

***A Ladder of Cranes.*** By Tom Sexton. University of Alaska Press, 2015. 60 pages.

Reviewed by Dawn Macdonald

On page 31 of Tom Sexton's *A Ladder of Cranes*, the poet stumbles upon a patch of star flowers—a plant that's described on *Wikipedia* as “a small herbaceous perennial,” “a weak competitor,” bearing “solitary white flowers” about 1–2 centimetres in diameter (or roughly half an inch, for Alaskans like Sexton). An unassuming little bunch of blooms, but Sexton sees here “an earthbound / galaxy that lifts my mood and humbles me.” This more or less describes the experience of reading Sexton's latest book of poems.

Each poem sits politely on its page, a small block of text, surrounded by generous white space. The longest poem in this fifty-seven page collection is nineteen lines. Yet Sexton manages to cram into these compact offerings the natural world, the human, the cosmic, the divine, and the connections between.

In the spirit of the Chinese classical poets, whom he acknowledges directly (“Old masters, I swore to leave you at peace / to not lean on you in my verse again”), he captures universal human experience through brief, spare descriptions of birch trees, eels, misty days, and the eponymous cranes. Without such acknowledgement, the work might walk a fine line between cultural appreciation and appropriation, but Sexton's naming of his influences places him well within a poetic tradition that spans boundaries of historical time and geographic space.

The poems themselves deal with what happens across boundaries, as when he notes that his poem “Gray Wolf” is written in the encounter with the creature, who creates the poem in the poet by appearing to him “beneath a hornet's nest of dark / cloud” and matching his gaze. We feel that Sexton's poems arise out of nature, as though through some meteorological phenomenon, as much as out of the cognitive and cultural tools of the poet.

This is not to say that Sexton's verse ignores the manufactured and the modern. Soggy pants and giant Easter eggs make their appearance. There are paeans to such cultural icons as Mozart, Seamus Heaney, education

reformer Bronson Alcott, and the T'ang dynasty poet Li Bai. He touches on themes of colonialism in pieces like "Resolution Park" and "The Man from Here." He quotes chattily from conversations with prairie café waitresses and superstitious old ladies at church weddings. A surprising number of his nature moments involve motor vehicles. The human melds into the natural, the natural into the cosmic, and the cosmic back into the human ("I'll turn to water and then to herring- / milt, to cosmic spawn. Imagine that.").

Occasionally, things can veer into fortune-cookie territory where the closing lines are perhaps a bit too "on the nose," always a risk with this epigrammatic style of short poetry.

Tom Sexton has published numerous books of poetry and was Alaska's poet laureate in the mid-to-late 1990s. *A Ladder of Cranes* represents the work of a mature writer who has honed his craft down to its essentials. The work is accessible, using simple language and relatable situations, yet contains much depth. These are bite-sized poems that will linger for some time on the tongue and in the mind.

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