

## Book Review

*The Nancy Poems*. By John Morgan. Cirque Press, 2024. 45 pp.

Reviewed by Dawn Macdonald\*

Poet John Morgan first arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1976 for a posting as director of University of Alaska’s creative writing program. He has never completely left, although he now divides his time between Fairbanks and the more southerly port city of Bellingham, Washington. The places where we live out our lives, by choice or circumstance, have enormous consequences for our character and our work. Equally consequential is the matter of who we live them with. In *The Nancy Poems*, Morgan draws a thread through nearly six decades of marriage to the woman he loved “at first sight,” though she, we learn, was initially under the impression that they were “just friends.”

Published by Anchorage’s Cirque Press, *The Nancy Poems* constitutes a slim volume of 33 pages, somewhere between a chapbook and a full-length collection. It’s a deeply personal document, frequently addressing itself directly to Nancy, as in the poem “Married,” which concludes with these lines about a first Christmas as husband and wife—“... the dozen / gates of heaven squeak open; angels / cry; carols rise from the ice rink / speakers. We exchange books, beam, have / breakfast in bed. Christ, I love you, Nancy!”

The personal nature of the work does not mean it is without Morgan’s typically high level of craft consciousness. He brings careful attention to the interplay of sounds within and across his lines. The near rhymes of “squeak” with “rink” and “speakers” sustain movement through the passage quoted above, as do the sound similarities between “dozen,” “heaven,” and “open” as well as the pair “angels/exchange.” At the same time, though, there is a degree of sentimentality that enters into *The Nancy Poems*, which can, at times, border upon the twee. The squeaking gates of heaven make for an interesting image, and the invocation of Christ as an expletive announcing a secular love is surprising and clever, but

perhaps the crying angels may be a tiny bit over the top. This same tension is at play across the book, between a finely tuned ear and a somewhat overeffusive turn born out of nostalgia and sincere emotion. The feeling of a skilled craftsman occasionally falling into excess can be quite touching, and many readers are likely to find these pieces deeply affecting, as we in turn are moved to reflect upon our own past and present loves.

Morgan makes use of the sonnet in *The Nancy Poems*, as befits a collection of love poetry. His sonnets are unrhymed (except for the subtle cross rhyming that occurs mid-line). A loose meter circles around a baseline of iambic pentameter in pieces like the 14-line opener, “First Date—The Sviatoslav Richter Recital” or “Sonnet of Lost Labor.” Just as the form varies from the strict rules of the traditional, so the content takes us to the less obviously romantic elements of a marriage: brief conflicts (resolved by poem’s end), little letdowns, a miscarriage. There is a rough chronology to the collection, beginning with the couple’s first date (which Nancy may not have known was a date) and progressing through the wedding, the move to Fairbanks, the birth and growth of children, and into aging. Two sonnet-length poems near the end of the book, “And Never Look Back” and “November Surprise,” both invoke the metaphor of the butterfly for the ephemerality of youth. The insect in the second of these two pieces has not only appeared far too late in the season but has also made its way indoors to beat against the window glass. “Its wings, like paisley, red and brown, quiver / as it paws the pane, embodiment of / summer in late fall, cold-blooded thing, / whose hopes will never be this young again.”

Morgan works in the lyric tradition—accessible, autobiographical, and with a studied application of craft. Often he presents an anecdote, some small moment of interaction or observation, as illustrative of larger truths within a relationship or a life. He self-consciously reflects upon these poetic choices in “The Beach Walk at Port Townsend, WA” where he muses, “I came here to think about poems: / which details count? The whole may / be luminous, but broken into parts // which sandgrain, which occasion rends / the heart? When I phoned home today / you said our two-year-old had learned // to fear his shadow on the road. He / stared and stared and wouldn’t move. / Then he saw yours. “Everyone has // a shadow,” you said, but he insisted / “*Papa!*” thinking it was me. ...”

Shadows recur and encroach as the collection nears its finish. Towards the conclusion of the long poem “Mt. Tamalpais,” in a sentence that wraps five lines, Morgan writes, “The mind / strays through these primal woods, impossible / to say I am this thing that was, trails / winding among shadow with no final / destination we can name.”

The destination may remain obscure, but in *The Nancy Poems* Morgan succeeds in delineating the shape of the path that has led to this point within a life. It's a quiet, reflective collection of admirable concision, and a marvelous gift to a beloved wife.

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