

## BECOMING OTHERS

by Jerry Craven

(Virtual Artists Collective, 2010. 113 pages. \$15.00. ISBN 13: 9780981989822)

A review by Laurence A. Musgrove

Subtitled “dramatic monologues and soliloquies,” Jerry Craven’s *Becoming Others* is an extended poetic exercise in empathy, an attempt by the poet to get into the mind and heart and voice of his subjects and to perform those subjects in such a way and upon such a stage so that we might also understand and touch and hear them. And because Craven’s experience with these subjects is richly personal, as well as studied, this attempt also provides us with a varied and broad ranging aesthetic experience.

The more than eighty poems in this collection, some previously published in this journal, circulate around a number of themes, particularly the fragility of life (human life most of all) in beautiful and dangerous landscapes. Most explicitly stated in “The Lands Within,” Craven writes with chiasmus, “From the inward landscapes flow / passions of so many selves; / from remembered passions flow / the landscapes, / green and gray and brown” (26).

This theme is evident in poems that explore failed relationships and families, accidental death, and suicide. In “Cypress Shadows,” a young boy dives off a bridge “to find with splintered / bone an oak tree log floating black / in asphalt waters” (28). In “Divorce Court,” the speaker is “caught / in this loss forever, mourning not a marriage / gone so much as the loss of the dream of forever” (102). The temporal twilight of life and love and the permanent glare of danger and loss are played out again and again in poem after poem.

These tragedies are set in landscapes exquisitely portrayed to partner

those tragedies, Asia to Latin America and the Sahara, the prairies of West Texas and the dunes of the Gulf Coast, Europe and the Middle East. In “Narcissus Old,” the speaker examines himself in a pool while “Larks cry among autumn grasses, / quails whisper sharp and quick, crickets / ratchet in the meadow chorus” (39). And in “Unwelcome Guests,” after seed is spread for winter birds, “jay and catclaw death” appear with unforeseen results: “feathers floating, ripped from life, / some bunched to bones of feathered flesh / and malachite matted green / and dead along the feeder fence / where cardinals died / in winter red” (67).

Obvious in these excerpts is the poet’s exquisite skill in language: “asphalt waters,” “cricket ratchet,” and “catclaw death.” Add to this list a description of an intercultural marriage in “The Chinese Cemetery above Malacca”: “Married to the Orient, might she meld the killer / and the killed into ancestors of my children’s children? / Will she womb mix Confucius and Christ” (11). And also in the sonnet “Speak Me No Forever”: “stop my ears / to promises of performed flowers yet unbloomed” (6).

Yes, there are sonnets and near sonnets here, including “Spring in Palo Duro Canyon,” “Painted Ground,” and “I Whisper Love Love.” Still, most poems are extended first-person narratives of a page or two, a chorus of voices, and some repeating, as in the on again / off again sequence of the missionary and his daughter, as well as the reoccurring Hartley poems.

Overall, Craven’s latest collection of poems presents a crowd of souls reaching for love and healing or simply overwhelmed by loss and regret. Not all is failure though; the landscapes, beautiful and distant, inward and outward, can be counted upon again and again.