

by Deborah Kearns

The Bridge by David Holper, pub. Sequoia Song, 2019,

It is so seldom that I read a poetry collection from cover-to-cover. Holper's work has no dry patches that I wanted to skip, no unnecessarily obscure poems that lose his reader.

While Holper's volume is titled after his mother's near suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge, his poems work to build a bridge that heals. He laments our social communities—fractured by race, economics, and class—and environmental destruction. His work describes the lethal burden carried by non-white races (in Afreet, Broken, Newer Miracles), the American shame of homelessness (Fiction Lesson), the unrelenting destruction of the planet (Unsaid), and our inflated estimation of our own moral sense alongside our assumed amorality of others (Villains).

Holper returns to historical moments highlighting more personal details: Gettysburg (The Trees), World War II (Doubt), Birkenau (Ditching the Tour), and Stalin (Floral Arrangement). He attends to the death of nature (Parting Words), the experience of teaching (The Dead Grandmother, Weekend Plans) and the power of poetry (Invocation to an Open Mic). He is thoughtful, funny, capable of self-disclosure, and writes with a tenderness for many things.

His language is beautiful. I found it inspiring, so much so that his Invocation to an Open Mic led me to write a poem in response (Hunger). In Invocation, he begins every line with "I know that you have come here this evening," and finishes each with some powerful insight, e.g., "because somewhere, somewhen, a poem found you, opening a page and igniting a hunger in you that you were not even aware of, until this moment."

Other memorable lines are: "Everywhere I looked, wonder called in her sweet voice, and my breath held with the holiness of it all." (Liturgy at Slide Ranch). "In the winter of one's life, the past grows until it swallows all present" (The Kestrel). "Both kindness and hatred often reside in the same tangled corners of our hearts" (Seven Rides to Remember). "But joy abides. Beauty, its twin. Together the two dance just under the surface of all that carries us along" (The Kestrel).

I am reticent to write in books, but I've written on every page of this one—stared my favorites, underlined words and whole stanzas that take my breath away, so beautifully crafted it's nearly painful, like this one, which concludes his collection:

“I know that you have come this evening
because each of us has come here, too,
looking for something that not one of us can name
—and even if we could, how could we speak
those clumsy words in a language we do not yet understand?
how could we give voice to each accented syllable
as if it were an incantation, an invitation for a life
we do not even begin to understand but cannot live without”
(Invocation to an Open Mic).