

POEMS OF LOVE AND LOSS

a review by James W. Kirkland

Anthony S. Abbott. *Dark Side of North*. Press 53, 2021.

JAMES W. KIRKLAND is a Professor of Folklore, American Literature, and Rhetoric and Composition at East Carolina University. He has co-authored and co-edited seven books including *Writing with Confidence: A Modern College Rhetoric* (Heath, 1989), *Herbal and Magical Medicine: A Traditional Healing Today* (Duke UP, 1992) and *Concise English Handbook*, 4th ed. (Houghton, 1997).

ANTHONY S. ABBOTT (1935–2020) was the author of seven books of poetry, two novels, and four books of literary criticism. He won many prestigious awards for poetry and teaching, including the North Carolina Award for Literature, the James Larkin Pearson Award, and the Roanoke-Chowan Award for this collection of poetry. [Watch the video about this most recent honor here.](#) Before his passing, he was selected to be a 2020 inductee into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. That ceremony was postponed until 2022 due to COVID.

ABOVE Anthony Abbott in his office at Davidson College



PHOTOGRAPH BY LOGAN CYRUS; COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE MAGAZINE

Dark Side of North, Anthony Abbott's eighth and final poetry volume, is, as Jacqueline Bussie observes in her "Foreword," "a dying poet's last gift to us" – a collection of more than ninety previously unpublished poems organized into seven self-contained books, which collectively form what Abbott describes in the "Acknowledgements" as "a unified manuscript about the last twenty years of life, and how we deal with diminishing health, retirement, changes in living, losses – how we maintain our joy for living in the midst of these challenges."

Even before we begin our journey through the collection's seven books, the title poem, which stands alone as the Prologue, offers us a brief glimpse of what is to follow. Set in the present, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, *Dark Side of North* captures the essence of this strange "upturned world" of "hurricanes without rain" and "tornadoes without wind" – a world where "college students frolic on the

beach" while "trucks with bodies" line "the streets outside the hospitals" and "On Palm Sunday, the Pope spoke / alone to an empty Saint Peter's Square." Yet amidst the confusion and uncertainty of the time, there are signs of hope: "azaleas pink and white quiver in the breeze," the "cherry blossoms smile to the empty paths," and "the fingers of love beckon through the greening leaves."

In many other poems too, Abbott is an astute observer and interpreter of the world around him, finding joy and inspiration even in the smallest and most familiar things: "the April sun slanting through the new leaves" ("A Poem for My Daughter on Her Fiftieth Birthday"); "the smooth river flowing by / and the click of the oars as the crew shells /made their way along in perfect rhythm" ("What the Prefects Would Never Know"); "the naked branches / of the trees the sound of humming, the whirr / of wings" ("All Saints' Day"); "the fading light of evening / sky pink in the west" ("Even the Grass"); "the cres-

cent moon / sharp against the clear black / night" ("Suppose"); "leaves / yellow and red and orange, / which floated slowly down / into our waiting hands" ("The Long Afternoon"); "Half-moon high in the night sky / sliding upward from the cover / of trees" ("Half Moon"); "the gold crowned kingleet" perched "in the pines" ("The Light in the Window"); a luna moth "slowly, tentatively / then surely, / rising / into the sweet / June air" ("Grace"); "the circling / hawk who bends to the shimmering pool / and dives" ("The Crazy Man Visits the Zoo"); and all the other moments "we wait for live for" that impart "to all life / the aura of the mysterious, the sacred, / blessed and consecrated by the heart" ("That Without Which"). More often than not, these images of the beauty and sublimity of the natural world are inseparable from remembrances of its human inhabitants, especially those Abbott memorializes in an effort to fulfill what he describes in his essay "In His Own Words" as one of the poet's most important

roles: to "find words to keep . . . alive in our hearts" the "people who would otherwise be lost." Some of the most poignant of these elegiac moments occur in Part One: *The Book of Remembrances and Grace*, which includes "love poems" addressed to his daughter Carolyn, who died unexpectedly at the age of four ("A Poem for My Daughter on Her Fiftieth Birthday" and "Lyn's Poem"); his sister Nancy, his "true mother, . . . teacher, . . . protector," whom he imagines at her death wrapped in an angel's "bright wings," transported to "where that brightness is" ("The Light in the Window"); the calculus teacher who lives on in the memory of all who knew him, "walking home toward us all, telling us / to live" ("Even the Grass"); and numerous other beloved friends and family members.

In other sections, too, there are poems that "keep alive in our hearts" both those who have died and those near death like the dialysis patients described in Part Three: *The Book of Driving and Music*. They are "courageous souls" who "batter against the brittle end of things / forcing their blood through the dark machines / to buy forty-eight more hours" ("Ashes to Go"), and so too are the retirement home residents pictured in Part Five: *The Book of Departures* in poems such as "In the Retirement Home Eva," "In the Retirement Home Patrick," "In the Retirement Home the Widows," and "A Day with the Doctors." Eva lives in a constant state of confusion, suffering from memory loss and beset by worries that the nameless "they" are watching her, waiting for her "to do something / strange." "Sometimes," she says, "I / forget my whole name. Sometimes / I walk and walk and my mind wanders / to the sea, where I lived as a girl." Patrick (another resident) is seemingly "happy here," but his words belie the fact that he is living out his remaining years in a place he equates metaphorically with "a piece of starched heaven," separated physically and emotionally from his children and grandchildren, who "do not come to visit." Herbert,

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a third resident, measures out his days in endless doctors' visits. "Just an ordinary day," he says, "another damned ordinary day," much like days the widows (principal figures in a poem written in emulation of Eliot's *The Hollow Men* [1925]) spend sitting at a table for eight and "whisper[ing] of past transgressions" and "happier times" while "at the tables of four / the matched couples snicker / smartly between bites," gazing "furtively" at the women they will soon be joining.

There are numerous self-portraits, too, of the artist as he confronts the reality of his own failing health and fading memory. In the two poems at the beginning of *The Book of Departures*, we find him in the liminal space between his old life and the new, contemplating his move from family home to retirement home. A few pages later, in "No Time to Make Desserts" and "Something to Be Done," he thinks about his own "strange waning days" in this strange new place and reflects on what really matters most following his cancer diagnosis: not the debilitating effects of the treatment but "the surge of the soul / down the steps to the water" and "the color of the sky, as the sun / sinks southwestern into the blue lake / and it is still possible for something / to be done." And in the penultimate poem "Suppose," he strikes a similarly hopeful note, urging us to imagine what it would be like to return for just three days to a place we love after a long absence and

... walk down the
familiar street

which now
shines with strangeness with
the unearthly
light of
eternity itself and ... weep
for this day

and the two
others you have been given
to come back

before you
are gone again into whatever
place they send you.

In the next section, however, there is a significant change in tone as the poet begins to view familiar scenes through the lens of "these new days," which "like snow in November" are beautiful and white – but "troubling." The Half-moon high in

the night sky" – a source of beauty and wonder in earlier poems—now elicits only a brief glance: "I stand on the deck / and look, then close the door / and go to bed. No more of this." In "Quite the Opposite" he views his current state as "these odd days edging into the ether world" and himself as

this stupid old man
who begs for one more bite, and gets
instead these odd days, as I say,
... these doddering edgings into sleep
into the wax figures of dreams.

In "The Nameless," people once familiar

... drift in and out of namelessness,
caught for a moment in a bright flash
of light, then gone again for months
at a time drifting with other forgotten
down the green streams of the lost.

And in the last of the twelve poems in *The Book of These New Days*, "The Man Who Reads the Newspaper," a man much like the poet, once happy and attuned to all the things around him,

Now ... stares out the window
and wonders how he will spend the day.

It will be too cold to walk. He will read
his biography and look up the unknown
words on his smart phone, the lost places
of the heart dim in the haze of another dawn.

Ultimately, the sense of sorrow and loss that permeates *The Book of These New Days* recedes as the poet embarks on the last stage of life's journey in *The Book of the Last*, where each poem is an invitation to learn "what the heart knows" and all that it teaches us ("What the Heart Knows"). To "Be thankful for the gift of life / and the small birds who drink / from the pool outside your window" ("Do Not Forget This"). To "give thanks for the rain / which soaks the roots of the trees / and gives life again to the small / plants and the nameless purple / wildflowers the mowers have missed" ("Rain"). To savor every moment as it "opens like a gift" in "the stunned silence / of here and now." To "receive / each morning as a wrapped gift" ("The Last"). And to remember that "the last poem, the last linking / of lines, ... / the last silence between words" is not really the last because the words live on in the pages of *Dark Side of North* and the hearts of all who read them. ■

2021 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST

BY MARK SMITH-SOTO

Clichés

Time flies is one, and so is love and so's
that third repeat in a riff meant to resound.
And so's the appearance, in the rosy
morning light, of two hearts traced on

a dusty window. And so is death and so
are those grey poodles in their winter best,
rose-printed bows tied at their necks. And so's
an apple plucked from a low branch, held

half-bitten in the hand, and so is death.
Too corny for words – well, almost. Isn't it
what words aspire to after all is said,
to repeat memorably like "What the eyes don't

see, the heart won't feel," or "Love's like a red,
red rose" – or say, just for example, death?



And at the End (mixed media on paper, 30x22)
by Francisco Gonzalez

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Costa Rican-American poet **MARK SMITH-SOTO** has been with the *International Poetry Review* at UNC Greensboro for almost thirty years. Along with three prize-winning chapbooks, he has authored three full-length poetry collections, *Our Lives Are Rivers* (University Press of Florida, 2003), *Any Second Now* (Main Street Rag, 2006), and *Time Pieces* (Main Street Rag, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016). He won the James Applewhite Poetry Prize in 2012, and his winning entry and another finalist were published in the 2013 *NCLR* issues. *NCLR Online* 2013 also featured him in an essay on North Carolina's Latinx writers, and his poetry has also appeared in *NCLR* 2001, 2012, and *NCLR Online* 2020. Smith-Soto's work has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize and was recognized in 2006 with an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing. His *Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Istarú* (2010) and his lyrical memoir *Berkeley Prelude* (2013) were both published by Unicorn Press.

Charlotte, NC resident **FRANCISCO GONZALEZ** is a native of Mexico. A mostly self-taught artist, his work has been exhibited throughout the Carolinas, Georgia, Oregon and New York. He was a featured artist in the exhibitions *Celebrating The Legacy of Romare Bearden* at The Mint Museum Of Art in Charlotte, *The Mint Museum's Arte-Poesia-Música* and the annual *Con A de Arte*, and the *Arte Latino Now* at Queens University, Charlotte. His art appears in several private, permanent, and corporate collections throughout North Carolina. He has received awards from Associated Artists of Winston-Salem, NC, and the Charlotte Art League. His affiliations include ArtSi and the OBRA Collective, both in Charlotte, and Art for Art's Sake in Winston-Salem.