

*whoopen, and sichen ahhhhh!*  
*Swifan, geswogen, sweep, and gremb-.*

Poems about grandparents, aunts and feuding siblings prove the adage of blood being thicker than water, for even Edward who hates his brother...

*...would side with Tim*  
*against the neighbors, and would defend*

*Tim Junior, even after the kid stole*  
*three gallons of hard cider off his back porch*

*and wrecked his, Edward's motorcycle.*  
*Kid was family, wasn't he?*

But mostly, while the collection writes the endless work, work, work of a farmer's life, "In the Lap of the Forest" imagines a restful life, incarnated as a skunk, basking in the sun after a morning of feasting on grubs and mushrooms and partridge eggs and answering her mother skunk:

*Mother, shouldn't we be busy?*  
*Don't we have floors to sweep?*  
*Pipes to run from the brook*  
*so we can scrub down our log?*  
*She will say, Daughter, the forest*  
*is self cleaning...*

—Maira Richards

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## Let's Imagine Fifteen Sunflowers

***Water the Moon* by Fiona Sze-Lorrain. (Grosse Point Farms, MI: Marick Press), 78 pp. Softbound. ISBN 978-1-934851-12-8. \$14.95**

In her debut collection of poems, Fiona Sze-Lorrain draws on a range of cultural materials to shape her verse, which is mostly free, although at times quite formal. The book's three sections offer, respectively, vignettes related to family dynamics (including Mao and Chinese heritage); life in Paris; and tributes to authors and artists that include a few ekphrastic exercises, including a riff on

a Man Ray photograph.

Among the most remarkable poems, "The Unrecorded Days" is a richly conceived (pun intended) vision of a child in utero, before, during and after birth. Sze-Lorrain recounts the nifty manner of delivery:

*Because you did not  
cry like an alarm, eyes warped on you like  
impassioned art  
dealers scrutinising Beauty during a vernissage.*

The Parisian poems include celebrations of the gustatory pleasures. "L'Assiette des Trois Amis" describes a classic French dish that features foie gras. The poem pays tribute to Monsieur Boetsch and his presentation skills. "Breakfast, Rue Sainte-Anne," "Privileged," "Eating Grilled Langoustines," and "Snapshots from a Siamese Banquet" are all memorable repasts of words.

Edith Piaf, Dora Maar, Gertrude Stein, Chopin, Paul Celan, and Samuel Beckett are among the agents of inspiration in the final section of the book. "Van Gogh Is Smiling" is especially fine, six of its seven four-line stanzas beginning with "Let's": "Let's imagine fifteen sunflowers," "Let's admit you fascinate doctors," etc.

Sze-Lorrain displays certain tics that can please or annoy depending on context and finesse. She sometimes overuses italics for emphasis. She can be creative with her verbs:

*When the envelope arrived with a shriveled  
brown shroud, it confessed  
a vulnerable hand.*

The poem from which the book gets its title, "My Grandmother Waters the Moon," is a series of honed two-line stanzas with some nice turns: "War strategy?" asks the poet near mid-way, contemplating the making of bean paste moons.

Sometimes the personal obscures meaning, but re-reading often clears up those opaque spots, or else you accept the mystery, which is part of this poet's sophisticated and sometimes clever sensibility. And then there are spot-on poems like "A Course in Subtlety," which starts out with a bit of explication—of the meaning of the French word *vérité*—and ends with a mother

pulling the silent treatment on a new son-in-law.

Singapore-born Sze-Lorrain maintains a busy life in the arts. She performs around the world on the zheng, an ancient Chinese harp; is an editor and founder of Cerise Press, an international online journal; co-directs Vif Editions, an independent publishing house in Paris; and is co-author of *Silhouette/Shadow: The Cinematic Art of Gao Xingjian* (Gao won the 2000 Nobel Prize in Literature). We are lucky she has found time for poetry.

—*Carl Little*

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## A Toadlily Quartet

***By Way Of*, poems by Matthew Nienow, Emily Carr, Diana Woodcock, and Diana Alvarez. Foreword by Sean Nevin. (Chappaqua, NY: Toadlily Press, 2009). 69 pages, paper. ISBN 978-0-9766405-4-7. \$15.00**

The Toadlily Press "Quartet Series" features four poets in each book. This attractive volume contains a foreword describing the poets. "Matthew Nienow's poems are at once sideways, delayed and ironic"; "Emily Carr's poetry is of a heightening sense of love's body"; Diana Woodcock's work "grows ghostly and marginal"; and in the poems of Diana Alvarez, "life depends upon a noun, a verb, a consonant." Such pretentious gibberish helps neither the reader nor the poets, who deserve better.

Matthew Nienow writes about an array of subjects such as parents, birds, blackberries, autumn, and "how to tie a noose." He achieves some striking lines, describing his mountain-climbing father, for example, as "knowing how it felt to be / as high as the ground could take him." But overall in his poems, I often fail to grasp what may be going on beyond the exercise of descriptive cleverness, and some unaffected endings:

*I'm interested to know what happens  
When earth is burning and we can't see beyond  
the smoke.*

I think we know what happens.