

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

**In the Absence of Birds (Cervena Barva Press, 2024) by Ruth C. Chad**

*Review By Lee Varon*

In this exquisite collection, poet Ruth Chad interweaves her keen attention to the details of our natural world with deep emotions of love, loss, joy, and grief.

Many of the poems in this collection (divided into three sections) focus on the poet's mother who suffered from Alzheimer's before she succumbed to the disease in her 90s. These poems read like journal entries with often just dates for titles

I imagine witnessing a loved one fall into the depths of dementia must be heart-wrenching as one sees the person becoming unmoored from their former life. Chad captures this brilliantly in such poems as:

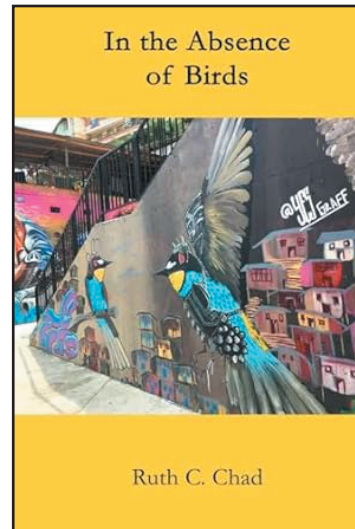
*April 24:  
Last night I dreamt of mermaids  
in the surf  
on the white  
wild mane of the waves  
and floating mussels  
with no flesh  
no byssus attached*

Byssus refers to the protein threads that attach mollusks, such as mussels, to solid surfaces.

What a perfect image of her mother, a shell of her former self, totally unable to attach to anything in the world around her.

Chad is not afraid to plumb the complexities of the mother/daughter relationship. In *If Only*, she laments the strictures of her mother's life.

*...Long after her death  
I will wish  
that my mother had been freed  
of the yellow walls  
of our split level  
that she could have walked  
calmly away  
from the turquoise kitchen  
apron trailing behind her in the grass  
that she could have walked  
calmly away  
into the moonrise  
and left a path  
for me*



## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

Chad's poems are a testament of how we go on, how we manage devastating things and come to terms with them. One thing poetry can do so well is help us survive difficult times and certainly Chad's poems provide this solace. Through her poetry, she illustrates how it feels to see a loved one slip into illness and infirmity, but she also shows us how one takes in the fullness of another's life and, in so doing, transmutes this loss into a triumph of the spirit.

These poems are artfully crafted with deceptive simplicity. Often, Chad dispenses with punctuation altogether and the beauty of her words on the page shines forth with its power and resonance. Most of these poems are no longer than a page and among these the poet intersperses haiku and other short poems which serve to crystallize her message as in this poem after her mother's passing:

*February 14  
I cried when I dropped the teacup  
robin's egg blue  
shattered shards of china  
on my kitchen floor  
it was yours*

No extra words slow the conveyance of the deep emotion in such poems.

There are poems in this collection about travel, the process of aging, and about other family members. All of these are imbued with Chad's keen attention to the natural world and breathtaking images as in lines from *Life in the Pandemic*:

*A hundred sparrows  
gather in the firs flutter  
against each other  
feathers bronze umber  
their chatter  
fills the lilac sky...  
And in another poem *Ice After a Storm*, the poet writes:  
I shudder  
in chill crusty morning  
awed by the cold fist of sun  
and how small I am  
standing here  
under the great loud beeches  
like a girl in the circus crowd  
the wild universe  
whirling around me*

Certainly, the poems in this enduring collection engender an equal sense of awe.

Lee Varon is a social worker and writer. Her latest poetry book is *The Last Bed* (2024). She has written two children's books about substance use disorder: *My Brother is Not a Monster: A Story of Addiction and Recovery* (2021) and *A Kids Book About Overdose* (2024).