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The Accidental Poet

Jonell Esmé Jel'enedra's collection of poems scavenges the heart with wit and poignant resonance | by Bruce Willey

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Those who grumble about the pretentiousness of poetry and can't seem to find the time to hobble through another obtuse metaphor will find comfort in Jonell Esmé Jel'enedra's poems. Her just published "Stilt Walking At Midnight" (Hummingbird Press, \$12) is a powerful collection of poetry that effortlessly mixes truth and beauty to striking, readable results. And lurking behind all this poetic truth and beauty is a woman who admits that poetry comes easily to her despite the fact that she has little to no training writing poems. "I'm always waiting for the poetry police to arrest me because I don't know what an iambic pentameter is," she says.

Real or imagined, Jel'enedra wouldn't have the time of day for such a police force. With a full-time job working for the Santa Cruz Library

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 and four children and a grandson, it's a wonder she found time to write the 61 poems found in her collection, the majority of which were penned in just six months. "Things compost in my mind for a long time, and my internal editor is always on when I'm writing and by the time it gets to paper it's already mostly done," she says. "Poetry is fast. I can write a poem and be done with it."

In person Jel'enedra is lively and loquacious, not at all the bookish type despite being surrounded by books in her job as a library employee. Her bangles create a wrist-top cacophony and she looks like someone that was born in the late '60s, not the late '50s as she reports without reluctance. Jel'enedra grew up in June Lake on the Eastern side of the High Sierra. Both of her parents were school teachers and highly reli-

gious—Baptists who attended church three or four nights a week and spoke in tongues—which explains the religious imagery in her poems. When she was seven, a babysitter molested her. She didn't speak for two years afterwards and it's an experience she's still processing with a tremendous sense of longanimity. What saved her, she says, is writing and reading. That, and her Gypsy great-grandmother, the one bastion of sanity in her family who wasn't consumed by religiosity. "She would brew a big pot of espresso and dump the grounds out on the ground and tell us our fortunes," she remembers. "Poetry is sort of like that for me, a way of looking at the ground and making sense of what's happening. I learned that you wouldn't have any light without the dark."

Jel'enedra's life story would fit better in an epic novel than a long poem. She's worked for Goodwill Industries, been a soda jerk, field hand, book reviewer, schoolteacher, waitress and sales clerk. She even dug ditches for Raymond Burr's winery. Along the way she married early, had children got divorced, got married and divorced again, and graduated from UC Santa Cruz with a degree in aesthetic studies, which she jokingly refers to in her bio as a degree that "qualifies her to make sweeping judgments about the nature of beauty in the world."

Perhaps because of this rich life her poetry hinges on storytelling. Some of these stories come from her life, while others are observations about the world through her devastatingly astute poetic lens. "I don't particularly like confessional poetry," she says. "It feels too private. So I would say I do narrative poetry. I don't usually start a poem without some inkling of a story."

The title poem, "Stilt Walking at Midnight" (reprinted below) is one such story taken from her life. During the hot summer nights in Ben Lomond when her daughters couldn't sleep, they would take walks on stilts through the meadow across the street. Others, such as her circus poems that close the book, are glimpses of life, a life that as she puts it, "can be a circus with a lot of tight-rope walking."

Narrative poetry has some dangers though. Unlike fiction writing where a writer can hide behind a character, Jel'enedra's poetry is right out in the open, exposed to the elements including her parents who she worries may never speak to her again after they read her book. And though you wouldn't know it from talking to her, Jel'enedra says she is a private person and feels as though she's bared her soul in this book. "But I thought, you are who you are, and just because situations happen to you, it doesn't define who you are," she says. "You get to be bigger than that. So why can't poetry be bigger than that?"

Stilt Walking at Midnight

For Rachael and Gabrielle

*They Falter,
balanced on their spindled legs
like white colts freshly unfolded
and learning to stand*

*Or herons,
tilting high above milkweed and thistle,
each step a hesitation, a contemplation;
the way their cotton gowns ruffle,
plumage bleached pale
by this meadow moon.*

*These are the daughters of the town
come to practice the secret rituals
of rising.
Though even in this darkness
you can see it: how they bend
their faces earthward,
a certain yearning
underneath anticipation.*

*This is the way they believe it will be—
everything the same, but further
from reach.*