 'the things that never change'. There is a gritty sense of humor, too, in poems such as 'Drinking at the Raccoon Grille', 'Hotel Caribe, San Juan' and 'Henry Miller Writes My Biography'.

Carlson is a poet with a social conscience. In 'Children of War' a poem where the personal pronouns bounce backwards and forwards between the first and second person singular and the first and second person plural, the conversation is one-sided for the dead cannot speak for themselves. The phrase 'children of war' is repeated at least six times throughout the poem because the subject refuses to go away.

In a number of poems the focus of our attention is constantly shifting from one thing to another. In the final stanza of 'Counselling Session,' for example, the focus shifts out of the room to the sight of a gull that glides past the window above the harbour.

Something similar is going on in 'About Wheelbarrows,' with its nod in the last line to William Carlos Williams. In this poem Carlson writes perceptively about the reluctance of men to talk about what is on their minds. This difficulty in articulating thoughts by reaching out in conversation is precisely what some critics consider the Williams poem to be all about: when words are too difficult to express out loud, solace and some semblance of composure can be gained from focussing on an object (in this case the red wheelbarrow) that has no connection with the subject at hand. Carlson's poem begins with a series of focal shifts from herself in the present moment to the poem by Williams and then to a memory of when she



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was a child with her brother watching her father and uncle at work on the land:

*In the shed, the day I went to clear it out,  
was that old wheelbarrow, hard-worked cart.  
I thought of Williams, his red wheelbarrow in the rain.  
Then me, nine, and my brother, ten,  
sitting on a stone wall  
watching Dad and Uncle Jack  
scything the high-grown grass...*

Everything they did, it seems, they did silently, concentrating on the task in hand. Even when they took a break, they did not break their silence:

*They were men, we thought,  
Men never talked.*

*And so much depending on that wheelbarrow.*

The focus shifts again in 'TV at the Villager Tavern,' a poem with an unassuming title, that soon develops into a narration of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and then accelerates into an account of both collective and personal loss:

*Look up in the sky! It's a bird! No! It's a plane!  
Then the Boom. "No one who heard that noise  
will ever forget it," intones the anchor.*

*This is the minute when my friend Jane blew up  
when her skin evaporated and her blood dripped into the sky.  
Her fine red mist drifted to cover the ground  
her blood watering roof gardens all over Manhattan  
Her skin turning to ash, coating the cars  
driving across the Hudson River...*

Carlson has a keen ear for sound: in 'Black Hole' the young 'lying alone in bed at night' hear 'the muffled voices of / parents, brothers, sisters...a television's dull drone / punctuated by laugh tracks or gun battles,' in 'Dusk' she hears the wind in the trees sounding like rain, in 'Anthrax, 2001' there is the sound of a low-flying plane and in 'Pigeons' there are blaring horns and squealing tyres. What we hear and how we interpret it is key to these poems.

One of the many engaging things about the poems in this collection is their capacity to surprise. This is achieved in a number of ways. In 'Sevier Park, Nashville TN,' what begins as a poem written in a pastoral, almost lyrical, mode suddenly turns on a single thought to the horrors of the American Civil War. In 'I Miss Pluto,' one minute we are in the world of super-dense space particles and the next minute we are witnessing a domestic scene in which the narrator confesses a liking for ironing: 'how the steam gets / into the cloth and / takes out the wrinkles.' These juxtapositions jump out at us as the poems are take on a life of their own.

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Even in the short poems in this collection, such as 'Grief,' 'The Eyes of a Horse' and 'Faith' Carlson is adept at surprising us with a sudden turn of phrase. The last line in 'Faith,' for example, is the sort of triumphant pronouncement a magician would make when conjuring a rabbit out of a hat. Here is the poem quoted in its entirety:

*The dead do not always  
stay buried  
Look at Jesus  
3 days in the tomb  
and voila.*

These poems vividly capture the life of the streets and are rooted in the here and now. Carlson is a poet who understands our pain but she also shows us how we can transcend it by helping us to understand ourselves. The men and women and animals that she writes about are not like 'apples with a perfect sphere,' they are 'apples with a freckled, bumpy skin / maybe with a worm within.' Carlson celebrates our imperfections, she takes life at face value, and shares with us her thoughts. Her poetry is all the stronger and richer for it.

*Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His publications include 'Librettos for the Black Madonna' (White Adder Press, 2011), 'The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives' (Poetry Space, 2014) and 'Penn Fields' (Littoral Press, 2019).*