

The Powow River Poets , Anthology II
Edited by Paulette Demers Turco
Introduction by Leslie Monsour
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Review by William Falcetano

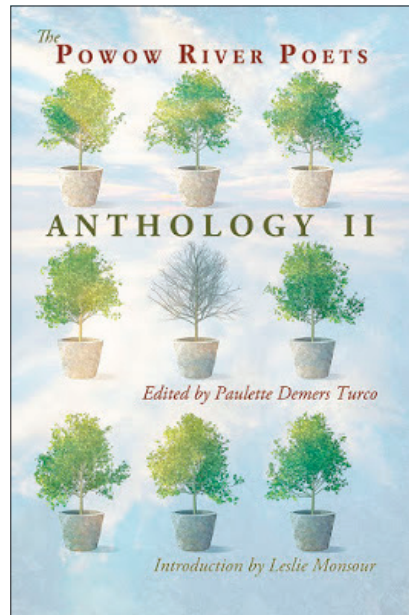
The Powow River poets have done it again, like lightning striking twice in the same place: they have produced a second anthology of poems that amply justifies their well-deserved reputation as highly talented versifiers and master-craftworkers of the artform. These excellent poems are distinguished by a graceful formalism, wry humor, scorching irony, delicious whimsy, insight into, and compassion for, the vagaries of the human condition.

There is also a distinct note of localism which brings us to such magical places as the sand dunes of Plum Island and “the sun-speckled Merimack” in that imaginary land “North of Boston” made famous by Robert Frost, as well as more far-flung Muse-inspired locales as the lush jungles of Honduras or a secret waterfall in Colorado. In ancient times poets haunted obscure brooks or hidden dells where they would be embraced by Muses who inspired them to sing in meters and chant in rhymes. Such inspired formal precision is on almost every page of this remarkable volume and it reminds the reader (this reader in particular) what makes poetry poetic. How to explain this profusion of talent? It has been rumored that they are imbibing the Muse-infused waters of the Powow River as it meanders through the charming hamlet of Amesbury (though I’m inclined to guess it’s equally the result of hard work and years of careful reading and pain-staking writing).

This gifted group of poets normally meets at the Newburyport Public Library, which hosts their readings. As someone who has recently found refuge on Plum Island just before the outbreak of the pandemic, I was disappointed that this happy congress was canceled - another victim of the dreaded covid-19. In lieu of attending live readings I offered to review this new anthology - it was a labor of love which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Apropos libraries and poetry readings I laughed when I read Alfred Nicol’s funny poem “Nuts”, which offers glimpses of such recognizable denizens as the old codger who won’t live long enough to read the arm-load of biographies he is checking out; or the “struggling poets” whose audiences find “the open mic’s a magnet for the daft”.

Another witty poem is A.M. Juster’s “Proposed Clichés”; some examples are:



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*More user-friendly than a hooker
hard up for cash.*

*Ask not what your country can do,
for fear of the answer.*

*Burn the candle at both ends
if you want to wax poetic.*

*If you're crazy like a fox,
get tested for rabies.*

I was touched by Kyle Potvin's "To My Children Reading My Poetry after I'm Gone", which offers a defense of poetic license and the right of the poet to dissemble. She advises her children, if they search for clues about their mother in her poems, beware:

*...poets play with words, ignore the truth,
"manipulate" as Plath once said. A ruth-
less cutting, blending, marking up - that's art.
Dears, best to trust what's written in your heart.*

Poetry also reveals truth through its manipulative art. Such revelations are everywhere to be found in this outstanding collection. Pace Keats, however, truth and beauty do not always co-mingle, as Michael Cantor's "Lament" reveals about growing old and

*what it all comes down to - thoughts of shits
and weekends with the Times invade a kiss-
kiss-fuck-fuck-bang-bang mind as age submits
his calling card, engraved, upon a bone-
white plate...*

In another memento mori James Najarian illustrates how the splendor of youth can suddenly be turned into something far from lovely when a frolicking frat boy meets his fate in a car crash. Najarian, who envies "the ease of any of these guys", first brings into focus the perfect prep school bodies of youngsters playing football in the April rain:

*The lawn is a snarl of pectoral and arm
In a game I cannot play or even grasp.
However rough it seems, they mean no harm,
shoulder on shoulder in a perfect clasp
of biceps, deltoid, butt, and leather ball.*

Then he hits the reader with the tragic reversal of fortune, marveling at how the frat boys are so "spendthrift with themselves, as only young men can be."

Another unbeautiful truth is told by Anton Yakovlev's "Ask Anyone" which alludes the common occurrence of nighttime arrests in the USSR:

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*Ask anyone who lived in Soviet times.
It was at night that people went away.
Faint blood in basements. Vague rumors of crimes...
Quiet black Volgas gliding past stop signs.*

This anthology is also chock full of beautiful truths as well, much of it painting word portraits on landscape, seasons, gardens, and family. The editor, Paulette Demers Turco, offers two poems about her mother. In "Singer" she is depicted as a modern-day Penelope at the loom waiting for her husband to return (like Odysseus, he too is off at war) singing tunes at her Singer sewing machine.

*...her wish
of daughters dressed by her - beyond her wish
when she took her vows on her wedding day.
While her love served in Normandy, she'd hum
soft tunes of his return - no sewing machine.
Her trousseau was of borrowed silk and lace.
Her groom gave her a Singer. She'd teach herself.*

What is it about parents that inspires poetry? Several poems in this collection draw upon memories of mothers or fathers. Rhina P. Espailat, the ring-leader of this happy band of poets, offers a memory of strolling the promenade in Newburyport with her elderly mother.

*Widowed, confused, dimly aware
of who I was beside her there,
but fond of mischief, and still pretty.
She loved the river and the city.*

They are joined by

*...an old fellow bald and thin
Who gripped his cane and slipped right in...*

What happens next I leave to the reader to discover - but the "mischief" made me laugh.

There are whimsical takes on the philosophical musings of a speck of dust in Alfred Nicol's "Old Haunt", or the absurdities of border controls placed on the natural world in Nancy Bailey Miller's Revisiting "Something there is that doesn't love a wall", in which she asks facetiously:

*But why can't we reroute the bird migration?
Insist on green cards from our waterfalls?
What monarch claims the path of butterflies
in spring?*

I have not, and cannot, do justice to this outstanding anthology, and its many fine poets, in a mere thousand words; but I'd like to reassure readers that every page of this excellent book is worth careful attention, especially if you enjoy reading well-crafted poems.