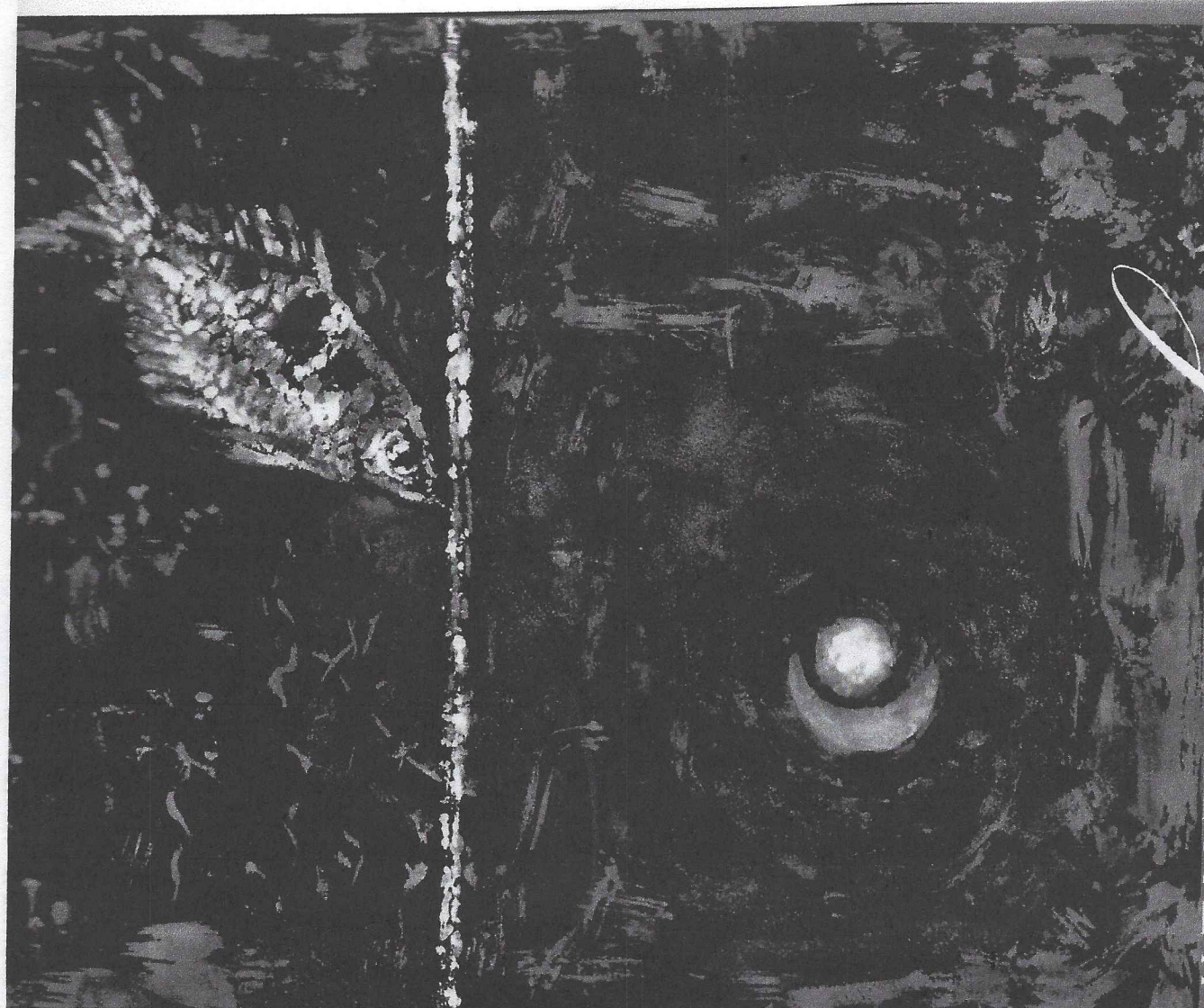


Lily Poetry Review
ISSUE 5 WINTER 2021

Lily

POETRY REVIEW

Issue 5 Winter 2021



BROOK J SADLER, PH. D.

**Review: Making Landfall with *Shoreless*
by Enid Shomer**

Persea Books, 2020 (\$15.95)

It is a pleasure to read Enid Shomer's most recent book of poems, *Shoreless*, winner of the 2019 Lexi Rudnitsky Editor's Choice Award. Here is a mature poet who has something to say and who understands the power of form. This is not to say that her poems are without feeling—far from it—but the evocation and representation of emotion in Shomer's poems does not preclude the deeper and more essential work of generating solid meaning or grasping truths whose application extends beyond the individual poet's experience or zone of identity. (The book opens with two epigraphs that orient us to the poet's truth-seeking efforts; both speak to truth as an overwhelming force.)

The first poem, "Rara Omnia," communicates feelings of loss, as Shomer laments the diminishment of sea life as a result of "oil spills and red tides." However, the feeling of loss is not itself the poem's *raison d'être*. And though it opens in the first-person singular—"If there's life after death, it isn't the body/I'd want"—it positions the poem's speaker as a witness not simply of her own feeling but of the beauty of the natural world, which is being ravaged and destroyed. What she wants is to participate in creating a record of the beloved sea creatures who "spend/ themselves in extravagant numbers." What she wants after death is "to come back as pure voice," which is to say, her ambition is that her poems will continue to speak after she herself is gone. This is precisely the ambition of any true artist; it also reflects the urgency of an older poet for whom it is not the construction of an identity that is at stake, but the loss of the world. The ambition to make a record of the world is not the ego-centric project of stamping one's place in it, but the desire to share one's love of it—here, a love of sea life that is simultaneously a love of language. The inventory of creatures includes "the leathery leis of the lightning whelk,/the castanets of conchs with dozens of baby/gastropods inside each disk of salty milk." The poet's musical language, as well as the musical metaphor of "castanets," not only records the creatures, but generates a sonic register that mimics their visual aspect.

The poet's encounter with the world becomes indistinguishable from the world, as language is a world-making device. The poem is presented in tercets strung together with rhymes and near rhymes, never forced, but always deliberate. To take a few examples: turtles/hurtled, surf/scarf, wrack/polychete/back. The formal constraints are no gimmick. The tercets and rhymes provide pacing that lends authority to the poet's voice; the reader feels guided rather than abandoned.

Several poems in Shomer's collection document the natural world—birds, beaches, trees, weeds, and water. Even without direct mention of climate change or environmental degradation, the essential metaphorical power of the natural in these poems attests to its value. Shomer's poems display how important it is to our understanding of the human condition to be able to encounter the natural. The healing value of the natural world consists not just in the warmth of the sun or the beauty of flowers, but in the transformation of ourselves that occurs when we recognize our own naturalness. Shomer's recognition, enacted through poetic language, is a gift of translation. In "Survival in the Thirteenth Year," she reflects on the experience of breast cancer. Pain and anxiety are projected into the description of "a branch of nickernut/its ferocious spiked pods/and thorny canes reminders/that life can be vicious."

The poet is also direct: "Nature feels like a friendship/the world offers. Miraculous/we are all here: the wildflowers/in their magical diversity,/me abiding like a wind-stunted/tree." What I find especially valuable in lines like these is the willingness to make an assertion rather than rely upon a gesture or evasive associations. The poetic craft is undeniable—rhyme, image, simile—but the poet is also saying something definite and discernible.

At the center of the book, a long poem, "Pausing on a Hillside in Anatolia," provides one of the most beautiful paucans to sound that I have seen in recent poetry. I'd buy the book just to study this one poem's extraordinarily graceful evocation of sounds. But, here, too, Shomer does not disappoint by leaving the reader merely to *listen* to more than one-hundred lines of image-rich, sonically gorgeous, carefully wrought stanzas. Again, she has something to say. Near the poem's close, she asks, "Well I have lived in a punishing wind//for years now, but how many bells/could I summon?" The bells have become a symbol of the

poet's ability to locate and relay truth in words. The initial answer shows how large her scope is: "Never enough for the century's/slaughter." What begins with personal observation and memory, concludes with a commentary on the power of language to bear witness to more than individual experience. If poets forfeit these larger possibilities—the capacity of poetry to speak outside of our identity zones—poetry will collapse into the cacophony of moral relativism or a multi-vocal, but impotent subjectivism.

Shomer's "Villanelle for My Two Spines" is an excellent example of the way that form can enact and enhance a poem's meaning, inviting the reader to participate in the order created by form. Here, the titular two spines are the literal "chain of bones," which has caused tremendous pain, and the "titanium disks" that the surgeon has implanted, which form a "scaffolding" to support the bones. But the villanelle itself is another scaffolding, another "cage," that contains the poet's pain, making it into a "bearable ache." The same lines and images divorced from the demands of the villanelle as a form would be comparatively limp. Form is constitutive of meaning, which exceeds emotional expressiveness.

In his well-known and, ironically, often-studied poem, "Introduction to Poetry," Billy Collins amusingly parodies students' attempts to "culture a confession" out of a poem. Collins' evident complaint is that a poem is not made in order to be analyzed, not written in order to make a point. The poem need not have anything to confess, no ultimate secret to reveal. And applying more pressure to the analysis of a poem will not necessarily give the reader greater satisfaction with it. I concur. Yet, we can forego the reduction of poems to a point without forsaking the poet's ability to say something definite and meaningful. We can embrace a poem's formal structure as a guide to meaning without losing the poet's individuality or feeling and without limiting its imaginative reach. As with other arts, the ability to discern at least some of the disciplinary techniques that constitute the specific form of the art—distinguishing poetry from prose, for example—will augment the reader's enjoyment. Shomer's poems are a pleasure to read because of what they have to say about mortality, aging, erotic love, illness, family,

and the kinship of poets (Keats and Shelley make special appearances), among other things. And the saying of these things is inseparable from her embrace of the formal elements of craft. I would encourage everyone to write about what they feel and who they are. But I would have publishers spend more time with poets like Shomer who have sounded the deeper resources of substance and form.