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POETRY: April Blooms Poetry

BYLINE: Mark Eleveld, Special to The Chicago Sun-Times

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Patrick Rosal is quickly writing himself into the prominent role of young statesman in contemporary poetics. In his second book, *My American Kundiman* (Persea Press, 64 pages, \$13.95), Rosal combines heritage and strong thematic illumination that pinpoints his 21st century ear. Unabashedly, he is influenced by hip hop, blue collar issues and poetry alike: The result is a stunning collection of poems.

The title, *Kundiman*, means a "traditional Filipino song of unrequited love." While the book is filled with this love, it is the poems "A Poet Visits With Prisoners" countered by "The Woman You Love Cuts Apples for You" where truth of the holy in the everyday announces itself: "They do not cry/And they're not waiting 'til I leave/They describe the scent of apples/It's how they teach me to be free." Rosal is playful in form, clever in idea, and interesting in wordplay. Rosal's second book reveals a major talent.

Coming from the same youthful, "hip-hop-in-letters" generation as Rosal, Roger Bonair-Agard, a star in the poetry slam world, demonstrates the strength of the poems in his first book, *Tarnish and Masquerade* (Rattapallax, 104 pages, \$12).

This collection of road-tested material has been masterfully reassembled under a cover and binding. It is a revelatory experience to read poems that play as well on the page as they do orally -- perhaps the book offers a new, higher form of poetics, similar in vein to Tyehimba Jess' *Leadbelly* or Patricia Smith's *Teahouse of the Almighty*.

These books are exciting to be around, to see mature and become accomplished works, activating so many visceral levels at once. And while there are wonderful similarities amongst this group, once inside the book, it is all Bonair-Agard. *Tarnish* is broken into five acts (think of a traditional tragedy), many of which speak to Bonair's Trinidad background. An expatriot of the islands, these poems explore a longing for home, a bold criticism of familial and societal injustices, all played to the backbeat of a steel drum.

In Bonair-Agard's collection, we get to taste rum for the first time, get angry at adults for the first time, and point fingers at those who should know better. There are rich tapestries of color that expose the stories of these writings as well-crafted, intent-driven poems. Accompanied by a CD, this book is rich on many different levels.

Roam (Southern Illinois University, 96 pages, 14.95) by Susan B.A. Somers- Willett wonderfully teeters between subtlety and brashness. Broken into three sections, this collection of free verse lyrics, draws upon figures in antiquity as well as modernity to answer questions of loss.

One poem, "The Boy Who Would Be Achilles," plays in the subtle: "he was always the dutiful one/quietly came between his brothers' conflicts/ and buried the cat's kill in the yard." And the bold in "Ophelia's Technicolor

G-String: An Urban Mythology": "But for now, I will dance for the fat man/who sits in your place and sweats his love for me at 3 a.m./because only he knows I am Horatio in drag"

This is a smart collection that nicely underplays a confident, feminist voice in a very real world, where questions of identity and home are written with an often terse self-reflection. Playful without being self-indulgent, there is little emotional relief in these poems. This poet is tough. And to draw thematically from the cast of characters she has put together, it would not be inappropriate to suggest this book of poems gets to the heart of the ancient command: Know thyself.

Tony Fitzpatrick's *The Wonder: Portraits of a Remembered City Volume 2* (Last Gasp, 70 pages, 26.95) is a collection of art and poetry intertwined -- a collage of word, drawing and aged matchstick covers combined as a slice of Chicago memoir from the always edgy voice of Windy City favorite Fitzpatrick.

While the truth of these pieces lies within the relationship between the poem and the art, the poetry still stands on its own: "The Chicago owls, stopped short in a yellow tree; hunting a love story, or a near-love story. They cock their ears toward sweet words piled one on top of another, like sugar bricks. On cold days, the love stories have no special destination and turn to ice."

Fitzpatrick's work is imaginative, steady in voice, insightful and reflective, while giving and thoughtful. Not to mention tough. When all three volumes are complete, there should be a bus tour of Fitzpatrick's Chicago; a tour that dances between Comiskey Park (OK, Cellular Field), the lakefront on all of its borders, through Bucktown and into Fitzpatrick's head. Literally, a bus that drives in and out of Fitz's ears, with tourists and natives alike taking as many quick pics as possible; these volumes, *The Wonder*, are that good.

Mark Eleveld is editor of *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* due out this April, and *The Spoken Word Revolution*. He is a co-publisher at EM Press in Joliet.

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