



Or/And POEMS

Jeannine Marie Pitas



“In uncommonly accomplished prose and verse, and with a remarkably audible, canny, and compelling voice, these poems perform the sort of surprises that feel like long-held, subconscious wisdom just now coming into our apprehension, just now, when we most need such wisdom.” —**Scott Cairns**, *Slow Pilgrim: The Collected Poems and Anaphora: New Poems*

“These poems do not equivocate desire and faith. Pitas has created a questing volume of dancing, blazing language to speak shibboleth.” —**Jon M. Sweeney**, coauthor, *Meister Eckhart’s Book of the Heart*

“Every page of this book confides brilliantly—through folklore, fantasy, reality—all sentiments possible, in words never imagined before. Or/And is a perfect title because the poems embody so many kinds of experiences: personal, social, magical—even those of crisis “or/and” loss – they all brighten the room with flair and originality. Author Pitas teaches us to be new, to be unafraid, to transcend the limits of language. I say, ‘Now THIS is poetry! Thank you!’” —**Grace Cavalieri**, Maryland Poet Laureate

About the Author:

I am originally from Buffalo, NY but am fortunate to call many places home. I am a teacher, poet, scholar, freelance journalist, book reviewer, and the Spanish-English translator of several Latin American writers. My translation of *I Remember Nightfall* by Uruguayan poet Marosa di Giorgio was shortlisted for the 2018 National Translation Award given by the American Literary Translators’ Association. A graduate of University of Toronto’s Centre for Comparative Literature, I currently live in western Pennsylvania and teach literature and writing at Saint Vincent College. *Or/And* is my second full-length collection of poetry.



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Ask for Living Water

“If only you knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me something to drink,’ you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water.” —John 4:10

Imagine that, one late July afternoon, while driving down Highway 20 outside Galena, Illinois, you stop at the scenic overlook rather than passing it by.

Suppose you admire the pastures, rolling hills, small patches of forest; you inhale the smells of thousands of plants that are as nameless to you as to those who first met them.

Maybe you’ll lock your red Saab’s doors, fumble in high-heeled sandals down the path, gaze up to cumulus clouds against a blue backdrop, take note of birds with black bodies, yellow wings.

At the bottom of the slope a stagnant pond waits. Green algae cover half of it; a turtle suns itself on a log. You don’t know why it’s calling you, but suppose you listen, entranced, until

startled from your reverie by the arrival of a man. Suppose he starts to talk to you, says he’s thirsty, asks for a sip from your water bottle, and you instinctively back away, but something in

his eyes says wait, don’t worry, I’m different. You already saw him at the top of the hill, easel before him, painting the scene. Now he stands beside you, plaid t-shirt covered in watercolors,

and he tells you he knows you’ve been through five bad breakups, that you’ve cheated and deceived, that you claim to like your freedom but still aren’t happy. Suppose right then he says it:

“Come, follow me, I’ll give you living water;” and all of a sudden you know the names of each plant, each blade of grass, each cloud that forms and breaks. Astonished, you thank him and ask

if he’ll be back there tomorrow, and he says yes, and you promise to bring others to meet him. Imagine that you step back to your car, now knowing that it is possible to make each act a

prayer: the cleaning of drains, the paying of bills, the making of phone calls and amends. You are confident that even in the midst of dark November you will find in yourself this place

where ferns touch briars, where this artist shows you his face. Imagine how you’ll feel, come January, when you recall that beneath the most solid ice, living water still flows.





St. Paul may have stayed at the same hotel where I'm staying

Thasos, Greece

Paul, with his convert's zeal, moving among early Christian communities, Philippi to Thessaloniki, writing letters that became the foundation for billions. Paul, who said if God is for us, who can be against us, who exhorted himself, the good I would do, I do not do, and the evil I would not do, that I do. As a girl I was taught to rein myself in—don't eat too much, don't laugh too loud. A few decades of this and I began to get tired, wishing that Paul might be supplanted by Aphrodite, that she'd appear to me on a beach, but not to make me separate grains or collect the wool of wild rams or descend to the dead—instead, to give me her beauty. This is the problem, my friend, a nun, says. You want all the benefits of mysticism but none of the costs.

I think of the unpaid debts I've piled up, the lovers I've left, the students whose papers I didn't hand back, the cancer-stricken former teacher I didn't visit before she died. They weigh me down like a purse filled with coins of a currency not in use anymore, make me scared to step into the sea. I have never learned to swim. After seven years of lessons, water remained a careless mother, a disinterested father who would not lift me up. Today I want no more than waist-deep exposure to the sea; any wave is enough to send me running for shore. I picture Paul in his boat, as he rowed from island to peninsula, and wonder if he ever saw the voluminous goddess emerge from the waves on a dolphin's back.

Did he turn away, try to hit her with his oar, rebuke her for her folds of unconcealed beauty? I'm sure she threw back her head and laughed, dragged him into the waves, splashed his face with her foam. Did he manage to swim off, fleeing to the rocks of this peninsula where I now sit, my brow as creased as his? St. Paul might have stayed in this hotel, might have sat in my room writing letters he couldn't know would be read two thousand years later by long-robed men, studied by girls in plaid green uniforms, pored over each morning by me. I'd like to put those letters aside, return to them in the morning. Now that it's night, let me cross the grove of olive trees, climb down moonlit steps, wade into foamy water, gingerly move hands and feet as Aphrodite lifts me—

If only

you had waited
one more minute
swallowed some pride
put down the phone

if only
you'd made it to your niece's dance recital
quit the job like you wanted to
and gone backpacking or back to college
after the kid was born

if only
you had left the party early
had been wearing the ring
deleted the number right away

if only
you'd left the bar
one hour earlier
with a handshake and a curt
"good night"

if only
you'd had your lucky hat
or rabbit's foot
or at least some bread
to feed the mallards

if only
you'd had some self-control, had known
when to stop writing to him
and accepted you're no Anaïs Nin,
spoken the truth with love,
given the right amount
of yourself—

if only
you'd practiced in advance
taken the time you needed
called him one time less

not too little,
not too much.

if only
you'd stopped smoking
gotten up early each morning to write
kept on with the mandolin lessons
signed up for yoga
psychoanalysis
Ignatian prayer

