

Precarious: New & Selected Poems

Judith Pacht

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The Compulsive Reader

Judith Pacht has stated that her intention with poems is to key in on sound, particularly the “pleasure of sound.” The poet is also a self-professed, dedicated revisionist who mines her craft.

In this latest full-length collection *Precarious*, Pacht’s lines are often sonically playful, at times staccato and spare; the result of her curation is clear (see the extraordinary weaving enjambment!)

We flip amongst different themes at the outset. A selection of new poems beginning with “Another New Poem” doubling up on itself, as the poem’s coda-like effect conjures a feeling of the infinite.

Brief lines, scrupulously structured and the staggered lineation mixing with the offbeat. The sequencing of the new poems was disarming because I couldn’t gain a clear sense of where *Precarious* was headed, but isn’t that precarity in its own right?

And to return to that word...in the poem “Precarious” there are curious lines of layered, careful beauty conjuring a feeling of caretaking only to witness larger forces scatter our human efforts.

we raked

the decomposed

granite smooth

but

decomposed again

it cracked

when the earth

shook

in Fort Worth

I remember soundless black

massing around me

the tornado’s vortex

precarious as

Elsewhere in the poem Pacht uses slant rhyme and bites into “k” and clear “t” sounds: *hot / flat / light*. This kind of complexity in brief poems is deceptive and Pacht is precise. A world adrift held in artistic balance, I caught the flow.

In “BBC Shipping Forecast, Facing South” the poem uses this eclectic reference to weather forecasts off the coast of the British Isles into a pressurization or storm front of facing of one’s decisions, uncertain where to turn:

on the other hand sometimes
north is more precise
I know how shame lies
in & down know to avoid south-facing
visibilities

The poems fire at times with these concise conflicts-ambiguity held together by choices, not indecision.

The selected poems draw from Pacht’s previous books, *Summer Hunger*, *Infirmity for a Private Soul* and *A Cumulus Fiction*. *Summer Hunger* and *Infirmity for a Private Soul* explore personal memory, objects lived in, revolving into that word level pleasure of sound and singular images.

A Cumulus Fiction draws in eastern influences. The exploration of form shifts in these later selections, with the inclusion of Pacht’s adaptations on haiku by such masters as Basho, Buson and Soseki. Pacht uses each single word of the haiku to begin each line, resulting in new poems with the haiku’s verse being read vertically as it is in the original Japanese.

Pacht, who lives in Los Angeles, has taught workshops at the Beyond Baroque literary center and is closely aligned with the city’s writing community. The poems are not primarily of the Pacific coast though, they explore Italy, Africa, Philadelphia, Palestine, Waziristan, Maine... The wide range of settings and influences compresses into poems that gaze; and the disparate working with the tactile and the sensory is evocative.

In the notes section, I marveled at how Pacht is a poet in constant absorption. From a Hammacher Schlemmer catalog to lines from fellow poets to topics like electrical currents and plastic surgery pulled from the news, the poet is a deliberate sponge whose words in the end are selected across a world of inspiration. Selected with care, that is.