

Poets artfully tackle aging, mortality

Can you recall the smells of places where you grew up? I remember the fragrance of roasted peanuts whenever my family drove past the old Sunny Jim plant in Seattle and — less fondly — I remember Tacoma's once-famous "Aroma." Nowadays, many Northwest neighborhoods have a distinctive olfactory signature, thanks to a resident brewery or roastery or bakery.

This prompts me to wonder about Tillamook, which has its longstanding dairy, timber and fishing industries, of course, but I wonder if more recently there might not be a whiff of something else in the air — is there a particular fragrance linked to poetry?

MoonPath Press, which relocated to Tillamook just a couple of years ago, has been pursuing such an active publishing schedule that it's charming to think there might be a subtle poetic redolence in Tillamook's evening breeze.

This week's column is devoted to two new volumes from MoonPath Press that feature the work of two older female poets. Each is assessing — with astonishment, rue, panic and occasional ecstasy — what it has taken to arrive at this point in her life, and what it means to be an elder.

Tacoma poet Connie K. Walle's collection, "What's Left," runs a gamut of emotions. Her "For the Love of Sunday" piece, for example, describes a nap in which she's covered by "a blanket of poetry books."

"Would my children



guess / by the smile on my lips, / I died from an orgasm of words?" she wonders.

But on the opposing page, the poem "Myth" takes a less rosy view, describing a withering Cinderella, "dry and brittle, / pressed between the pages / of time."

Walle contends with bittersweet memories and with faltering memory, with the specter of loneliness and the prospect of death. She writes about regret and forgiveness and what it takes to face loss. This is potent work.

Likewise, the poetry of Sequim poet and nurse practitioner Risa Denenberg.

As collected in her new book, "slight faith," Denenberg's poems offer fragments — sometimes they're more like shards — of life's twists and turns.

Her lines can be as reductive as "a birth, a chipped / tooth, an affair, a custody war, a death by fire, / a vial of ash."

But as a mother, a lesbian and a health care worker, as well as a poet, Denenberg also has keenly honed insights into "tapped-out psyches" and "our own sacred essence." She plumbs passion and contradiction. She considers unflinchingly the cruel fallout of intolerance.

And on occasion, she displays a magnificence of craft that outshines the poem it resides in. Take her piece "Rain," which may be a soliloquy on longing and loneliness, but it is that poem's succinct third verse that asserts a timeless, stand-alone perfection: "I dream in haiku / as it taps at my window / in tart syllables."

Sometimes exultant, sometimes bruising, both "slight faith" and "What's Left" offer words of candor and courage.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



COURTESY MOONPATH PRESS
Author Connie K. Walle.



COURTESY MOONPATH PRESS
Author Risa Denenberg.

"What's Left"
Connie K. Walle
MoonPath Press
100 pp
\$15

"slight faith"
Risa Denenberg
MoonPath Press
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\$15

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