

Drowning Like Li Po in a River of Red Wine
Selected Poems 1970-2010 by A.D. Winans

Reviewed by Sharon Ramirez

San Francisco poet A.D. Winans is best known for his poetry about the invisible amongst us; he speaks for those who have no voice of their own, for the downtrodden abused by society and its uncaring institutions. His poems come from the heart, not from some workshop assignment that cranks out the stale academic poetry he so detests.

This limited edition of his latest book is a comprehensive selection that includes poems from his early *Carmel Clowns* and some of his outrageously entertaining *Crazy John* poems.

I've been an A.D. Winans admirer since I first met him at a poetry reading in the early seventies in San Francisco. I liked the emotion in his voice, that slight tremble that gave authenticity to his plainspoken words. Here was a real poet, I thought; not one of those hip, slick, cool academics trying to impress female students. A.D. is a poet of his convictions who wants justice for the people. We're lucky he's stuck around this long and is still feeding our souls.

A treat for those of us lucky enough to own a copy of this limited edition collection is an introduction by the author himself. He calls it "A.D. Winans on A.D. Winans." As we would expect from his poetry, he writes out of a sense of loneliness, sadness, and anger. He tributes the love and humor in his poems to the late Bob Kaufman. A.D. states that he wants to be remembered as a poet of the people, and he considers his poems as the wife and children he never had. His poetry and prose have appeared in over 1,000 magazines and articles. In addition, he published *The Second Coming Magazine and Press* for 17 years.

Part of his charm as a poet of the people is his easy use of ordinary spoken language. His words give us commonplace images that can be appreciated by all, especially city dwellers. He shows us

"one yellow-stained wash basin" and "empty shoes/sitting under the bed" and "single light bulb rooms sealed/Like tombs." And then there's the shocking image of a Panamanian hooker: "Naked legs spread open/Labia lobster red." Winans's stark images stay with us.

A.D.'s disdain for pseudo-intellectual poets, as opposed to his respect for blue collar poets, comes through in his condemning lines in "Coffee Gallery Blues." He writes:

I heard one of them say
poetry isn't for the masses
it's been raining intellectual
snobs all day

Yuppies don't fare any better. In "How to Spot a Yuppie" we read: "they look like they want something/and are willing to kill/to get it."

It's interesting to see the poet and his poetry mature over a forty-year span, during which time the poet continues to write about the agony of seeking love and of aging in existential loneliness. As an old soul suffering the angst of a godless universe, Winans gives us tender irony in "Trying to Let Go":

Tied to death's umbilical cord
That refuses to let me go
Knotting itself like a noose
Around my neck
Too tight for comfort
Not loose enough
To set me free

He gives us more angst when he writes in "City Poet" that

You walk her streets a hungry vampire
Lapping up your own blood
On nights when blood transfusions
Are not enough.

The smell of death lingers in yet another startling image: "Death crouched low/Like a sprinter waiting the/Starter's gun."

A.D.'s poem "The Old Italians of Aquatic Park" holds much rich imagery, with the refrain, "The old men of Aquatic Park," echoing the title, while lending a sense of timelessness to their bocce ball

games. A.D. writes "lady death striking them down/like bowling pins." And from the same poem:

the bocce ball rolls slowly
along the grass
coming to rest like a hearse
parked next to an open grave

A.D. has an uncanny ability to summon metaphors that work so well in context. In "Old Joe" he conjures up Vietnam when he writes "nightmares that whirl inside/His head like helicopter blades." He ends with: "Left tired withered/Like an unattended/Kansas grain field," leaving no doubt that Joe was a Kansas farm boy before Vietnam. And now he's a homeless drunk in the big city.

A.D.'s range of theme is broad; there's the suffering of others caused by an uncaring universe, the commercial poets whom he sees as sellouts with "ideas as sterile as surgical gauze" and there's the love-seeking, lyrical A.D., who writes of "The falling away of our clothes" and "inside the heart where/all language stops"

One of my favorites:

a love affair so fragile
it was like trying to thread a needle
in the teeth of a storm

A.D. tells us in his "40th Birthday" poem that "america is no place for/a poet to grow old in." In 2006 he writes, when he was 70, that "Having escaped the nursing home/Is a small victory in itself."

Because of A.D.'s intensity it might be easy to overlook his wry humor. In his "Dick Tracy" poem, he writes about a transvestite dressed as a cowgirl taking Tracy home:

In the morning when
Dick Tracy wakes up
He isn't sure which side
Of the law he's on

Here's a favorite of mine about a dog's dream:

a fire hydrant

a buried bone
Snoopy defeating the
Red Baron
Over the skies of Paris

Several of the selected poems honor dead poets, including Bukowski, Patchen, and Micheline, all of whom he admires. Of Micheline he writes:

Spinning words that
Hung in mid-air
Like a humming bird
Drunk on the
Pollen of life

The poet struggles against the tides of time throughout this dynamic selection of poems. He gains comfort, not from nature, but from his beloved city streets and its denizens. "For Kell" from his 1997 collection, A.D. promises us:

Still fighting
Still scrapping
Like the rest of us
For whatever time
Is left

Long may this poet live. No one else can replace the *genius loci* of the San Francisco beat.