

**Blues, Prayers, & Pagan Chants**  
Poems by Diane Sahms  
Alien Buddha Press [abuddhapress@yahoo.com](mailto:abuddhapress@yahoo.com)  
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*Review by Dennis Daly*

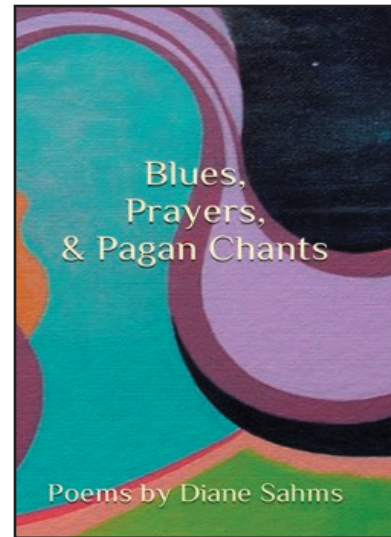
ARE THERE PARALLEL UNIVERSES that complete us, that deliver meaning where there seems to be only chaos-- a place, perhaps, for prayers to be delivered, petitions to be filed, unholy chants to be rhythmically sounded out, and sadnesses to be unfolded into wonder and song? Diane Sahms, at least in a literary sense, seems to think so. In her marvelous new book, *Blues, Prayers, and Pagan Chants* Sahms connects with this other shadow (sometimes sacred) reality, often using memory as her catalyst and nature as her medium.

A poem entitled "Songs of Praise" opens Sahms' collection. Birds of many feathers are her subjects of choice: a grosbeak, goldfinches, a woodpecker, orioles, a catbird, and a mourning dove. Somehow the poet merges her consciousness with their colorful cadences and flourishes. Consider the contemplative tone of these lines referring to the grosbeak,

*Black-hooded head  
brilliant semicircle of red,  
with a leaky valve extending down  
the middle of a white breast.  
Satin black wings with patches  
of white highlights  
& this sacred space—his rambling  
song and sharp rhythmic tweets—  
then silence—emptiness—  
to enter, to become silence,  
ever changed.*

Another early piece in the collection, Sahms' "Dulcimer's Broken Strings—Restrung," a well-wrought pantoum, details the grimness and privation of Philadelphia's mean streets in the eyes of a child, and a sensitive, artistic one to boot. Dreams of ghostly abodes with bungled plumbing and cracked plaster metamorphosize into musical refrains and brilliant word imagery. In the end the artist escapes, but the nightmare seems to persist as an alternative field, separate from reality but still a haunting presence. This presence must be acknowledged before any healing or high art takes place. Thus, the pantoum. Consider these lines as a mnemonic paean, gone, those childhood ghosts will show their faces no more

*nor haunting mice jumping out of toaster's coils.  
No more snake charmer baskets of interwoven thoughts  
Scurrying about the inside memory's walls  
nor haunting mice jumping out of toaster's coils.*



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*No more heartbreak of country tunes — crooning,  
Scurrying about inside memory's walls  
& numbing voices — playing over hollow airwaves.  
No more heartbreak of country tunes — crooning.  
No more superstitious stories, wives' tales  
& numbing voices — playing over hollow airwaves  
or crucifixes hanging from rusty nails in cracked plaster.*

In her poem "Wedding Portrait, 1934" Sahms peers into time's portal, seeking knowledge, preparing for an uncertain future. She sees the concern in her grandmother's eyes. In this telling scene, infused with intensity, the portrait's aged glass doubles first as a crystal ball and then as a weapon capable of turning sunlight into flame. The poet observes,

*Petals as snow owl feathers fall from a hand-  
held boutique much the way down feathers  
escape from pillow fights and there's a real tug  
here between memory and this present moment.  
I whisper, Beside you in a field of frozen sleep  
two of your four children now lie.  
Long trailing albino peacock veil fans out its tail  
on studio's floor like a foam tipped wave's arrival  
on an unexplored shore. Lace camouflages grief,  
& beneath her hidden shoes — a trap door.*

My favorite piece in this collection, Sahms' "Well-McLain Heater," strays a little from the poet's dominant nature imagery — but not really. The furnace becomes a ghostly backdrop to wintry life in a stone-walled space. Always there to adjust the temperature of life's troubles with new warmth and comforting, if metaphysical, rhythms, this mostly unnoticed machine periodically kicks on to penetrate the entire house. It projects its influence into humanity's dimension through strategically placed radiators that faithfully extend its essence. Here is the heart of the poem,

*... Stationary  
for countless years, little  
need for repair, unnoticed  
as a forgotten bike. Concealed  
companion clicks abruptly on  
& off, then all's silent, again  
& again, 24/7 works  
winter hard as a behind the scene  
maintenance man or out of the spotlight  
stage crew hand. Housed  
in basement, shares room with containers  
of Christmas decorations and boxes  
of retired books.*

Love in the city materializes as a miniature Eden in Sahms' "Urban Garden, a love poem." Emotional intensity rises with the contrast of nature and cityscape. The poet's beloved gently gardens his plants and their resulting flowers manifest gratitude. Seasons burst into wonder, blossoming multitudes sing their tonal arias of climaxing life until autumn collects

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them into disappearance. An unseen world grows into fruition, filling vacant patches of our landscape. The poet sets her scene this way,

*In marbleized moonlight, hidden  
garden, as if part of Eden  
had secretly fallen. Discreet  
in the city's concreteness, just  
at the bend of a shared neighborly  
driveway, where waist high  
red & pink roses tell  
of passionate love.*

Not all universes are invisible and ghostly. Some are tangible and exist with the same backdrop (albeit secretly) that mankind uses. Sahms' poem "The wall behind me

breathing" elucidates many such worlds made up of trees, currents, breezes, and hills. These natural phenomena practice with little effort their languages and dialects that in some ways parallel discourses exhibited within human society. Consider these lines,

*reminder of wind, the way it rolled song  
over sloped cliffs, among  
many languages of trees—  
even fallen, overturned ones,  
whose root matrixes plucked  
vibrations dead accents, decaying trunks  
fanning out fungus dialects.  
Everything has a voice.*

Indeed, everything does have a voice in this multilayered book. Diane Sahms loops in again and again, birdlike, to dazzle her presumably pensive audience with these deep blue poems of parallel possibilities. Lovely images. Tonally near perfect.