

Drowning Like Li Po in a River of Red Wine (Selected Poems 1970--2010)

A.D. Winans

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Reviewer: Linda Lerner

In a book that spans forty years of a man's life, we are given a close-up of the American soul by this San Francisco poet whose vision ranges across a country he both loves and mourns. *This Land is Not My Land*, the 1996 collection of poems dealing with three years during which Winans served in Panama during the mid 1950s, encapsulates themes that recur throughout this unique collection. In "Panama Four," Winans writes, "Panama city could have been/ any slum city in America"; disillusioned with the corruption he sees there, he views the price paid (there and in America) for not fitting in, for being poor, black, elderly, and refusing to "Buy...into the system" ("America").

In "I Have Loitered," from 1970's *Carmel Clowns*, Winans writes, "I have watched/ listened/ observed/ only to return home/ and close the door"—a door behind which Winans crafts his poems in a deceptively simple style, a style that also aptly serves the astuteness of his insights. *Drowning Like Li Po* is divided chronologically, beginning with poems from the above-mentioned *Carmel Clowns*, in which we meet the poet in Golden Gate Park picking a flower only to look up into the face of a part-time policeman ("Flower Dreams"), the first of many disruptive and oppressive authority figures alluded to in Winans' poems. Winans tries to ignore the policeman and "Concentrate on the flower," just as the poet generally and throughout his life tries to ignore the dishonesty and hypocrisy he sees in the literary world and America at large, focusing rather on being true to himself, to his own values.

This is a poet who has never felt comfortable with being called a poet, who would have preferred being blessed with "the skills of a union carpenter" ("40th Birthday") and yet the contradiction: he writes in his introductory essay to this volume that "Poetry and writing have kept me going all these years." This dichotomy is at the heart of the collection: how to keep from falling into the American literary success trap and yet be successful with the work one does.

For forty years, Winans has documented the emotional and even political climate of America, of San Francisco, of North Beach: "stoned on words" ("North Beach Poem"), observing the misfits, those

who remain estranged from corporate America, people struggling to get by, to keep their own and social demons at bay.

In *Tales of Crazy John*, released in 1975, Winans writes about a character named Crazy John, a local poet who symbolically embodies the “outsider poet”—along with such writers as Bob Kaufman, Jack Micheline, Bukowski, Kenneth Patchen, and d. a. levy—whose visionary genius lands him outside the mainstream, leading him to being labeled crazy by society at large. He is the character whose laugh “never failed to frighten the establishment” (“crazy john was a local poet”); who couldn’t handle a simple job; who “invented his own cloud” (“crazy john liked to dance”); the guy who “could be seen/ dancing a raindance only/ flowers understood” (“crazy john liked to dance”). Doctors had him committed, then “with unbelieving eyes [watched] him/ create butterflies/ from building blocks/ then turn into a frog/ forced to devour his creation/ in order to survive” (“they locked crazy john up”). Crazy John represents those poets, jazz musicians, and artists who have inspired Winans, helped him to believe in what he is doing, helped him to keep his own sanity.

The influence of Li Po can be seen in some of the pieces taken from later collections—haikus and shorter imagistic poems such as “Rain Poem” from 2006’s *The World’s Last Rodeo*. In “Li Po on my Mind,” from *Marking Time* (2008), the poet expresses a kinship with this Chinese poet when he concludes by saying, “I mark time/ like Li Po/ mixing words with/ wine.”

In this volume, one will also find the ghosts of women whom Winans has loved, as well as tributes to poets and jazz musicians/friends who have passed on. Tribute is paid to them in his very moving poem, “I Kiss the Feet of Angels” (from the 2001 volume by the same name). Among the poets mentioned (in this poem and elsewhere) are Bob Kaufman, who took a Buddhist vow of silence for ten years after Kennedy was shot; d. a. levy, who knew that you can’t beat the system and was killed trying; Charles Bukowski, who twenty days before his death from leukemia sent a poem to *Wormwood Review*—“perhaps a wry smile /on his face/ for the doctor/ and a hand on the ass/ of the nurse,” a man who played “out the game to the end/ like only the old man/ was capable of doing” (“Poem for the Old Man”); Jack Micheline, “[a] shaman a con man/ a vagabond poet...[h]is poems racing across the/ Streets of America/ Pure innocence/ Pure genius...Drunk on the/ Pollen of life” (“For Jack Micheline”); and Kell Robertson, who wandered around the country with his guitar, “Nearly 66/ Hard as the highway...Still scrapping/ Like the rest of us/ For whatever/ time is left” (“For Kell”).

These people are not dead for Winans; they continue to inspire and motivate him. He concludes “I Kiss the Feet of Angels” with the following lines:

I hear the drums

I feel the beat

I kiss the feet

of angels.

Early in his life, Winans wrote, "america is no place for/ a poet to grow old in" ("40th Birthday"). The younger poet, who in the 1970s watched old men eat their last meals, is himself now in his seventies. But his age hasn't depleted his focus, his intensity and anger, his determination to stay true to his own values. So, go out and get this book. Walk with A.D. Winans down those same streets. Cross one decade into the next; leave one century behind, begin a new one. Take a journey you'll never forget.