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Water, Earth, Air, Fire, and Picket Fences

By Carol Smallwood. Published 2014 by Lamar University Press, Beaumont, Texas
116 pages Paperback, \$15.00

Reviewed by Eleanor Lerman¹

The relationship between the individual and the natural world can be upended in a moment. Vegetables, fruits, moons, clouds, wind, insects, seasons, lakes and leaves, can all—year after year—present themselves as mundane elements of an everyday life and then, in an instant, suddenly appear in a very different light, surrounded by a different context, and take on new and uneasy symbolism. That realization occurs to the reader on almost every page of Carol Smallwood's new collection, *Water, Earth, Air, Fire and Picket Fences*. In the book, Smallwood examines the nature and meaning of these changes and the individual's perception of them. Honing in on her own experiences, the poet uses repeated words and phrases to hammer home the necessity of turning over both one's short- and long-term understanding of the world around us (and within us), as if no endeavor could be both more and less important than the close study of a single human life. Unexpected—but not unusual—occurrences offer the opportunity for such close study: a power outage, for example (as in the poem, "The Blue of Swimming Pools," and a companion piece that appears later in the book, "Using Available Light"), that allows the poet to observe and report on her reactions to a town suddenly deprived of the certainty of its daily activities, of colors affected by hot and cold, of a cat's patience and the slow passage from light to darkness through hours measured only by one's own experiences of these carefully noted scenes.

There is, however, another type of experience that infuses this collection: illness—specifically, cancer—and the nearness of death. Interestingly, for a book that is so imbued with the pastoral scents and scenes of suburbia, illness is mostly framed in what most readers would consider the archetypal destination of urban America: fast food restaurants. It's an effective choice, a way of presenting suffering, along with the disturbing possibility of nonexistence, in a setting so mundane as to be familiar to anyone. For example, if not for this book, who would imagine that Taco Bell, Wendy's and McDonald's could be so artfully (and completely non-ironically) presented as way stations between life and death? The loud colors and hard surfaces of these environments also allow for the jarring juxtaposition of images across the various poems in the collection: blood cells and Styrofoam cups, chemotherapy and countertops. How the ordinary insists on surrounding the extraordinary danger of illness is also examined in a hospital setting, as patients undergoing treatment remark on the exploits of TV talk show participants as paternity is debated and a man "with a Christopher Reeve profile" dozes. Superman, in this

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context, is startled awake; his escape from the situation both he and the poet are caught in is uncertain.

For anyone who survived the “hope I die before I get old” era, there is a particular poignancy to Smallwood’s descriptions, rendered in clean, narrative lines that remain poetic even while edging towards reportage, of what happens to a patient who must voluntarily enter a hospital waiting room, a place that cannot help but seem to presage a slow death—not the glorious flaming out we envisioned for ourselves. And once there, she must allow her body (which contains betrayal in its blood and bones) to be entrapped in a chair described as “elephant tan,” (a weighty, immovable object) as the fearful anticipation of what comes next settles in. Then, as the hours go by, and the patient stays still in that chair, perhaps with toxic chemicals coursing through her veins (akin to “the terror,” that Smallwood tells us, which “keeps on repeating”), she watches those endless morning-to-afternoon representations of troubled lives that crawl across the television channels. This is not what was supposed to happen to us. We were going to be light as incense smoke, free for as long as we wanted to be, and then, when we felt the time had come to use our bodies to create pain and pleasure of our own choosing, we would embark on a campaign to live hard and die young—a reasonable, even desirable goal, it seemed when we thought we were readying ourselves to form the vanguard of a revolution that was going to change the world. And indeed, the world changed, but not as we expected it to: war did not end, peace did not get a chance, the desire for material goods and comfort did not wane, and we did not drift off to some rural commune to live on the land and groove on the pleasant passing of time. Instead, like our bodies, time betrayed us—and more, it played the unforgiveable trick of letting us live to see how much we did not accomplish. And, trying, at least, to have the last laugh, it now sends us off to those hospital waiting rooms where, as if it mattered more than the cost we paid to make it through all our long days and nights, we watch the new conflicts—the culture wars—play out on big screens bolted to the walls. These are not our wars, but still, we have to hear the reports from the front: “None of the say they’re the father of her baby,” Smallwood tells us. And she’s right; no one is.

But in this collection of lovely, sly, and painful poems, as far into the dark as Smallwood sends us, she also finds a way to offer a route to rescue. That lifeline comes in the form of understanding that one thing leads to another, whether you like it, or are prepared for it, or not. And perhaps you’d better learn to like it—or at least, have some respect for the cunning ways that change slips itself into whatever picture of the world you think you’re looking at. Always, in every page of this book, Smallwood is concerned with transitions; not only the change from daylight to evening, from the view of sunny suburbs to the great night sky, but also the human changes that come about not only with the long passage of years, but even the short distances one travels by getting in a car and moving down a road from home to elsewhere. In the poem “Tea in a Plastic Cup,” for example, Smallwood reminds us how important it is to always observe and make note of these changes because otherwise, who knows what events might go unremarked? “I missed the moment water became tea,” she tells us and we are all reminded that even the quietest, seemingly unimportant shift in the universe might mark a passage we will never recover from.