

Book Reviews *from The Institute for Poetic Medicine*

Healing Through Poetry: Recommended Books for Personal and Professional Use

It is my intention in these new IPM website pages to highlight books that would otherwise be difficult for a nationwide audience to find or know about. The featured books are, of course, a very small sample of the important and valuable work that is out there.

Yet for those who are in hospice work, for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, for anyone who would like to be inspired by a blend of poem and photograph, the first three books we are presenting can meet your need and interest.

I want to thank Carol Katz for contributing such fine work in writing these book reviews. Carol has taken considerable time to explore and find the healing elements within these books. Her reviews are not focused on critical evaluations. She shares liberally from the books themselves. She welcomes you, the reader, to sense and feel how this book could be of use to you personally and professionally.

My appreciations also go to Rachel McKay for organizing this material.

John Fox, CPT
The Institute for Poetic Medicine

Writing poetry is contagious writes Rachel Naomi Remen in her introduction to *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*. If we find ourselves alone and longing for words to infect us, there are always books to turn to for inspiration. In addition to providing friendship, books also teach us. We learn new ways to work with the healing power of poetry through the stories of and reflections on loss and healing in a great variety of people and communities. These stories offer us a broader perspective as well as deepen our abilities for listening. In this spirit IPM offers an addition to the poetic medicine bag, this section of book reviews.

Rachel McKay

About the Reviewer, Carol Katz

We are pleased to inaugurate this section with a trio of reviews written by IPM volunteer, Carol Katz. A native of Montreal, Quebec, Carol lives there with her husband of 42 years. She works and creates through many artistic expressions including singing, dancing, painting, and writing. During her professional career in the field of learning disabilities, one of her four careers, she wrote book reviews for prestigious journals. Now semi-retired, Carol is an active participant in the Creative Social Center, a senior center in Montreal. A number of her works were published in an anthology of the works of the center's Creative Writing Class.



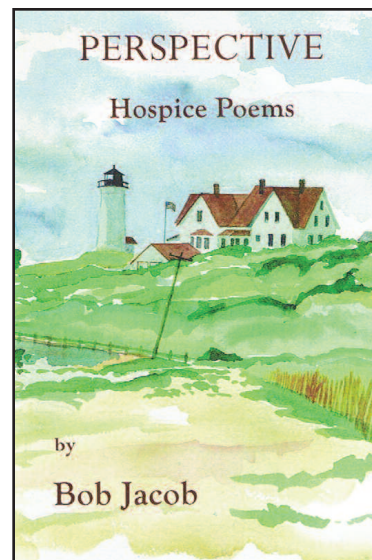
Carol started writing poetry nine years ago and loves the freedom that writing poetry and stories affords. She became involved with IPM through a chance remark from her creative writing teacher, which led her to *Finding What You Didn't Lose*, John Fox's first book. Then after finding the IPM website and John's second book, *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*, Carol was hooked. Inspired, she sent John one of her poems. Their subsequent correspondence led to these book reviews. Carol volunteered to write them as a way to further her knowledge, and ours, of poetic medicine.

Reviews by Carol Katz

Perspective: Hospice Poems

Jacob, Bob. ***Perspectives: Hospice Poems***.
Simsbury, Connecticut: Antrim House, 2008.

Bob Jacob was born in Brooklyn, New York. He developed a love of poetry from his father who wrote poems about family love. In the 1980s, Bob and his wife, Betty, invited poets to stay at their Massachusetts inn and also ran a poetry reading series featuring many well-known poets. In the mid-1990s, Bob and Betty moved to Connecticut. There he founded VERSEtality BOOKS, selling signed copies of famous poets' books and giving most of the profits to the poets. Bob is a poet who started writing 32 years ago.



In the 1990s he began reading poetry to cancer support groups, and today he continues volunteering his time at the Connecticut Hospice Hospital in Brantford and other hospitals. He also visits homebound patients. He composes his poems after hearing patients' stories. These poems are included in *Perspectives*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. He is donating the proceeds of this book to the Connecticut Hospice. Noteworthy to mention is that Bob Jacob has created an index of the poems that he sends on a regular basis to people who request them. Quite a service! He makes his large collection available to churches, chaplains, and to cancer patients.

An impressive landscape painting of the Connecticut Hospice on the cover invites us to open this book. What we find inside is a unique and gratifying experience. The honesty and warmth of these poems conveys the author's compassion for the patients in palliative care. He even encourages these people to create and share their own poems, giving them a chance to live out their last days with joy and satisfaction. For example:

*Catherine lies quietly
a former grade school teacher
with a beautiful smile,
dark, brown eyes, soft voice.
She sighs after each poem,
then recites some back to me. (p. 23)*

Although the book is written from a Christian point of view, there is a universal message of faith in a higher power whether it is Jesus, or the God of other religions. The words of John Fox in Jacob's poem, *Cradled Love*, express this universality:

*The greatest current of love
rushes forward in the choice
to make a cradle of the body. (p. 49)*

Quotes throughout the book from other poets and writers epitomize its poignant message of love: *We are each of us angels with only one wing. And we can only fly embracing each other.* – Luciano De Crescenzo (p. 32)

The author's flair for treating hospice patients as though they were healthy is a testament to his own "joie de vivre." He values people who are struggling with terminal illness. They teach him life lessons. Although dying is a depressing topic, the people he reads to are far from gloomy. In fact, we have some good, honest laughs through his poems. *Special Lady* is about a woman of 89 who seems at ease with death and looks forward to seeing family and friends who died before her. She says:

*"I hope I have a good seat,"
implying heaven is a theatre
with preferred seating for those
waiting to greet newcomers. (p. 82)*

And, of course, we laugh at Jacob's famous lines that are quoted in some of the other poems:

*"If a man speaks in the forest and there's no woman to hear him, is he still wrong?"
She answers with an emphatic "YES." (p. 83).*

The poem that stands out for me is: *IDT Meeting*. This poem demonstrates Bob's flair for personalizing the hospice experience. It starts with:

*Picture yourself surrounded
by people who care about you.
Some you know, some you don't.*

*Picture them discussing you,
Your family, your pain,
drugs to help alleviate it. (pp. 21-22)*

These verses bring back personal memories of when I was flat on my back several years ago. The caring warmth and empathy of my family and friends helped me to recover more quickly.

Then talking about volunteers:

Volunteers, a ray of light ...

*young and old
through song and words, ...*

*giving time and hearts
to souls seeking comfort. (p. 20)*

With each passing year, I attend funerals of my friends and family, some younger than I am, who have died of cancer. Four years ago, I played soulful Yiddish folk songs on my guitar along with a clarinettist to patients in palliative care at a hospital in Montreal. It was a heart-rending experience. The patients were too sick to leave their beds. I was happy when I heard that our music soothed them.

Since then, I have learned to appreciate every moment, every bird, every tree and every flower. There is a Hebrew prayer that Jews recite every morning upon awakening: *Thank you God for giving us another day.*

Order Perspectives: Hospice Poems by Bob Jacob from Antrim House, P.O. Box 111, Tariffville, CT 06081; [Click Here: Check out "Antrim House Books: Catalog: Perspective by Bob Jacob"](#) for details. All proceeds will benefit The Connecticut Hospice.

When Sunflowers Speak: An Invitation to Contemplation

Flanigan, Patrick W. and David McQueen.
***When Sunflowers Speak: An Invitation
to Contemplation.*** Pacific Grove, CA:
Pacific Grove Publishing, 2005.
Illustrations by Christine Crozier.

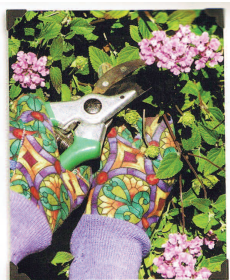


The yellow, brown and green petals of a sunflower on the front cover immediately catch our eye. We need to open this book to discover what is inside. Its unusual length and width make it stand out on a bookshelf. What a delightful surprise awaits us when we see handwritten poems that are illustrated with photographs by David McQueen and delicate line drawings by the accomplished artist, Christine Crozier.



Patrick Flanigan is a physician and writer, born in 1943 in northern Indiana. He gained his insights into the spiritual aspects of life and death when he worked as a haematologist and oncologist. David McQueen is a nurse and photographer, born in 1953 in South Carolina. He acquired his first camera in 1973 and recently became a professional photographer. Christine Crozier is a professional artist who grew up in northern California. She paints from nature, focusing on the flora and fauna in landscapes.

The author takes us on a journey of self-discovery by inviting us to discover and contemplate the beauty of nature. Like Bob Jacob's book, *Perspectives: Hospice Poems*, the themes throughout *When Sunflowers Speak* are celebration, struggle, healing and finally acceptance. But love is the thread that weaves these themes together throughout both books.



Several of Flanigan's poems appeared in *ONCOLOGY TIMES*, Dec. 10, 2005. In this article, *Poetry by Cancer Caregivers*, the editor writes: "The world of poetry is a means of expression and a source of comfort for many who care for cancer patients." Bob Jacob expresses

this sentiment regarding caregivers and poetry. The first poem in *When Sunflowers Speak* is illustrated with a greyish door surrounded by flowers and trees in bloom. It reminds me of a secret garden, an inner sanctuary where I can let my thoughts wander. For instance in *To Write a Poem* (p.1):

*You cannot walk
into a garden
and command a poem
to flow from your pen...*

Your task is to be there,

*awake, seeing, listening,
open to the message
not yet written on the page.*

The author give life to inanimate objects. For example in *Driftwood* (p. 6):

*The trees above whisper
about the skeleton below.
Some raise their boughs
To heaven in fear and trembling.*

At first, the poems seem more upbeat than those in Jacob's book. However, in reading further, we realize that Flanigan is conveying the same passion, love and caring as Jacob. But he says it differently. Jacob's poems all relate to his visits to patients in a palliative care hospital. Flanigan's writing is more general. In his poem *Fog* (p. 23) he gives the fog a life of its own.

*Fog quietly delivers its message:
move softly
love gently
accept mystery.*

His metaphoric descriptions of the seasons convey the message of birth, growth, adulthood and death as in *Beneath the Snow* (p. 86).

*During the darkest winter night
slumbering beneath the snow
seeds and bulbs wait
for the windsong of spring...*

And in the last verse:

*the ancient voices
that proclaimed
for everything
there is a season.*

McQueen's use of cool and warm colors, vibrant shapes and abstract designs give a

harmonious melody throughout the book. For example, the photograph on page 14 of a pair of shears cutting leaves in a garden can be seen as a pair of hands. The poem *Scents* (p.14) also illustrates this abstract concept in the second verse:

*The garden sought his attention
seducing him
to sink his strong hands
into its moist soil.*

Flanigan's vivid use of our five senses—taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound—is evident in many of his picturesque poems. Here is one example in the poem entitled *Sunflowers* (p. 30):

*Sunflowers are the giants of the garden.
They watch the movement of the field mouse...
They breathe the heavy perfume
of the honeysuckle and jasmine...
They hear the hum of the bee...
They know more than all the other plants...*

Also note the anthropomorphic descriptions of the flora and fauna of his garden above.

The poet compares living and dying to the blooming and wilting of flowers in the first and last verses of the following, *The Love Poem* (p. 17):

*He started to write
a love poem
on the petals
of a daisy.....*

*Before black ink
stained the last white petal,
she touched his neck
and whispered "I love you".*

Although poems about dying can be depressing, Flanigan always ends his on a positive note seen in the last verse of *Fairy Dance* (p. 25).

*Further off shore
giant whales
spout white plumes
of hot breath
and sing for us all.*

The poem on page 37, *Now*, talks about the importance of each moment in our lives.

*but I like to think
about Now.
I mean this moment
or maybe the next.*

*with this color in the sky,
this scent in the wind,
this hand on my shoulder...*

*So does This Life (p. 53):
I struggle each day
hardly able to live
this life
and experience this body....*

*But today
I am content
to see a face
that simply needs a shave.*

Eckart Tolle corroborates this concept in his book *The Power of Now* (p. 95). He talks about the pain-body and tells us how to connect with our inner body:

...Feel it from within. ... Can you feel it simultaneously in all parts of the body as a single field of energy? Keep focusing on the feeling of your inner body for a few moments...

In conclusion, Patrick W. Flanigan, poet; David McQueen, photographer; and Christine Crozier, artist have worked together to produce a book of graphic illustrations, vivid descriptions of nature, and contemplative writings that will soothe any soul.

Order this book by check or money order for \$24.95 plus \$2.00 shipping, from Pacific Grove Publishing, PO Box 803, Pacific Grove, CA 93950; 831-595-1600, fax (831) 375-4749; Email: pgpublishing@redshift.com.

With Nothing behind but Sky *A Journey through Grief*

Longo, Perie. ***With Nothing behind but Sky: a journey through grief.*** Santa Barbara, CA: Artamo Press, 2006.

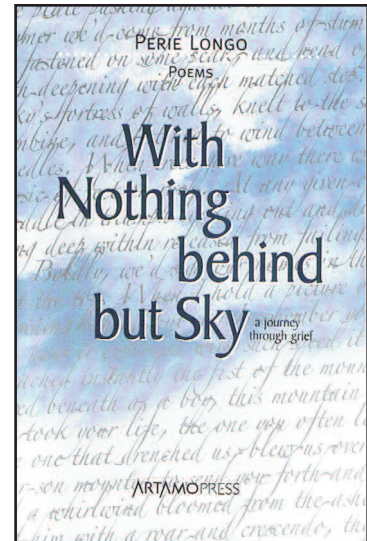
Perie Longo, a California poet, has been leading poetry workshops for more than 20 years with the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and California-Poets-in-the-Schools. Her poems are published in various poetry journals and anthologies. Some of these include: *The Journal of Poetry Therapy*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She is a certified Poetry Therapist as well as a marriage and family therapist.

Longo's poems are more personal than those of Jacob and Flanigan. She tells the story of her personal tragedy—the illness and eventual death of her husband and how she persevered. Like Jacob and Flanigan, the theme of love runs throughout the book as, for instance, in *Along the Way*:

*above it all where a liquid tongue
lunges over the mountain, cracks
over jagged granite meant to snap you awake.
Even with sore muscles we managed
to climb to another height
and yes, take my word for it,
with something we learned
along the way, love. (p.16)*

Although there are no illustrations, the poet's descriptions are so vivid that we are able to rely on our imaginations. For example in *Cat Scan*:

*In a dream I rescued the cat
on the way out of a war torn town,
where we really do not live. ...
...But today the doctor points out
on your cat scan the bulge of white lymph nodes*



*like miniature mushrooms. H-bombs exploding
against a dark background that leaves us stunned. (p.15)*

Look at the metaphors—the comparison of lymph nodes to miniature mushrooms. These types of metaphors are also seen in other poems. My artistic instinct can visualize my paintbrush illustrating this powerful scene. Also look at the play on words: cat the animal and cat scan the X-ray.

The narrative form of several poems adds a novelist's touch. For instance in *The Widow Attempts a Singles' Group Potluck*:

*Gender balanced. That was the big thing.
I had to bring a man, but wasn't the point
there wasn't one? ...*

*I looked up, imagining him floating like a blimp
without wires. Would have to figure how
to get him down. "Never mind," my friend said... (p. 73)*

Note that even the title reads like a book, yet it is a brilliant poem with its satirical tongue-in-cheek descriptions: "women with casseroles to titillate the men_" and "Stupid questions like 'Why didn't the man who commissioned the Mona Lisa like the final product?'" (P.73). The six other "widow" poems are more nostalgic than satirical (pp. 77, 79, 82, 83, 84, 88).

I like the way Longo plays with words. For example in *Squoze*:

*Down Highway 15 past Vegas
past midnight inside the steam
of air you say you are "squoze" ...*

*I think squozen a good word,
what happens to your life at the end
when you're trying to squeeze in
as much as you can, pushing to the rim...*

*squoze from comfort and our bed...
... I lean back for a snooze... (p. 18-19)*

She writes about her coping strategies in several poems, using dreams and her imagination. For example, in the poem *After Visiting Chagall: San Francisco*:

*roosters posed in off-kilter windows
I'm like that, detached. To stay grounded
you have to unfasten yourself
from the once true, look around and see what else:*

odd emus poke heads through thistledown fog...

imagine Chagall's wings on our backs,

and suddenly we're floating, the whole family...

we pass each other and wink.

You should hear that rooster crow. (p. 81)

We see that she does not sit at home and mope. On the contrary, she visits museums, goes to widows' events, but always thinks of her late husband. Another way that she comes through her grief is experienced in *The Dar's Daughter*:

*And when it became the darkest, I lit
the kerosene lamp on the mantle
with a sense of purpose and paraded through the house
shouting "All is well, all is well." (p. 22-23)*

We admire her strength in showing us the spectrum of emotions from sadness, grief, hope, and even humour. We cannot help laughing and crying with her as we read her poems.

The following are two examples of Longo's funny lines from *What My Husband Taught Me about Adventure and The Dar's Daughter*:

*Risking your life is a good thing—it halts rumination.
Women ruminate too much and want compliments... (p. 13)*

*... I'm not sure I can use the word
'fuck' in a poem and still be allowed
to be a member of the Poetry Society of America
even though it sounds accurate. ... (p. 22)*

As Flanigan does, she shows her appreciation of nature in *With Nothing behind but Sky*:

*We passed sky's fortress of walls, knelt
to the surprise of columbine, and listened
to wind between thin green needles. ... (p. 92)*

Longo's poems remind me of *You'll Never Walk Alone*, a beautiful song of hope, faith, optimism, and the beauty of nature from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Carousel*:

*When you walk through a storm, Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of the storm, There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of the lark.*

*Walk on, through the wind. Walk on, through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone. You'll never walk alone.*

The themes of nature, grief, love, passion, hope, humour, and empathy run through each of the three books of poetry. Each poet expresses these themes in a different way: Bob Jacob in his personal involvement with hospice patients; Patrick Flanigan in comparing grief to the flora and fauna in nature; and Perie Longo through her personal tragedy.

As with Jacob's and Flanigan's books, Longo's book belongs on the shelves of libraries, universities, schools, hospitals and hospice centers.

Buy this book from www.artamo.com

Click Here: ["Perie Longo: Poet, Poetry Therapist, Marriage & Family Therapist"](#)