*That Beauty in the Trees*, Ron Smith, LSU Press, 2023

Reviewed by Jack Ridl

Don’t bother reading this review, just go read masterful poet Ron Smith’s That

Beauty in the Trees. And what is that “that”?

Ron Smith is subtle, nuanced, clearly ambiguous, rich in layers of implication. His

poems don’t talk to you. They lead you into a world where you participate and

wonder.

Reviews often attempt to make up your mind for you or draw attention to the

intelligence of the reviewer. Or they reveal the reviewer’s insights for a resume:

tenure’s on the line.

Do something more important than the impotent notion that evaluation makes a

difference. W. H. Audin retracted his ridiculous and yet still perpetrated line,

“Poetry makes nothing happen..” Set aside your educated notion of the importance

of critical evaluation, and something will happen. Bring your vulnerability and

attentiveness, and something valuable will happen. And in this discordant time

when language is used to mislead, twist intention, cause cruelty, annihilate

reputations, misdirect, impose nihilistic solutions, grant permission to unleash

hatred, poems and most certainly Ron Smith’s poems can save moments within our

lived lives.

Should I end there? Sure.

I know I should support such exclamations even though I’d prefer to let the work

do that, and I’ll go walk our dog. First of all, Smith (Can I call him Ron for

Aethlon readers? Sure.) First of all, Ron’s book of poems is varied, covering a broad range of subjects.

Ron dares to violate the preeminent ideas held in a hammerlock

that a collection of poems should “hold together,” be thematic, have a structural

coherence, tonal consistency, and recognizable voice, (Whatever that is.) one made

familiar by the fourth poem, one that remains familiar until we’re asleep.

Because this review is for Aethlon readers, I’ll offer some poems where Ron works

with sports.

In “Rizal Stadium, World War II” (p. 24) he creates a convincing fusion of baseball,

killing, the body strewn landscape of war, the speaker’s ability to take “bad hops in

the heart then firing a/frozen rope (yes) frozen rope to first,” his “father who’s right

now fighting/ for his life on Guadalcanal,” Rod Serling, Episode 19 of The

Twilight Zone,” sudden commentary, and more to create the reality of innocence

and horror that was then and, when we reflect, is now. Ron makes it seamless, and

seamless it becomes for us no matter how accomplished we are at

compartmentalizing.

This is one of the great accomplishments throughout the collection: to refrain from

isolating experiences and instead give us the “blenderized” world we live within.

Read “Birth of Modern Poetry” (p. 88). Every line turns at the right moment; the

poem “flows” in the voices of Pound and Williams and you’ll laugh and wonder if

Ron means it, and wonder about modern poetry itself and notice Ron’s mastery of

free verse while he parodies it, or does he? And it’s a multi-persona poem where

Ron, or is it Ron? steps in. Every line begins at the left edge: how formal and

controlled and common. You now and then stop at moments such as when WCW,

talking about Hemingway and Pound going at it— “ ‘Pound [falling] back upon his

settee.’/1922. the year of litrachur’s nuclear atrocities, Hem wrote/ that Ez led ‘wit

his chin’ and had the general grace/ of a crayfish,’ whatever that means.”

Then after the delight of that “formally free verse” Laurel and Hardy perceptive

fiasco you note a poem where the subject offers a revelation in varied line stanzas,

a poem tapestried into various juxtapositions that bring a fresh perspective in

fragments, short lines, long lines, single lines, couplets, varied in position on the

page, syncopated in rhythm. For example—

“Riefenstahl” (p. 56) Hitler’s Olympics film maker where we read

“and less

bat-

tired, brushed

by tender woodwinds, faces, fluent bodies

mist enfolded, invested, draped, touch them, smooth them,

as the camera turns

them

into

gesture . . .”

Images? Well, in one poem there’s “anchovy sauce, fried artichokes, and gusts of

garlic,” then in another you’re with Willyum Wumpus, then on Omaha Beach, in

Plato’s cave, Rome, Assisi, or the marsh water of Savannah. You’ll meet up with

Mussolini, Keats, Casanova, Jesus, George Washington.

Attend to three poems a day. Three. The poems welcome your participation and

rewards your imagination and intellect and delight and sorrowful remembrance.

Spoiler alert, I’m giving away the ending—

“that we must say, we do say, we will

always

say is a kind

of beauty.”

Jack Ridl, author of Practicing to Walk Like a Heron (Wayne State University

Press), co-recipient of ForeWord Review”s award for the year’s best collection of

poetry