

Susan Shaw Sailer

**Passion and Compassion Imbued: A Review of  
*Breathing the West: Great Basin Poems***

Liane Ellison Norman. *Breathing the West: Great Basin Poems*.  
Bottom Dog Press 2012.

Pittsburgher Liane Ellison Norman has been a force in the city for the last forty-five years, teaching journalism at the University of Pittsburgh, working to end the manufacture of nuclear weapons, and playing a significant role in the poetry scene. Last year was a bumper year for her publications. In addition to *Breathing the West*, 2012 also saw the issue of *Driving Near the Old Federal Arsenal* (Finishing Line Press) as well as *Roundtrip* (Yesterday's Parties Press).

Norman grew up in the Great Basin mountain area of Utah, where her father, whose area of expertise was soil conservation, was a range ecologist working for the Forest Service. The poems in *Breathing the West* pay tribute to her family and the values her parents, especially her father, inculcated: an interest in science, appreciation for family and the natural world, a commitment to social justice and to preserve and protect the environment, and the power of using language well and responsibly.

Thus, Norman reveals the irresponsibility of the Texas Board of Public Education's substitution of the neutral-sounding "Atlantic triangular trade" for the reality of the slave trade ("In 2010"). That substitution reflects the misplaced values that distort Captain James D'Wolf's regret that he lost a piece of furniture but didn't give a thought to the sick slave he had blindfolded and tossed overboard, alive and bound to a chair ("So Good a Chair").

Throughout the volume, poems attest to Norman's concern for justice; for instance, white mistreatment of Native Americans ("Sue's Bones on Sioux Land") and the horror of using the atomic bomb on "people like me" ("August 6, 1945"). Ordinary circumstances reveal the poet's concern for all people: washing windows and drying them with wadded-up newspaper, she declares she wears "news of the day—children's / fathomless eyes as winter begins in earthquake-ruptured Himalayas— / under my fingernails" ("Washing Windows").

Through her father's work, Norman learned as a young girl that unregulated grazing by sheep and cattle caused serious soil erosion; she sees the parallel in the oil and gas industry's unregulated digging and drilling ("Alibi"). Gophers digging tunnels and displacing



I fall  
leisurely, turning over and over,  
floating, a downward dance

alongside my beloved. We're falling  
together, toward one another,  
as our bones thin and brittle.

The poet is a keen observer, and the language she finds to evoke what she sees is a delight to read: “A weasel, winter white, / poised upright on a gnarl of wind-blown root...” (“Philadelphia Flat”). Jars of canned cherries, apricots and apples “lined the basement pantry, / gold and rubies of Aladdin’s cave” (“Canning”). Dementia of old age having robbed her mother of her former articulate language, “a generous, garbled kind of conversation, / a baby’s babble girdled by grammar” is all that remains (“What She Lost Last”).

What Norman sees is not always a delight, though the language with which she expresses it continues to be. Thus, in “Back Yard in Late Spring,” she finds “the scrambled entrails of something small// glistening on the path, a ruby globule, trail of frayed/ intestine...” Humor is an important player in these poems, too. In a poem paying tribute to the common garden orb spider, the poet observes that the spider “mates// as she needs to—sex with sixteen legs—” (“Found Amber”).

Liane Ellison Norman’s *Breathing the West: Great Basin Poems* is a joy to read. If you haven’t had the pleasure of listening to her read these and other poems, watch for the next reading she gives somewhere in Pittsburgh.

Liane Ellison Norman’s poems have appeared in *Kestrel* 23 (fall 2009) and *Kestrel* 27 (fall 2011). —Eds.