

MYSTERY WRITER'S POETRY MOURNS AND HONORS LOST LOVED ONES

By Lois Rosen

I first had the joy of meeting Susan Clayton-Goldner from Grants Pass years ago at a novel-writing workshop led by Marjorie Reynolds in Portland. Susan shone as an astute critic and author of family-centered mystery novels. She's published three: *Finding a Way Back*, *Just Another Heartbeat*, and *Murder at Cape Foulweather*.

Besides being an award-winning novelist and popular blogger, Susan is an accomplished poet whose work has appeared in literary journals for decades. In her poetry, she ably combines her strength in creating character with vivid imagery and musical lines. This year, finally, her heartfelt poems have been gathered into her first poetry collection, *a question of mortality*, published by Wellstone Press.

Breaking with convention, all the words in the title, *the question of mortality*, begin with lowercase letters. Perhaps this symbolizes how mortality humbles us. On the cover, a black background frames a woman in a dark room. Dressed in black with her back to the reader, the central figure seems shadowed by tragedy.

In the poems, as in the cover art, there is a sense that tragedy has transformative effects. Hints of resilience appear in the poem "An Eternity of Hope." After the mention of a brother's "suicide" and "pain" like "broken glass," "hope" does "simmer." The speaker's grief never disappears, but a daffodil poking up from "frosted earth" signifies beauty coming back like "flames" rekindled.

Death softens the poet's heart, makes her vulnerable, yet more empathetic. For example, in "When My Father Slipped into His Death," Susan writes,

Near the foot of his bed, I expect fear,
but the face and hands are too familiar.

In a rush of lost affection, I uncurl

his fingers, pet a ruffled arch of brow...

and the years of rage, too hot to touch,
cool at once into this mourning.

The words “mourning,” “longing,” and “memory” recur throughout this book. Fresh images and powerful lines paint experiences of love and loss. The book pays tribute to complicated, flawed, but cherished family members, who have left their survivor bereft yet determined to write these moving, elegiac poems honoring them.

Many of the poems employ nature and weather to convey inner landscapes:

But one season bleeds into the next
and what nurtures can also strip away.
Soon the wildflowers will
fold in their perfect petals and disappear
into the pine-scented earth.
Only their memory will flicker
across the quiet face of time.

Despite the beauty of the wildflowers, which the narrator observes and appreciates, they die as do we. Only memories remain.

One of the powerhouse poems in this collection, “In My Favorite Easter Memory of Lillian Nell,” includes these striking images— “Chanel # 5 and whiskey,” “stiletto heels,” “spider-leg lashes.” I won’t give away the poem’s stunning end. Read it and this whole collection of narrative poetry, which is passionate, honest and profound.