

Precarious: New & Selected Poems

Judith Pacht

Published by Giant Claw Press

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Tupelo Quarterly

last viewed at <<https://www.tupeloquarterly.com/reviews/precarious-by-judith-pacht-reviewed-by-charles-rammelkamp/>>

Precarious is the perfect title for this new and selected collection of poems. Throughout, Judith Pacht expresses a vision of a world whose balance is tenuous, provisional. With excerpts from past volumes – especially from *Summer Hunger* and *Infirmary for a Private Soul*, but also *A Cumulus Fiction* – we get a picture of a world whose beauty is fragile, in which violence is volatile, capricious. The title poem, one of her new ones, describes and contemplates a world of natural disaster – tornadoes, wildfire, earthquake. It starts:

we raked
the decomposed
granite smooth
 but
decomposed again
it cracked
when the earth
shook

The warning is implicit in the ominous post-disaster description, but Pacht makes it so explicit in the final lines:

I write because
this is my truth:
 guard the flashing red

That flashing red light screams danger, urges caution. In a new prose piece, “Porta Portese,” the protagonist, widowed just seven months before, has taken a trip to Rome. Her friends warn: “*beware of Italian men.*” Not entirely comfortable speaking Italian, she nevertheless ventures out to the popular flea market. Everybody is helpful, telling her how to get there, the bus driver, the passengers. “A gray haired man in a tweed jacket with a blue checked shirt” is especially solicitous.

When he asks if she is married, gesturing to both their wedding bands, she tells him about her husband’s recent death, and it opens a flood of unexpected emotion. She tries to hold back the tears. At last, her equilibrium more or less restored, they arrive at the stalls, leather and fruit vendors surrounding them. He kisses her cheeks. “A shower of Italian, a smile & he disappears into the crowd, his ultimate kindness making all that came before seem ordinary, completely natural, a matter of course.” Despite the warnings of her friends, what she experiences is *kindness*. It’s a refreshing conclusion. The civilized

world does exist, *a matter of course*, though never to be taken for granted. “Notes from the Edge in the Time of Covid” underscores the point. Life really is precarious. Or take the poem, “Summer Hunger, New York City,” a poem about innocent girlhood, sunbathing on a city rooftop. It ends with the flashing red light:

all leaves and roses swaying just so at the hem,
consumed by what might
(it could you know anytime now)
blow over the parapet.

“On the Dresser,” a poem from *Infirmity for a Private Soul*, about a plant in a vase that thrives until it doesn’t is emblematic of this outlook, as is the sonnet, “Undelivered Mother’s Day” from the same collection, which begins:

My cabbage rose is drooping from the sun,
her petals opened full, a bit undone
like any dowager – by heat noon-day
when fading parts or petals drop away.

But in this case the plant maintains its vibrancy: “A grand dame ever ever to the end, / her dignity forbids her stalk to bend.”

Pacht writes with sensuous delight about the natural world, whether in the southwest United States, Maine, California, Poland, Palestine, Tanzania or elsewhere. “Recipe for S & M Marmalade” is downright erotic. It begins:

Blood oranges
should be eaten
blushing,
cupped
in the palm.

The poem goes on this way describing the tactile and other sensory experiences. It ends:

Think only of the end,
the mouth-feel,
the stew of dark sweet,
& juice,
& thickened pulp
 you swallow.

Similarly, one of the new poems, “Liberate Me,” begins with the overwhelming sensory imagery:

The faint scent of skunk
far from sirens & congestion –

steer manure, leaf-change, earth-scent.

Poems titled “Hummingbird,” “Sidewinder,” Falcon,” “Bird,” and “Spider” suggest her focus on the natural world, but at the same time, the human implications are just as involved in her writing. “Falcon,” which is situated in Scotland, describes the natural precision of the falcon as it kills for food,

not sport, not

human fantasies
splayed,

hooded black

or red on a concrete floor
like those, say,

in Abu Ghraib.

Remember Abu Ghraib, the Iraqi prison where American soldiers tortured their prisoners, humiliated them, just because they could? This was not unlike the concentration camps the Trump administration has set up. The cruelty is the point. It’s a flashing red light if there ever was one, not to be found among birds of prey. Or take the poem, “Medium Rare,” ostensibly a poem about the agricultural production of meat, with its images of “The farmyard fence, chickens, goats, / beyond, a grazing herd.” Here, too, we see human corruption at work:

In Waziristan near the mountains
soldier Lars from Iowa
now barely nineteen
(he said *hen* said *egg* said *moo*) —
captured, beheaded.

She makes the same point about human greed in “On Giving a Silver Fox Piece to Jessica,” in which, just as she’d noted the pragmatic impulses of the falcon, she praises the silver fox, a species whose luxuriant coat is the result of natural adaptation to the elements, a species that is monogamous, both parents raising their young. The poem ends with sly humor:

So who in conscience could wear real fur,

& besides I

don’t have anything it goes with —
although

around the neck it does flatter.

Divided into seven sections, the first two of which are the new poems, section six of *Precarious* includes poems from Pacht's chapbook, *Cumulus Fiction*. These "Conversations with Basho, Buson & Soseki" are responses to the haiku of the Japanese masters. Her response to Boson's haiku about the flowers' shadows creeping eastward as the light of the moon moves west reads:

Light at night sees the unseen, underbellies
of rocks, a scramble of millipedes & sowbugs.
The paralyzing exposure. A full
moon paints Rothko on the meadow, blueblack & dancing,
moves the insects from chaos to choreography.
West of the field salt & ocean spray, a lone
flower's mist and bloom. The shadow of
shadows. Deep purples, blackgreens vibrate,
creep into the dim field. Wait – look
eastward – orange light is tricking the night.

Such vivid, sensuous, natural imagery! I love the insects moving "from chaos to choreography."

Judith Pacht's writing is a sensual delight. And yet, the world we inhabit is precarious indeed. Red flashing lights surround us. But just as Pete Seeger once said he believed "the world is going to be saved by millions of small things," so Judith Pacht's vision seems ultimately benign, and *kind*. The final poem in the collection, from *Summer Hunger*, is called "Praise Small Things." It ends:

Praise the wild geese rising slow,
circling after rain to taste the scent
of air, of earth, this earth.

About the reviewer: Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore, where he lives with his wife, Abby. The two are retired from federal government service. Rammelkamp is the author of several collections of dramatic monologues.