

## Marsh Hawk Review (Spring 2025)

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*Recent Books from Marsh Hawk Press*

### ***Creativity* (2022) by Mary Mackey:**

Mary Mackey concludes in *Creativity: Where Poems Begin* that, simply, “creativity is a gift. You can’t board it like a bus,” she says, “[expecting] it to take you wherever you want to go.” So what is creativity? It’s ephemeral, phantom-like, ungraspable, and indescribable by its very nature, because it comes from a place where words have no dominion.” Does this say something about poetry’s magic? Its wordless eloquence?

Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* can be of help in appreciating how her reflective memoir might lead to self-realization. “[T]he supreme achievement of memory [Nabokov writes] is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past” (131). There’s a music in Mackey’s prose, which nearly, on its own, carries the book to completion—a process not unlike how creativity, as a force in our lives, does somehow lift up the facts of a past retrieved from the realm of poetry. Mackey gathers what she can. Her reach is enormous.

Her gift of recall confirms her notion that there was something first inborn in Mackey: namely, the realization that art’s vibrancy comes from its refusal to honor the right and wrong of a pedestrian world. “My memories go back a long way,” begins her first chapter, “too long to be true, people tell me. And yet they are there, stored in a wordless space in my mind, because they came before words [...].”

### ***Translation Zone* (2023) by Brian Cochran:**

*Translation Zone* recalls, for me, Augustine’s mystical notion of creation, in the *Confessions*. Echoing Apocalypse 6:14, Augustine sees the eternal as a furled scroll, whereas the created world, he says, is “spread out like a canopy of skins” beneath it, on which “the primal dictation of creation is dispensed as a written text, as Scripture” (*Confessions*, ed. and tr. Pine-Coffin).

Cochran’s conceits are marvelous. Their rigor, in his collection, comes out of reverence for manifest experience whose gorgeous symmetry is irresistible. In this sense, the source of his enchantment is an endless beauty wherein metaphor *per se* originates.

The poetic forms his book gathers are determined by a confidence in poetry as never erring. Or, at least, this is how Cochran’s poems seem. John Yau, Marsh Hawk Press’s 2024 contest judge, obviously admires Cochran’s phenomenology, especially relishing in his poems their “precise clusters through which meaning peeks”—they’re “allegories [slipping] out of that category as soon as we try to fix them there.”

As Cochran explains, “the poem [. . .] is a kind of transitional space”; hence “words” are “gates that open onto the chasm into which all languages fall.” These “gates” involve “a border, a translation zone, a threshold.” The magnificence of the created world, as well as of poetry, depends upon the poem that spirals in on itself, in a peculiar moebius strip.

The divine becomes mortal, just as the poet sees and records the inspired poem. Cochran is our witness to events. And yet, he tells us, he’s “almost afraid to watch.” His poems aspire to maintaining their end of the balance with the world. “When I write the poem,” he says, “I realize it’s my lack of one.”

### ***The Flaws in the Story* by Liane Strauss (2023)**

Liane Strauss won the Marsh Hawk Press Prize with this book. Her long-lined excursions go on and on in wonderfully kooky, twisted apothegms, which breathe new life into both tautology and truism. Her jaunty, garrulous wit fashions shaggy-dog tales I wish never to end. Some of them don’t. “As scenes accrue” (Mary Jo Bang has commented), “individual points in time become an inner life made visible, a brilliant enactment of a mind talking back to the world.”

Beware: A remembrance’s innocent tone might quickly turn serious and disturbing. “One Small Sleep Past” is a poem about dancing, growing up, and the reach of a dream (in which “balancing” gets juxtaposed with “Balanchine”):

Balanchine was Balanchine, she was saying, as I wound the double  
helix round and round my small ankles, spinning and spinning  
until I was the last one standing still, and the world, at last, both under  
and around me, the only one doing the spinning for all of us.  
It had been so long since I had given the benefit of the doubt to  
doubt .]

The rich textures of Strauss’s voiced perspectives are over the top but of course she knows that perfectly well. Once we readers get wise to her excesses, we can sit back calmly to enjoy the ride we now realize we’re on.

### ***Craft: A Memoir* (2024) by Tony Trigilio:**

A pleasure in reading Marsh Hawk Press’s Chapter One collection—these are short books of autobiography, telling the story of becoming a poet—has to do with how each author in this series responds variously to its basic premise of autobiography as how-to manual. In praising Tony Trigilio’s *Craft: A Memoir*, Denise Duhamel considers how the book “chronicles his own projects—from pop culture to history” while giving readers “a behind-the-desk view” of his practice. The book is equally practical and visionary, Whitmanesque not in style but that it’s unswervingly democratic.

The range of approaches already apparent in the published Chapter One books, thus far, is also manifest

in short “Chapter One”-like memoirs to be found on the Marsh Hawk website. All of these share a commitment to relevance with respect to the aspiring young writer. *Craft: A Memoir* is perfectly pitched in its author’s dependable voice. We learn of Trigilio’s heritage and how it has informed his work as a poet and professor—two vocations entwined. His life began as the child of Italian immigrants; Trigilio resides in old and new worlds, which are amenable to documentary.

Meditation lies at the heart of his Buddhist way of life, the source of his intellectual, writerly success. In *Craft: A Memoir* his own story and advice are of equal value to the aspiring poet. Each is rooted in his philosophy of “[p]oetic language,” which, he explains, “is the only kind of discourse that helps me untangle what is strange, weird, and sublime in my everyday lived experience.” What, then, is “poetic” language?

“Poetry forces me to pay attention, [to] listen to what the unknown world is telling me,” he says. His book, meant to be practical, is gently reflective. His life—from within a maelstrom of languages—has made his poetry, “first and foremost [...] a personal thing, an art form that documents [...] emotions as they collide with the outside world.”

***Green Leaves, Unseeing* (2024) by Susan Terris:**

Now late in life, Terris has neither inclination nor time for illusion. She provides emotional ballast in the plumbing of memory, her retrospect. The book’s title poem—“Green Leaves, Seeing”—finds its occasion in a passage from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: “All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing.” Terris flips Woolf around, furnishing this rejoinder:

[. . .] Don’t look  
back Satch said / And since my  
Brooklyn guy has left me I’m  
seeking new spaces / Wilderness  
maybe but shall avoid all apples  
and watch for the snake / Is he  
lost or is it me / So action / Look  
past all green leaves / Breathe  
in the lives or the fortunes of  
others /  
Carpe diem

While her interior monologues may be diaristic—her inner-outer thoughts, personal-impersonal reflections—they’re filled with “small things.”

Jane Hirschfield calls Terris “a poet of tensile, particular language and fearless investigation.” My one-word description of her would be elegance. I admire Terris’ wonderful economy (to which “tensile” refers) in *Green Leaves, Unseeing*. Its working principle evokes for me lines from Robert Creeley’s poem,

“To WCW”: “There, you say, and / there, and and / becomes / just so.”

She recalls dining with a man, “years ago,” in “How It Feels When I Am Here and He Is Not”; he has taken her “to the Grolier // to see its miniature books.” They sip their rosé wine; he talks of the “crazed world.” “[W]e love // small things,” he goes on. “They offer us the illusion of control.”

When Terris observes what’s around her in the moment, in moments past, which I might describe as her poetics of small things, she allows herself a life within retrospect. She can be quite light on her feet, as in these lines from “I Live in the Layers”: “You yes are a husband not mine // You’re layered with Ps & Qs / As a pianist parent procrastinator // Or as quick quixotic / Enough yet never quite.” (I love that “never quite.”)

“Being third wife to you old man / Will not suit me,” she tells a man who “Stalk[s] through [her] nightmares.” Beware! “My djinns will torture you / My teeth may injure your manhood.” Her sober clarities come through terse thoughts as well as the spaces between them on the page. Terris no longer has the time to be anything but piercing, direct, in dispensing with social niceties.