

**Disquiet and Quiet in Brian Mooney's debut book of poems, Unbidden**

*article by Michael T Steffen*

The poems of Brian Mooney win our skeptical confidence, singing songs of Experience:

*Helicopters lift above, pissing red tracers to earth,  
as Charlie dives deep underground leaving one conical hat floating in a rice paddy.  
[page 20]*

Mooney braves that censor, also, risking songs—genuinely cadenced, lyrical—of Innocence, as in the opening poem:

*GREEN WOOD STOOL  
(in memory of Grandma Mooney)*

*I'd climb onto the green wood stool,  
my boost to reach the kitchen sink.  
She'd take my little hands in hers:  
long, thick fingers, an amber ring.  
With lathered soap she'd gently rub,  
the dark stone bobbing through white suds.  
A cool rinse then and dry them nice  
on the embroidered Dutchman towel.*

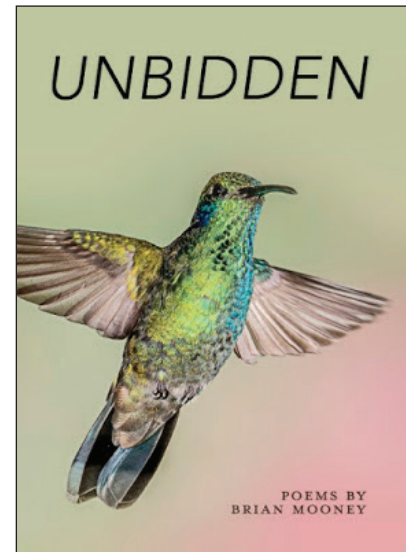
It's important, then, that Mooney's verse is also capable of happening onto the numbing neutral ground of weirdness in the familiar, getting a haircut from his father:

*Sometimes when my father touched my head,  
a shock would strike my neck and spring down my back. [page 33]*

Son of a mother who recited the verses of Emily Dickenson and Walt Whitman to him,

a Catholic monk for a year in his coming to age, a scholar and teacher of languages and literature, then a soldier in the Vietnam War, coming home to become "intensely involved in the Anti-War movement," Mooney presents himself with a wide experience, spiritual and worldly, to poetry in his 2020 debut collection, *Unbidden* (ISBN 978-1-7923-4926-3, self-published and printed by the Harvard Book Store, available for \$15).

Along with the undeniable lyrical soul of the poetics comes some artistic and intellectual shrewdness of slanting at the present through the past. Our current national divide between nature and its minimal needy aspect vs society and sophistication and wealth— which is perhaps global — is deftly sketched by Mooney in terms of French philosophy:



## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

*My classmate would hold his picture  
close to the side of his desk,  
and whisper to me "Rousseau"  
and I would reply "Voltaire." [page 20]*

Yet managing the particular argument is short of Mooney's greater purpose. Fred Marchant has generously and perceptively commented: "the unbidden in these poems is most often an earned glimpse of a mystery at the heart of things." Heart of hearts: the startling realization that the world of experience dawns on our consciousness as—unbidden. In the philosophy of Martin Heidegger the term finds its correspondence in our "being thrown" (geworfen) into this world.

It strikes us as unsettling to the great extent that the makeup of our lives is ultimately beyond our individual control. It precedes and encompasses us, leaving even the most familiar of our surroundings to the scrutiny of questions:

*Is it in the backyard where I learned to ice skate,  
pushing away from the apple tree?*

*Is it in the window of the garret room where  
the great elm showed its seasonal faces? [page 19]*

Yet along with this terrible awakening there is also the grace, despite our ego's proneness to the delusion of the totality of itself, of finding and knowing how we rely and are bound to a world of otherness and its beckoning to us, in the mergence of the individual and the spherical:

### WHISTLES

*With two fingers and rolled tongue  
she'd send out a piercing call,  
the signal for her kids at play to drop the bat and ball.  
Sometimes a Red-Tailed Hawk would circle in the sky,  
matching mother's whistle sound with its high-pitched reply.  
Whose territory is this, the raptor seemed to ask.  
Could it be a brother hawk concealed in human mask?  
As the children scurried home to wash before their meal,  
both whistles blending in their ears  
in Mother Nature's weil.*

The poems in *Unbidden* by Brian Mooney sing to us with the welcome of spiritual eagerness while, full of the unexpected and at times unsavory, for the differences they make, keep our eyes watchful line by intentional line. Reading the book leaves us both lighter and deeper, better than when we first opened it.