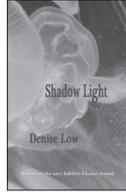


An Anywhere Road for Anybody Anyhow

By Julia Older

Book Review:

Shadow Light, by Denise Low,
Red Mountain Press, 2018.



What appears to be a prenatal sonogram on the cover of *Shadow Light* seems a fitting takeoff for Denise Low's cross-country road trip from the Florida Keys to Pacific Cove, California. However, as with many of these poems, first impressions morph into curious side lights. The floating birth nimbus in fact is a laboratory photomicrograph of an algal particle (red tide killer) from the Sarasota, Florida, Mote Aquarium—a speck with the potential growth power of annihilating the coastal ocean. This sort of Merlinesque wizardry runs deep through her poems as well.

With the skill of Kerouac on his “Anywhere Road,” the poet shape-shifts into a sight-seer parsing American culture, hangs out with real and virtual family-friends, and zips into telluric sacred spaces you won't find on your GPS.

The ignition on Low's micro-macrocosmic sensory motor starts with a triplet of poems. “Eyes,” a rhapsodic ode to sight and sound, segues to “Isaac Newton's Opticks: Definitions,” a strange dichotomy between erudite optical laws and childhood piano lessons. The third poem, “Optics,” drops us into a mystical realm of Bigfoot, little people, an *angel*, and ghostly mist emanating from a dying man. While her sister's violin weeps, a friend teaches the poet,

to glance oblique at the sun.
In Cherokee *ka-tv-gv*.

It's four-trails
fire-brand
my eyes

Readers might consider steering clear of this blinding heliology lesson.

Low's journey is multistoried, from caverns and sea-level desert and plains to tree-level birds and astronomical visions. Her world is analogous to that of the Australian aboriginal "walk-about," who for millennia has memorized the stones, trees, subterranean cave paintings, and constellations of his people.

And indeed, her native fifth-generation Kansan of British Isles, Gereman Delaware (Lenape/Munsee) and other heritages drives our expedition.

I must admit that I share a familiarity with the sites (and concepts) she visits in *Shadow Light*; but I'm confident that if you leave without reservations, Low's incantations, images, wanderings and wonderings have the ability to reach and teach you.

Readers have the optional advantage of online visuals such as the burial mound in the poem "Chota Overhill Town," or a virtual tour of Cahokia Mound City, Illinois, which supported 20,000 native Miami from ca 1000–1300 A.D.

Flash points of American culture sizzle and spark through the topography. You won't be staying at Motel 8, but might discover the fortune-telling, popular '60s toy 8 Ball in "Coastal Winter Abstract,"

My cold front narrative laps forward,
to eight ball answers: "Chancy," "Hazy."

With me sit Dorothy of Oz and Wizard sun.

*

Or you might consult a Mayan "Night Calendar," leading you to the equivalent of Dante's *Inferno*:

In Mayan creation Opossum travels nights
below ground, red paint in her paws.

Rouge hands tip the world at dawn
spin it another round before nightfall
before descent into Xibalba.

Apropos, I often dance with a Mayan-Mexican teacher who asks her class to "think six directions." We not only travel to the

four corners of the studio but extend our feet underground to the center of the earth and stretch our upper body skyward. Denise Low's cardinal-cosmological NS-EW-UPDOWN compass takes us far afield—yet never leaves us behind.

In another trio of poems, she welcomes us into her memory house—starting with “Ceilings,” “Balconies,” and “Doors.” Puzzle poems such as “New Bridge Is Old” (*Pont Neuf*, France) effortlessly transition to intuitive nature poems “White Dear Again” and “Blue Birds at the River.” The moonlit trail of full-grown white birch planted as saplings by native ancestors beckons us down a naturally cleared, grassy path of “Trail Marker Trees.”

Backing up. Puzzle poems require *thought leaps* from one image or concept to another. Note taking, shorthand, and lists aren't poems. But Paul Klee type abstract surreal imagery and thoughts floating through our minds may be caught. And this type of spatial acuity works if readers aren't required to ride a pogo stick to catch the “Aha!” moment. Denise Low nets a boatload of *ellipses* in *Shadow Light*. One of my favorites is the first stanza of “Disappearing Act”:

Jackalope postcards vanish from truck stops one winter.
Rotating racks display rows of empty.

Some of Low's shorter poems, “Pacific Bay” and “In Utero” (a 25-word gem), bridge me to the tensile strength of Lorine Niedecker's *Paeon to Place* and her elemental life on Black Hawk Island at Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.

The overall movement of these poems by Low is carefully composed, so that they ebb and flow as we travel from place to place. For example, after meeting a “Satanta, Kansas,” Kiowa fighter and “Cheyenne Country” woman warrior Moki (“who shot a soldier before he raped her”), we bite the dust and cruise through a lyrical cycle of cranes, cardinals, curlew, tree swallows, and gulls. This winged respite seems small consolation for the bold, bloody story-poems that follow.

The poet's Delaware River Lenape ancestors gather, as we near our final destination. “Forebears at Shackamaxon,” sparked

by Hicks' "The Peaceable Kingdom" painting, honors the bucolic scene in which settlers and cattle look on, as Quaker William Penn signs a peace treaty with "men with shaved heads, plume hairlocks, tattooed thighs." "Matoaka: A Portrait" describes the 1616 etching reproduced in *Shadow Light* of Powhatan's daughter who was raped and kidnapped to Virginia.

Denise Low has written a lifetime of books (nonfiction, poetry, memoir). Three of them, including *New and Selected Poems* (1999), were printed by Penthe Press at the University of Kansas. This third collection, from Red Mountain Press in Santa Fe, won the Editors Prize.

Here I must bring up a few quibbles. The body of *Shadow Light* retains the poet's spatial vision. But the front and back matter seem like afterthoughts. Contents file single-space down the page ho-hum as a shopping list. And Italian quotes in the title poem, "Shadow Light," eluded me until I discovered Notes at the back. Then, the title had been transposed into "Light Shadow." Perhaps in future editions, a Foreword would help readers like me to absorb the notes with more understanding and less interruption.

This said, I confess the poems hanging on lines, laws, fragments and labels from Dante, Newton, Wm Stafford, Wm Carlos Williams, and the Field Museum struck me as academic exercises. Personally, I would rather leap into "Sky Over Iowa":

—thunderbirds lapping seas of stratus—
certainties I can petition for mercy.

The *New Poets of Native Nations* anthology edited by Heid E. Erdrich and published by Graywolf Press (2018), includes 20 poets who published their first books after 2000. If Graywolf Press publishes a sequel, I hope it will include overlooked poets like Denise Low, who have devoted their lives to bringing native nation voices, old and new, forward. Her unique voice and vision deserve a larger platform, especially now when indigenous leaders are at the forefront of social, political, and environmental change.