

***Our House Was on Fire***  
**by Laura Van Prooyen**

Reviewed by Philip M. Arevalo

Laura Van Prooyen's collection of poems in *Our House Was on Fire*, challenges the reader to recognize that as a warring world burns, so do protected homes. All battles spill blood as much as any "cat with a mouse/lodged firmly in the mouth." Van Prooyen documents this domestic war and the inevitability of death "because she wants to see how it looks."



"Migration" sets the stage by calling upon the muses: "Listen, then. Quiet as a dream. As the moment / she held her breath to see the man who touched her." Here in this dream (or perhaps the past), the speaker is endowed with a heart that is "a ruby, a painted / rose-breast, a crest, a blood-red crown." The writer acknowledges, "to put her plume in his hand was never to go back." Any romantic ideas about exploring the self through the other are exorcised. From this point on only her blood can reach the deepest truths.

What the speaker means by "her own blood" is made clear in "This Child." In eighteen single-spaced, minimally syllabled lines, the child shares a dream with her mother: "She had been / in the kitchen gathering / knives. She / was planning to cut / and eat me." While this child's subconscious terrifies, the truth is that this mother and child share the knowledge of "where the knives are." The reader does not for one minute believe a lethal tension exists between mother and daughter; however, one senses that both would cut to get to the truth.

Youthful indiscretions and lovers momentarily distract a mother's instinct to protect. "Happiness" is an ironic conversation, over cocktails perhaps: "Once I wore / an impossible dress to a party and drank so much / I woke with a mysterious bruise," and another time "hopped on the back of some guy's bike never thinking / he could drive me to the cornfield / and leave me there." Van Prooyen's lines flow with lyrical intoxication at the happiness of independence. "One Particular Peach" sensually plays with "the thought of juice that dripped / from my chin into the mouthpiece / while I bit down to the pit. You moaned and / your breathing got quick." "Repair" binds lovers' vows: "But you never look better / than when you're undoing someone's mistake— / a hammer in your hand, the next nail in your mouth." Yet, these fun, romantic affairs can't compare to the truth imposed by nature's indifference.

Van Prooyen is never more poignant and artful than when she bares truths never sought, as in "On the Discovery Channel." Here the "daughter understands / her illness is forever" as they "watch caribou migrating / over the arctic plain." The daughter then "cries / about the stupid, stupid mothers / as cows swim across the river, / the current washing / the weakest calves away." The swiftness of these images is heart-wrenching, because they are honest, vulnerable, simple, and courageous.

"In the Gallery" offers an artistic introspection in which "My daughter sits by the life-sized nudes." The mother interprets her daughter's juxtaposition to the art: "she doesn't know / I brace for loss, though / I suspect / she knows her body fails." The mother later reviews the daughter's self-portrait, "a pack of bees in swarm about / a butterfly and its girl." The gallery's austere backdrop that draws the viewer's eye to focus on the nature of each artistic expression also drives the mother's emotional epiphany as she examines her daughter's own fragile composition. Ultimately, she discovers in her daughter's defiant drawing a reality in which nature's creatures co-exist in an ephemeral moment as infinite as any masterpiece.

***A Crown for Gumecindo***  
**by Laurie Ann Guerrero**

Reviewed by Jane Focht-Hansen

The fifteen sonnets in Laurie Ann Guerrero's *A Crown for Gumecindo* clearly are a labor of love, wrought by grief, longing, and memory, a testament to the healing power of writing and of love.



Guerrero invigorates the form by twenty-first century tongue: the very language strikingly uninhibited by the demanding and disciplined practice of sonnetry. Last lines become first lines, circularly bridging one poem to the next, culminating in a crown of love, remembrance, and reincarnation, a reinvention of a deep, abiding love.

The book itself is a new take on the broadside, its traditional yet expanded elegance a tribute to the written word and published image in a world of cyber images and texts. A multi-sensory read, a domain where word, image, and potent memory dwell, Guerrero's powerful *sonnetta*-word songs and Macero Montoya's reflective paintings take readers on a heroic journey of love and loss, which is nonetheless a celebration of a pragmatic, driven, yet mythic soul whose identity, like the collection of sonnets, is linked past to present through tradition, love, blood, and bone.

Dream-like dialogue between the speaker and Gumecindo provides a meditative aside, recalling the dread and anger of loss, the tensile irony of strangely apropos coincidence, akin to the surreal memory humans grapple with in our quest to preserve a beloved's life when wrenching details and our memories begin to fade.

Voice deeply resonant of pain, pride, anger, love, and finally a queasy acceptance, each line reminds us of the suffering we endure as we struggle beyond transitions to remain humanly connected to our most intimate teachers, our elders.

In preserving and sharing Gumecindo Martínez Guerrero with us, the poet calls upon readers to find themselves and their best beloveds in a not simply functional but also beautifully universal family tree, perfectly imperfect—grandfathers, granddaughters, patriarchs, matriarchs, ancestors all, heroes whose lives of determination and resolute passion teach us, inspiring us to use our talents and voices to achieve more than we know possible.

Read Guerrero's words to know Gumecindo for yourself.

