

*P*resence
A JOURNAL OF
CATHOLIC
POETRY



In the Margins: A Conversation in Poetry by
Christine Higgins, Ann LoLordo, Madeleine
Mysko, Kathleen O'Toole (Cherry Grove
Collections, 2017)

Both lovely and devastating, healing and disrupting is this conversation in free verse. The four female poets come from divergent backgrounds, yet their voices form a harmonious quartet in one slim volume. The formidable range of voice and precision of language enthralled me.

The collection comprises seven sections of poems. That number finds just cause. Within the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, seven conveys a polyphonic meaning. A seventh "day" caps six "days" of creation. The leprous Naaman must bathe in the Jordan River seven times (2 Kings 5:10); through persevering he receives complete healing. Jesus' seven signs and the seven "I am" statements in John provide another connotation of completion. In the seven-day march of Joshua around Jericho or the "seven" of Revelation, the number refers to the totality of the body of Christ. Thus the seven sections of *In the Margins* lend layers of meaning—of the sacred, of completion or totality.

The first section is titled "memory's the vessel," and its first poem, "In the Ofuro," illustrates the immensity memory holds. The poet Ann LoLordo details a customary Japanese bath with evocative turns of phrase that delighted me. When the narrator nearly falls off her low stool as she showers before the bath, the incident triggered a laugh as it aptly recalled my own experience of life in Japan. The remarkable and lovely description: "I wash her skin, / the nape of her neck, the delicate / black hair circling like a thumbprint," depicts the intimacy and beauty of the moment. The poet perfectly summarizes the close yet separate experience of the hot springs bath, "We soak, / steam circling our heads. / Side by side, we barely touch."

Parallel to "Ofuro" and adroitly situated on the facing page is Madeleine Mysko's description of bathing a mother's feet: "Newly fragile from the surgery, / she trembles in the shower, holds on tight / to the towel bar. She's balanced slippery / as infants I have lathered in this tub." Compact lines create an exquisitely specific scene, evoke my empathy and reference role reversal. The matching first and last lines suggest the heroism of this hidden act. They intimate Christ's washing of his disciples' feet. The first line reads, "I have to kneel to wash my mother's feet," and the line circles back, "I am struck with piety and lose / myself in washing her, like one ordained / to take another's precious feet in hand." Softly, artfully, it conveys the beauty of the mundane and secret spirituality.

The next two poems of this section point further to the significance of memory. The last recalls memories of three deceased aunts with a unique image, "My memory's the vessel—an old jar, lid / punched with holes, to let the fireflies live." The captured insects are spared—given life-sustaining oxygen—and that is how "memory's the vessel," how memory succors us. The artful and pertinent poetry selection of the initial section characterizes the other six.

The succeeding portions also have intriguing names. Each title repeats an evocative line capturing the essence uniting the poems of that section: "she comes knocking," "pure wound of the body," "for the missing," "testing the truth of it," "what hope, what shelter," and "hard to believe." These seven divisions represent a range of human experience and emotions of a journey towards God and wholeness. Space limitations turn me from elaborating on all seven sections; I will instead comment on two more works from the remaining two poets.

The sixth segment, titled "what hope, what shelter," focuses on hope, explicitly mentioned in three of its poems and implicit in the fourth poem by Ann LoLordo. Its heroine is "Perpetua," whose hope undergirds her faith and actions as saint and martyr. In the poem "Corinthian Baptist, First Sunday," hope is set within a contemporary community, an apparently black gospel church. Kathleen O'Toole, who penned these lines, spent four decades in professional work as a community organizer. The narrator of the poem ponders the "long slow burn / of pent up desire" and their hope, compared to "a hawk ready / to ride a wind current out over the edge." The musicality of words coincides with the gospel music of the church. The poem references the season of fall, and that—combined with the quoted quip of the pastor, "Something I never thought / I'd live to see,"—give rise to conjecture that the

election of President Obama has led to the momentous emotion of the congregation.

Lastly, Christine Higgins's poem "My Fortune," in the seventh section, chronicles a wonder—how a seemingly devastating loss turns to a richness of life—an abundance never conceived of, much less hoped for. The reader is carried on a kind of time travel through images with exquisite details—"you will drive your teenage / daughter and her friend / through a countryside of corn / and horses and handmade fences / . . . / you will sing Beatles songs / together." The narrator concludes by confessing that if she were told in her younger period of heartache what good fortune would later befall her, "I would have found it / hard to believe." The latter phrase provides the title to this section. The theme of surprised by goodness or beauty found in the midst of scarcity or loss is further explored in the other three poems of this section.

Thinking on the poems of *In the Margins* stirred my own faith and gratitude towards God. The poetry instructs in the art of grieving, surmounting loss through memory, or keeping faith and hope throughout the ravages of time. Crucial experiences are recounted—of reversals that are grieved but not scorned, where the honor bestowed wanes but not the speaker's self-respect. The array, technical virtuosity and passion of these poems create a work that mesmerized and drew me back to read the poetry again and again, to discover fresh resonance or echoes, harmonies or layers of spirit—human and holy.

Carol L. Park earned her MFA in Creative Writing at Seattle Pacific University. Her homes range from the suburbs of San Francisco, to redwood wilderness to cultural mazes of Japan. While teaching and befriending English learners from distant places, she's learned how little she knows and how precious is the meeting of minds over tea. Her poetry appears in the journals *SLANT*, *Minerva Rising*, *The Black Fox Literary*; her fiction in *The East Bay Review*, *Inigo*, and *The Harpoon Review*. While still in the cradle she participated in the Baptist Church, and then moved on to Evangelical Covenant, Presbyterian and currently the Episcopal Church. Maybe in the next decade or two she'll turn Roman Catholic.