

Rick Campbell

These Flowers Keep Unfolding

Barbara Crooker. *Les Fauves*. C&R Press, 2017.

In the spirit of full disclosure, as they say on NPR, I have admired Barbara Crooker's poetry for many years; I read her first book, *Line Dance*, when it was still a contest submission. I admit too that I don't generally like ekphrastic poems or poems using forms such as the Abecedarian. Despite my small mindedness, I agreed to review Barbara's book.

I'm happy I did. The poems in *Les Fauves* are quite good because they, as all good poems do, transcend the constrictions that formal requirements often impose on poems. In *Les Fauves*, Crooker's poems transcend the subject of their ekphrasticism—it's as if the paintings that many of these poems are about are the triggering subjects, in Richard Hugo's term, and the poems go on to discuss life, the emotions and trials of the lived, experienced world. Granted, the triggering subject of Matisse's *Pansies* does not disappear from the poem as a goose in flight might, but the pansies are not just a still life reproduced in a poem. Crooker brings the pansies and the painting "alive" when they impassion her heart and she says to her partner—"so jump up / and kiss me, O my darling. Paint your sweet / lips over my skin." Crooker's ekphrastic poems, as poet George Bilgere remarks, make the reader fall in love again with the "sweet, sweet world."

Sections II and III of *Les Fauves* are not about paintings, and instead of strolling through French museums, we are in Pennsylvania, "home of potato filling, cabbage / slaw, shoofly pie." In an abecedarian poem that remains true to its complicated and sometimes restrictive form's rules, we are delighted to hear "Zero in on what's important. Be bob a looma / a love bam boom." We are surprised by the sober revelation of "How did love thy neighbor come to this / Sunday morning's slow march." In "This American Life," Annette's *Beach Blanket Bingo* life becomes redefined by the Vietnam War's no exit plan: "You're only nineteen. / Your chances of getting out are just / about none."

Yes, Barbara Crooker poems are witty and playful—one poem celebrates words scrambled and respelled—atlases becomes sea salt and straw becomes warts—but word play comes home to ask "the tide can turn / to edit, in the blink of an eye which / will you choose: *heart or earth?*"

The mission and blessing of this collection of poems is to bridge, to connect (or reconnect?) works of art to our oh so human lives. "The Jetty At Cassis, Opus 198, 1889," which begins with a discourse on Signac and Seurat and the techniques of Divisionism, becomes a love poem when the speaker remembers "you and I, in that small hotel. . . Nothing to wear / to bed that night but ourselves."

This is why I can read any and all of Barbara Crooker's poems—for their transcendence and their revelations about the human condition and this world, sweet and sometimes troubling, that we find ourselves in.