

The ties that bind us: five new books by American poets

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Main content

Article Preview :

Another Creature, by Pamela Gemin. University of Arkansas Press, 100 pp., \$16.

Open Interval, by Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. University of Pittsburgh Press, 96 pp., \$14.95.

Ka-Ching, by Denise Duhamel. University of Pittsburgh Press, 96 pp., \$14.95.

Elephants & Butterflies, by Alan Michael Parker. BOA Editions, 92 pp., \$16.

Let Me Open You a Swan, by Deborah Bogen. Elixir Press, 96 pp., \$17.

As I sifted through books this summer, thinking about what I might like to review, I noticed that I tend to lay aside volumes by poets I know, even if only tangentially. It's always been my habit, and one I thought--still think for the most part--reviewers ought to have. At some point, however, I looked back to that pile of rejects and considered how unfortunate it is that books by one's friends, associates, colleagues, or acquaintances feel out of bounds--or at least have felt so to me--because the practice cuts out a great many books for any reviewer. It's an inevitable problem of the contemporary poetry world, resulting from its small size; we go to the same conferences, attend the same schools, teach in the same programs. It's almost impossible to pick up a handful of new books and not find someone I know.

Does this familiarity, I wondered, mean that reviewing such acquaintances can't be fair, or worse, that good books can't be reviewed because positive words will be construed as back-scratching or favoritism? I don't have a complete answer for these questions, but I finally decided that I would take on a batch of books to all of whose authors I have had some kind of personal connection. Perhaps I will reveal biases of which I myself am unaware, but I hope that the poems will bear out what I say and help me prove to myself that creative and critical communities need not always be mutually exclusive.

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Pamela Gemin and I went to Vermont College at the same time. I liked her poems then and I like them now. Her latest collection, *Another Creature*, is no exception. It focuses on American girlhood of the Boomer era, a historical period in which Gemin has had an interest for a long time. Many poets, myself included, have written loosely autobiographical poems on this subject over the last few decades, but the topic is far from exhausted. Unfortunately, many of the poems in this four-part collection, while carefully crafted and symmetrically presented in neat stanzaic forms, introduce potentially dramatic events on which the poems fail to deliver.

The first poem, "Sweet Engine," is one of the best in the book, though it seems to make use of Mark Doty's signature combination of spirituality and sexuality in his book *Sweet Machine* (as well as his title) without ever acknowledging the debt. Despite that, the poem begins wonderfully: "God for the furnace, god for the fire, god / for the engine of love, where are you now?" This lyric petition quickly gives way to an anecdotal memory. As a...

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