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Three New Offerings from Red Dragonfly Press

Christine Stewart-
Nuñez



Review of:

Quiver, by Sarah Busse

31 Mornings in December, by Thom Tammaro

Lida Songs, by Scott King (Thistlewords Press, an imprint of Red Dragonfly Press)

I often use the word “distilled” to describe the difference between poetry and prose to new readers of poetry. The loose, connective tissue of prose falls away in a poem; an accomplished poet razors down a landscape, scene, or image into two or three essential sensory details making that image recognizable to us all. At the heart of this recognition the reader and writer intersect. When engaging the natural world, however, a poet’s work becomes more difficult; he or she must do this work in a fresh way, one that shifts—subtly or shockingly—the familiar. Because it embraces environmental, communal, and rural work, Red Dragonfly Press attracts poets of nature, and the poets of three recent RDP books, Thom Tammaro, Sarah Busse, and Scott King, are adept at showing readers new ways to see the everyday world.

In the preface of his chapbook, *31 Mornings in December*, Thom Tammaro poses the question: “What if one simply wanted to be alert for the small gifts the world might offer each day?” What follows is a haiku-like sequence, one poem for each day of the month, exemplifying this presence, this open state of existence. The best poems, such as his second, braid insight with natural imagery, giving readers a startling perspective of common objects:



Moon.
Yellow coin.
A bubble rising
From a fish's gill.

The white space between each poem slows readers down so we can meditate—the gift of the moment. And with each new day, Tammaro gives a new context for perception: “Across the lawn, / Light from the neighbor’s window / Opens the morning” (23: 1-3). Often Tammaro transforms the ordinary, such as the surprising couplet: “Below the window, / Drifts bury the sleeping heart” (27:1-2). Since reading *31 Mornings*, I have found lines rising up from memory when I see a patch of snow, a sparrow, or sunlight sliding through a curtain, each time reminding me to celebrate simple beauty.

The eleven poems in Sarah Busse’s *Quiver* take readers into a “sky full of occasion” (“Evening Walk, Mid-March” 9) despite our complaints about suburban life. Busse calls attention to the common and lovely: the sounds of robins, the color of bars on a wren’s wing, and the way “new leaves cup the sun’s light” (“Prescribed Burn in a Prairie Region” 8). Yet Busse moves us beyond detail by infusing birds, fields, and trees with emotional—sometimes philosophical—significance, as she does in “If I’m Honest I’ll Admit.” Here she praises the iridescence of a fern and writes how the silver spun by fog prompts the question: “Can I learn, / oh million, million filaments of moss, / to breathe like you?” (10-12). Similarly, in “Flicker,” a description of a flock of flickers and the “corn-colored / light of September” (6-7) blurs into an address to an absent love; in one arcing sweep, the speaker looks for the beloved in the “slow pour / of strong coffee” (12-13) and the “smoky stars that reel invisible” (13). Throughout *Quiver*, Busse punctuates her graceful rhythms with subtle repetition of sound, such as the lines “mud on the knuckle, wet / wood, blood in the womb” (“If I’m Honest I’ll Admit” 9-10). The result creates a musical book, both in the sounds she

imports into her work via description and in the artistry of her form.

In *Lida Songs* Scott King writes tenderly of fatherhood and the joy of watching a child step into the world as she learns to name it. But before he does so, he begins with “Expecting,” a poem which clears the “blackness and sparkling debris” (14) of physical and psychological landscapes and approaches the magnitude of anticipating birth:

All new burdens are lightened by this,
the rustle in last year’s grasses, the dark
knitting of the trail-side brush, the sky
curved and opening with stars,
the coming birth. (20-24)

As the collection builds, we see the speaker becoming immersed in the life of his daughter as much as he has been in the natural world; he holds up both for us to study, drawing parallels with imagery and metaphor. In “Looking into Your Eyes,” “irrigated crop circles in the Dakotas” (4) become “filled with the bluest flowers. / How beautiful, these blossoms of the brain” (5-6). The poet maintains this momentum as eyes morph into striking, exquisite “bowls of blue salt,” (14) “lattices of winter sky,” (15) and “summer lake water at dawn” (16).

Just as the experiences a child brings into his or her parents’ lives elicit humility, terror, bliss, and profound awe, so follows the emotional textures in *Lida Songs*. A daughter’s innocent wisdom in “Offering Cheerios to the Buddha” is followed by humorous “Baby Kisses” in which the child’s open-mouthed kisses “bless” not only her father, but “the rail on the playground slide, / the big dolmen of granite in the yard, / the front steps, each one of her toys” (9-11). Yet King doesn’t hesitate to allude to a parent’s deepest fear. In “Our Daughter Doesn’t Notice the Dead,” he contrast’s the father’s careful observation of a headless “sharp-shinned hawk” (7) and how his daughter ignores the body then uses



this moment as an occasion to insinuate risk:

Not looking back,
our daughter is waiting at the corner
where the sidewalk slopes down
into the dangerous street. (16-20)

Poet Freya Manfred writes of *Lida Songs*: “Even in their technical musicianship, from line to line, stanza to stanza, these poems exemplify the delicate, sturdy, vulnerable but unbreakable bond between fathers and their daughters.” I agree. Further, *Lida Songs* helps us remember how to engage the world as a child and how to allow our environment to inspire us as only poetry can.

These three collections are not only excellent reads, but the layout, book design, and paper quality make them artistic works in themselves. They remind me to savor not only the ideas imagery conjures and the music sounds create, but also the physical sensations of reading—the smell of the book, the texture of the paper in my hands. With such emphasis on material quality, Red Dragonfly Press embodies the traditions it seeks to embrace and encourages us to revisit the commonplace—a book—in fresh ways.