

PYTHAGORAS IN LOVE BY LEE SLONIMSKY

Reviewed by Marcia Golub

To get full disclosure out of the way—Lee Slonimsky and I both teach writing workshops at Writer’s Voice in NYC. In the past year I have taken poetry workshops with him, availing myself of an opportunity to study with a reputedly wonderful teacher (I have since found this to be the case). Because of this connection I have come to read his poems and can appreciate what a gifted poet he is.

In this, the second collection of poetry published by the author, Lee Slonimsky uses the 6th century BCE philosopher/mystic/mathematician Pythagoras as an alter ego through which to pick out the meaning of life in his observations of nature. A sonnet sequence made of five parts, the book focuses primarily on Pythagoras’s perceptions of cloud, tree, bird, water, using vision and sound to explore patterns that lead him to mathematical and philosophical conjectures. The most moving aspect of the sonnets, for me, is when human nature breaks through his obsessions with nature itself. Seeing and hearing Pythagoras the man, heartbroken by the loss of his land (he was exiled for political reasons from his home in Croton, Magna Graecia) and his great love, we can’t help but understand his focus on rock and pond differently than we did at first. The more, then, that he seems to narrow his vision to hawk arcs and crow calls, sunlight angles and sunbeam reflections in still water, the more such narrow focus is revealed as a way to find solace for his loss. Whorls found in shells are observed in leaf veins, tree limb patterns mirroring both. A crow caws in threes, then fours, then fives, leading him to speculate about square roots. By thus taking the world as his art teacher, choosing to focus on the minuscule and the humungous, he learns to paint in words, like one of those magical miniaturists who could draw a fly on a man’s arm that, while invisible to the naked eye, could be seen with a magnifying glass to have hairs on its legs. When the intensity of this vision is broken, again and again, with a sob from the heart, the declarations are made all the more powerful for their simplicity. Pythagoras is alone, aging in a foreign land, mourning a lost love who can only be dreamed, never held. In these moments the slim book of sonnets takes on the evocative power of a novel.

“Review of Pythagoras in Love by Lee Slonimsky” © 2007 by Marcia Golub

Contemporary Rhyme Vol. 4 No. 3 2007