

Books: A cartload of poets, a lode of wisdom

New collections from Minnesota poets will resonate with anyone who has faced breast cancer, sent a child to war, worried about getting old or splendor in the grass.

By Carol Connolly, Special to the Star Tribune

Last update: November 09, 2007 – 5:19 PM

With humor, wisdom and bite, these new collections by Minnesota poets speak to illness, aging, desire and missing loved ones. Some come at considerable cost, crafted only after blood is drawn. They give thanks, curse the unexpected, celebrate the erotic, laugh at the absurd. All strengthen our tenuous hold on what matters most. "A good poem may begin in self-expression," the poet Mark Doty said, "but it ends as art." There is art aplenty in these works.

"A Cartload Of Scrolls: 100 Poems in the Manner of T'ang Dynasty Poet Han-Shan," by Jim Lenfestey (Holy Cow! \$15.95).

In his fourth book of poems, Lenfestey, curator of the Literary Witness poetry series at Plymouth Congregational Church, enters into a 33-year correspondence with Han-Shan, a 1,200-year-old Chinese hermit and poet, who, it turns out, "is the cure for warts." These short, elegant poems, written in the manner of Han-Shan, are clear as a crystal bell. They ring with gratitude and take care of things -- unload the dishwasher at dawn, love wife, children and grandchildren. They also cherish the syllables that "buzz around my ears like flies/ I reach out with my pen and snatch them" -- even as dad phones in to remind him of his "potential with The Company." Lenfestey loses his calendar and feels his "... insides rearranged./ When my mourning ends for what I might have been/ I will be someone else. My wings will shine." And in this book, they do indeed shine.

"Definite Space," by Ann Iverson (Holy Cow! \$15.95).

In her second book of poems, Iverson, director of arts and sciences at Dunwoody College of Technology, measures the emptiness left when someone goes to war. It is dedicated to the poet's stepson, deployed twice to Iraq where he served with honor, and to his father. She lives "in this most definite space/ and sometimes cannot save myself/ from the comfort of order," which is fickle. "Two robins sing sad songs so softly/ that even the leaves cannot chime in," and the soldier's father is beside himself. Lovely simple images and a May basket hung askew mark the passage of the seasons, as the soldier's deployment continues. These poems are full of the quiet acceptance of demands that give "no say and no choice." The only wailing seems to be in the distance, in "the center of the coyotes' howl." Iverson's poems illuminate the powerful presence of those who are absent.

"One-Breasted Woman," by Susan Deborah (Sam) King (Holy Cow! \$15.95).

In her third book of poems, the Presbyterian minister, psychotherapist and teacher faces her breast cancer with courage and eloquence, outrage and wit. If you are not one of the many who has personally been affected by this scourge, drop everything and cross your fingers. It's an epidemic. Every 1.9 minutes, a woman is diagnosed. There is solace in this poet's brave, graceful poems, full of the dignity needed to carry one through the struggle from diagnosis through treatment. "We can't though the heart splits apart trying,/ will each other to heal," she writes. But with powerful resolve, this poet holds her beloveds, as they hold her, and taps into the deep inner resources that light up this work. As for trouble, "When it arrives, I invite it in/ and ask it to sit down."

"North of the Cities," by Louis Jenkins (Will o' the Wisp, \$15).

Every poem in this seventh collection from the esteemed Duluth poet provides a hearty laugh and casts a penetrating eye on life's ironies. A starfish with no brain "maintains an active social life ... like many of the people you know." Seagulls stand on a frozen lake, as if "waiting for a big bus to come and take them to a casino." A mangy old lion "gives a pathetic roar and the hyenas die laughing." A squirrel crosses the street knowing that a speeding car is coming at him, but "He will stay the course." These poems point out a few good things about growing old. No one asks, "What do you do?" You come to know the importance of having a place of your own "where in the evening you can hide away from all the defeat of the day." If you are reluctant to leave your place, you might reconsider. You could, as Jenkins suggests, "think of it as practice for not being there at all."

"November," by John Minczeski (Finishing Line, \$14).

Minczeski is an editor, author of four poetry collections and teacher who never fails to inspire. Several of his manuscripts have been finalists for four prestigious poetry prizes, but are, inexplicably, yet to be published. Finishing Line at last brings us this remarkably timely, beautiful book. In an earlier incarnation, a large portion of this book was performed by the poet with the music ensemble Zeitgeist. These poems move across continents, capturing the ambiguity that is November: sun and sleet, life and death, dark that comes too early. A new war, however, is "similar to the old one." What is past is carefully considered, and the future wallows "like a whale/ eluding our nets."

"Magdalena," by Maureen Gibbon (Marie Alexander Poetry Series, White Pine, \$14).

The novelist and assistant English professor at Bemidji State University delivers a strong, sensual, shimmering, elegant work of a woman happily alive in her own skin. She welcomes nature -- dolphins, birds and "Trees and flowers that give off their smells in the heat, like women." She grows strong picking pears, honors her grandmother, bakes breads for her high-school lover, wears a cornflower blue dress that makes her look like her mother -- "a woman I never thought I'd be." Magdalena is honest and alive with erotic poems that began to simmer when the poet "was 16 and hungry all the time."

Carol Connolly is St. Paul's first poet laureate.

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