

**Built of All I Shape and Name by
Jessica Genia Simon (Kelsay Books,
2023)**

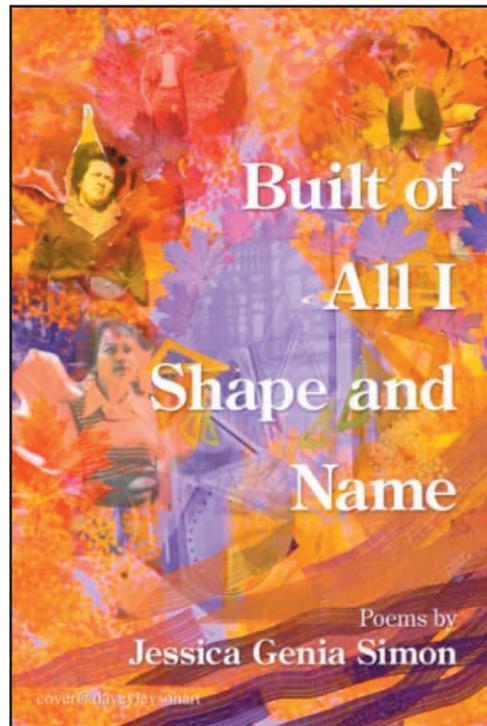
Review by David Trimble

Jessica Genia Simon has been writing poetry since the age of seven. She participated in the University of Virginia's Young Writer's Workshop and won a spot on the Brave New Voices 2001 D.C. National Youth Poetry Slam Team. This is the first publication of a collection of her poems, some of which appeared previously in *The Atlanta Review*, *The Edge*, *Slipform 2020 Anthology*, *Super Stoked: An Anthology of Queer Poetry*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, and *Washington Writers Publishing House – WWP*H Writes. Written in a variety of forms, her poems tell the story of a life from birth through some challenging passages of adulthood. By the end of the series of 24 poems, the reader has

come to know a voice of wonder, fear, love, pain, determination and hope, a voice that shapes and names the particulars and the universals of the world in which the poet lives and acts. It is a voice that embodies determination to know and to remember, a voice that can be fiercely intentional. It is at moments broken-hearted, at others tender and vulnerable, and occasionally hilarious. Her poem, "Apology for the 'I'm Sorrys,'" tumbles out in the apologetic cadence of a person in the grip of generations of female socialization, yet negates its self-effacement with blunt assertions of being. It concludes with, "What, in a day full of apologies, can an apology even mean?"

My daughter, in her early fifties, struggles to contain the apologetic impulse from her own gender socialization. I sent her a recording of Simon reading "Apology for the 'I'm Sorrys.'" She found it both hilarious and affirming. She in turn played the recording for her grandmother, who enjoyed it equally.

As an adolescent, I read all 824 pages of Nikos Kazantzakis' verse in his *A Modern Sequel to the Odyssey*. I have since seldom read poetry. I approached *Built of All I Shape and Name* with the "fresh eyes" of a reader unaccustomed yet curious about this form of writing. I had just published my memoir and was particularly curious about differences and convergences between the voices of poet and memoirist. *Built of All I Shape and Name* is, like a memoir, an engagement with the reader fraught with risk and rich with opportunities for connection. In "Deck of Cards," the poet invites us into "quiet nights" writing "quiet poems." As readers, we step into sharing her hushed solitude and witness her use of art to shape and name a meaning that will make sense of emotional pain:



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*...I pick up a pen to write a poem
about failed love as if this will
gather the cards
untangle the strings
order the papers
render the emptiness
anything more than a loss.*

“Deck of Cards” is within the first of two numbered Parts in the book. The eight poems in Part I bring readers through the poet’s childhood into early adulthood. I was fascinated by the complexity of the poet’s voice in the first poem of Part I, “My Birth: A Villanelle.” We hear her adult voice as a proficient poet in her mastery of the highly structured Villanelle form, with its disciplined requirements for complex structure and rhyme. I hear a child’s voice, perhaps singing and enjoying her own music, even as I acknowledge the proficiency of the poet’s craft. Yet, its refrains reveal that this is far from a nursery rhyme. In the second verse of the first tercet, we learn that she “was born before the doctor could show.” This shapes the refrains, which engage with time and mortality:

*Fast you enter the world so from it you will go.
and,
Will I be so quick to leave? I hope it is not so.*

I read others’ words with appreciation for the process of dialogue celebrated by Mikhail Bakhtin.¹ A curious and attentive engagement between reader and writer generates unique meanings, with sources in both, yet emerging uniquely in the space between them. Fresh as my eyes may be as a reader of poetry, my eyes are trained as a clinical and developmental psychologist with over fifty years of clinical practice. Knowing that the words are written by a proficient adult poet, I nonetheless allow my heart to open to the child whose voice appears in “My Birth: A Villanelle.” A “sensory babe,” she opens me to the sensations of the natural world, even as I feel the foreshadowing embodying her acute awareness of mortality in the passage of time. Who is the child that we will come to know in the ensuing poems?

In the next poem, “Tree Eyes Looking Down,” the narrators are three trees, in schoolyard, backyard, and graveyard. The poet shifts to third person, “the girl,” who is still engaged with sensations from nature, but seems to be easily afraid. She engages with the trees, who, from the perspective of their longevity, offer a counterpoint to the girl’s fears of mortality. The schoolyard tree witnesses children exploring their sexual futures by sharing pages from a stolen *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The girl wonders, “...if women start bleeding and never stop.” We learn that the backyard tree accompanied her through depression and recovery in early adulthood. The poet tells us that the third tree is in a Jewish graveyard, where the girl “looks this way and that as if she will fall into one of the geometric beds.” As this poet shares of herself from the safe distance of the trees’ consciousness, this reader begins to speculate about trauma, both individual and intergenerational. My opened heart feels pain I see how the text uses the third person to hold vulnerable experience a safe step away from the immediacy of a child’s untroubled absorption in sensations from the natural world.

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In the poem, "Recurring Dream," the child seeks in a field of flowers for "the right flower;" "the one that will tell her how to grow up," "that will show her who to love," "that will whisper in her ear she is enough..." The final wish is perhaps the most poignant, as the little girl seeks for the flower to be "the one to teach her how to fill her nose with what turns toward the sun." The poem, and the dream, evoke my compassion as a parent and as a psychotherapist. I witness a child's determination to grow up, and her vulnerability in that struggle. Can she hold onto childhood's sensory wonders as she learns to make difficult life decisions? Does the little girl's dream recur in search of a flower that can soothe implicit fear of losing what she may have to leave behind in the journey toward adulthood?

"Deck of Cards" follows "Recurring Dream" in sequence in Part 1, and the poet shifts from third person to first person. Although this poem is in the voice of a person, no longer a child, struggling to find meaning for romantic heartbreak using her art, we know that Simon began writing poetry at the age of seven. Did she discover as a child how to use language to hold on to the wonder she felt as a child, using poetry to build a craft strong enough to carry her forward into life and protect her vulnerable openheartedness?

The next two poems, "Stuffed Prizes," and "50-Year-Old Dad Teaches 20-Year-Old Daughter How to Bowl," continue in first person. Both are set in young adulthood yet point back to memories of childhood. I sense a loving and protective paternal presence, which seems affirming enough for the poet to keep trying, despite the bowling alley gutter balls. Images of darkness, the ocean wind from its "giant dark portal" and the dark tunnel the bowling ball traverses to return, strike me as a reader, already alerted to speculation about trauma. Darkness can be a metaphor for the wordless, timeless, spaceless source of generativity and creativity, frightening yet fundamental to operations of both mind and world. Somehow, in these poems about relationship with father, the darkness is not terrifying.

In "Even After," the next to the last poem in Part I, written in the third person, the poet is driving her car alone, having discovered that she "could visit Eden again on weekends." Childhood is the Eden of wonder, recaptured in the moment. Clouds, trees bowing to her "with wet green sunshine on their backs" in "unabashed" rays of sunshine, "the light the way she remembered it, before she could shape or name." Entranced as the reader, with unspoken awareness of the wonder hidden in my own frightened childhood, I felt relief and even pride as I witnessed the poet's capacity to know and remember "that holy place where each breath wore the sweet rose scent of purple years." No longer a child, her sensuality more embodied and her mind now trained with the power to shape and name, she turns her attention back to road, "reassured that even after the fall she was allowed a sideways glance to the past." The use of the third person no longer keeps a safe distance from the poet's direct experience; it conveys awe of the sacred rather than fear of feeling overwhelmed.

Part I concludes with "Fear of Burning," from the concluding verse. It names fear of her own desire, a fear that dissolves with experience emerging from action. Her sensuality fully embodied in her sexuality, reflect-

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ing as she awakens the next morning to a snowfall, she recalls the night before, "allowing" her hand to caress her lover, "turning snow into heat." She remembers "kissing a neck, cradling and tracing hips, "all the while shedding nineteen years of learning not to kiss them for fear of burning." The poet is a woman ready to engage with the challenges of growing forward into life.

The sixteen poems of Part II do indeed bring forth profound adult challenges, including historical and intergenerational trauma, mood, relational yearning and frustration, and the physical limitations of aging, fertility, and illness. The heart as a source of metaphor is also a very literal and vulnerable embodiment of mortality. The series begins with a bird and concludes with the poet's decades-long labor to build a nest for herself.

"Sing, Robin, Sing" affords imagery for a challenging mood. "Is winter a thing to be endured?" the poet asks, as the robin rides through gusts under "a gray void of thin clouds vast and dull," "the sun a filmy disk." The robin "hunkers down, beak to bark." As important as endurance may be, so also is hope. The robin on the deck, "fat with scraps," "puffs his belly, opens his mouth, pushes his hope out in song."

In "My Mother and the Maple Tree," the childhood image of trees as stalwart and enduring is altered by the wisdom of experience: "An upright trunk with roots stretched out may still be a tree dying." In the cold of winter, the maple tree in the yard of her childhood home "half naked in the winter chill," she and her mother sit with books from the library on heart disease. "I whisper a silent prayer to the temple of her, for her hidden heart."

"Nightfall at the Pond," evokes soothing and contemplative inner peace in its word picture of a natural scene. A bird is again a vehicle for an inner sense of beauty. As "the heron vanishes in the sky, beyond the pond into the deep dark night," the reader recognizes in the poet's words an adult awareness of darkness as an aspect of natural beauty, no longer just a source of fear nor beyond the power of language.

In "Jewish Tourist in Toledo, Spain," the poet takes the reader into direct encounters with the challenges of historical and intergenerational trauma. Simon reflects on indicators in a stone church of its previous lives as synagogue and mosque. The stone holds stories of past expulsions, which "certain amnesia in countries and pious men" cannot erase when stories have been carved into stone. "No matter how deep truth is buried, time turns rock to fossilized braille." Pointing to his arm, "Jewish blood," a man shows a statue of the Virgin that once hid a mezuzah on a door-jamb. Simon learns that the man's grandfather held onto the key of an ancestral home in Toledo abandoned after the Inquisition. This brings to her mind a Palestinian man holding onto the key to his grandfather's house "that may, or may not, still stand" in Jerusalem.

In "Why I Studied in Israel for a Year," the historical trauma of the Holocaust converges with the particulars of intergenerational trauma. The longest poem in the book, it reveals stories, and stories of hiding of stories, a process that Simon started to reveal for herself when she was eighteen and began to demand answers to explain her mother's silences. The language is deeply moving as we begin to discern the intergenerational

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sources of Simon's childhood fears and loneliness. Her mother was raised in Israel to parents who escaped the horrors of Europe;

*"Your childhood was sifted through stolen dreams
erased history, survivor nightmares, aftermath.
You did not speak child, playful innocence.
You did not speak poetic dreamer, hammock swing.
I did not speak your mother tongue,
or your mother's mother tongue.*

I feel my own heart break as she writes of her mother escaping into books; mother and daughter reading books,

... Two different

*languages, always language, always seeking
not just the sound, but meaning. A you are, not just your
You kept memories from me, tried to protect me.
From what? From you? I searched for you in language.
I dreamed you, listened for you.
What did your silence mean?
There must be a reason you hid devastation in the folds of your heart.
I finally learn.*

As the story held by mother to protect daughter are revealed, the word, "heart," itself takes deeper and more painful meanings. We learn that Simon's mother immigrated to the United States from Israel, her birthplace, where her mother's parents had settled as refugees. With Simon a baby less than a year old, her mother returned to Israel for a visit with Simon's grandfather, who was in the hospital awaiting heart surgery. The night before the surgery was scheduled, "He told you to leave, go back to your family."

*Your father jumped off a balcony
Before his heart could be repaired.
Then you had to bury him.
Your mother already dead from a heart attack,
my brother only three-years-old.*

The poem continues as the daughter remembers her years of searching for what was hidden in the folds of her mother's heart. As the poem concludes, the daughter's heart opens to her mother's broken heart:

*Your guilt at leaving your parents in Israel
hangs like an anvil above your life.
A truth you walk miles around only to reach the start.
You cannot outrun your losses, your griefs.
You left the country that shaped you, but you shaped me.
I sounded you out, mom, I found you, I'm found.*

I have read this poem many times in the process of writing this review. I weep each time that I come to these concluding verses. I witness healing

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and restoration of relationship that come with naming, feeling, and sharing grief.

"In Vitro Fertilization," "Bee Sting," "First Miscarriage: A Villanelle," and "Second Miscarriage: Anger Stage of Grief" draw the reader into the poet's struggles with fertility. Viscerally physical and intensely emotional, the poems convey consciousness of others around her yet absorption in awareness of a body that struggles and ultimately fails to carry the life trying to grow within her.

In "First Miscarriage: A Villanelle," the images of bird and heart that recur throughout the collection here embody the urgency, intensity, and determination of her struggle in the refrains, "Slow my panting desperate heart," and, "I cling to hope like a lark."

*If I wait for my womb to restart.
I can try again, again, again.
I cling to hope like a lark.*

The words of friends in "Bee Sting" evoke echoes from archetypal maternal sages about pregnancy:

*One sees my eyes full of fear, reassures me,
bees make honey, you know.
In other words, pain, but sweetness too.
Months of discomfort will be worth it.*

Throughout the poems, the words of others often contribute unwittingly to the pains of loss, of being unseen:

*We speak feverishly of births and abortions,
not all of the ways a woman can house
the full span of life and death in between.
The half-lives, the almost weres
she also carries.*

Isolation, loss and frustration crest in "Second Miscarriage: Anger Stage of Grief."

*How inadequate the word miscarriage.
I don't 'miss' the 'carriage.'
I cry at OPB—other people's babies.*

In the midst of these painful poems appears "Vermont House in Winter," a still, contemplative poem contrasting with the urgency and intensity of the surrounding poems. In this poem, winter is not a setting for the bleak moods of other winter poems in the collection. Nature in winter is beautiful. The temporal tone is geologic, without the immediacy of uncertainty over the outcomes of tests and procedures.

*I pick up a rounded stone
see time smoothed over.
I am the stone, time passes
through me.
When I am gone
the brook will babble on
over stone and hill.*

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"Third Viewing of 'Two Fridas,' Philadelphia Museum of Art" conveys a poetic voice shaped and named by trials which the poet has endured, as she shapes and names the story of her life for her readers, each reader shaping and naming unique meanings in this process of dialogic engagement. This reader remembers "Tree Eyes Looking Down," the second poem in the series, and the girl who wonders "if women start bleeding and never stop." In this poem, the poet resonates with the viscerality and vulnerability of Frida's art, "a woman alone with her organs and bones beating on pages." The adult poet reflects on the painting of a woman in a dress of stained linen, "next to a more innocent you." As the two women in the painting are in fact the same person, so the adult poet reaches out and comforts the frightened girl of her second poem:

*She offered and you took
your own hand, as she pinched
to stop the bleeding
that threatened to end you.*

"Some Women" and "Apology for the 'I'm Sorrys'" follow each other in sequence, embodying her understanding of her mother's silences and her decision to open her heart and her voice. Here is "Some Women" in its entirety:

*Some women I know hold
their pain so deep
the still water will never betray
itself. No breeze will ripple
the surface. Below rocks,
wounds hold ground
buried and bound.*

"Apology for the I'm Sorrys" tumbles out, nearly filling the page with a rush of sentences describing herself as not meeting others' (and sometimes her own) standards. Sentence follows sentence, arranged in space as though the poem is an essay or exposition:

*... My god, I am so sorry all the damn time, for what I
feel for what I do not feel. How the hell did I learn to give a fuck so
often? I am so good at feeling so bad, learned so young to be a good girl, to
feel sorry for being bad, being bad is one who does not follow rules. I follow
them. What, in a day full of apologies, can an apology
even mean?*

In the defiant transgressiveness of this poem, the poet firmly asserts her determination to be herself, not like "Some Women" who hold their pain out of sight.

In the first stanza of the penultimate poem of the collection, "Make Me like the Crocus, the Daffodil, the Cherry Blossom," the poet brings the reader back into childhood wonder at the lush beauty of nature. In the second stanza, she makes it clear that she writes as an adult. Standing in the bathroom in front of a mirror fogged from her shower, seeing herself in

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*"a lavender mud mask smeared across my face to rinse away toxins.
I hope to drain myself of any blood I do not need
anything that does not live or help me live
unsheath my body of unnecessary skin,
shed what I can to be new, new as I can be now,
with decades done.*

As the poet reflects on life and mortality, she cries out for liberation from the burdens, wounds, and obligations of her life and socialization, "Free me," the words that begin each of the ten lines of this next stanza, concluding them with

*Free me of any tense but the present,
Free me, dammit, from physical time,
Free me of any and all I do not need.*

The last line of this poem is a life-affirming assertion that her childlike absorption in nature is an existential necessity, not to be shed, rinsed away, or drained:

Make me like the crocus, the daffodil, the cherry blossom.

In the concluding poem, "Built of All I Shape and Name," the poet at thirty-eight, in her home "built of all I shape and name," tends her "lush, leafy potted plants, smelling of girlhood dreams." She treasures the gifts her mother gave her: "books on shelves, a garden watered," and reflects on her childhood awareness of her mother's silence, "The gift my mother tried to give me, her American child."

The poem embodies understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness achieved through Simon's determination to make sense of closely held family stories. We recognize Simon's courage for having engaged with fear and pain to insist on difficult conversations and uncover family secrets. She writes of the parental injunctions her mother received as the child of Holocaust survivor parents, and of her mother's courage and determination to immigrate to America, to train as an architect and build "stability out of steel beams." We see through the daughter's eyes mother's basement drafting table on which she "designs strong solid structures that withstand." A photograph of that table, on which her mother's drafting tools lie, graces the cover of the book, as do pictures of mother and maternal grandparents.

The poem embodies understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness achieved through Simon's determination to make sense of closely held family stories, and her gratitude for knowing them:

*Perhaps my mother thought silence
could stop the flow of fear to her womb.
For years, it worked.
I slept peaceful sleep, wrote
poems to birds chirping in treetops
believed my arms, wings, ready to fly.
I could not fall.
Until I did.*

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The poem, the series, and the book close with a metaphor of the poet building her own nest. The imagery of a bird seeking for nesting materials is fluid; is she writing about a bird or a person crawling on hands and knees, her fingers pricked by sharp evergreen needles? It is from this position, close to the earth, that the poet notices a dandelion growing from a sidewalk. Liberation from childhood fear and superstition, the poet

*observed the dandelion
in a sidewalk crack,
stepped on hundreds of times,
grow.*

When poets and memoirists are fortunate, they live beyond the publication of their work. After Jessica Genia Simon published this collection, and I published my memoir, we met in a workshop convened by poet Deborah Leipziger, accomplished in her work as consultant and poet, and a talented matchmaker. Deborah had suggested to workshop participants that we read and write about each other's work. Jessica and I took up the challenge, reading and writing about each other's work. A memoir is by definition the story of an author's life; the autobiographical nature of Simon's poetry collection creates a similar curiosity about the author. I learned to see myself through Jessica's eyes in her very appreciative writing about my memoir. I hope that, when she reads my words, she feels my appreciation of her work and discovers new meanings in the generative space between Jessica, the poet, and me, the reader.

1 Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin. C. Emerson, Ed.; translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press