

FOUND MAGIC*a review by J.S. Absher***Joan Barasovska. *Orange Tulips*. Redhawk Publications, 2022.****Janis Harrington. *How to Cut a Woman in Half*. Able Muse Press, 2022.**

J.S. ABSHER has been a frequent finalist in *NCLR*'s James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest, so his poetry has appeared in several issues. His work has also been published in approximately fifty journals and anthologies, including *Visions International*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Southern Poetry Anthology, VII: North Carolina*. His first full-length book, *Mouth Work* (St. Andrews University Press, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), won the 2015 Lena Shull Book Competition sponsored by the North Carolina Poetry Society. He lives with his wife, Patti, in Raleigh, NC.

JOAN BARASOVSKA is Senior Vice President of Membership for the North Carolina Poetry Society. An academic therapist in private practice, Barasovska grew up in Philadelphia, PA, and resides in Orange County, NC. She has published two other poetry collections: *Birth Age* (Finishing Line Press, 2018) and *Carrying Clare* (Main Street Rag, 2022). Her poems have appeared in journals and anthologies such as *Flying South* and *Kakalak*.

Janis Harrington's *How to Cut a Woman in Half* and Joan Barasovska's *Orange Tulips* bring their readers intimate portrayals of emotionally fraught situations through well-crafted, moving poems. Their subject matters are similar – the suicide of a sister's husband in Harrington's book, a young woman who repeatedly attempts to harm and kill herself in Barasovska's book. Both poets employ understated but fully nourished styles. Both books end with a return to life – "to fresh woods and pastures new" – however changed it may be.

Janis Harrington's *How to Cut a Woman in Half* is a sonnet sequence that depicts two family tragedies and the loving relationship between sisters that helps overcome them. The occasion for the sequence is the suicide of Nick, the husband of Annie, a death that prompts the poet and narrator, Annie's older sister, to make an extended visit. The account of this visit occupies the bulk of the collection.

In the background is an earlier tragedy: some years before, the narrator's husband was severely injured in an automobile accident and for weeks lingered unconscious before dying. The narrator's experience with her unexpected loss, recounted here in several poems, helps her understand her sister's situation and emotions as they change

over time. Another strand of tragedy comes into view, as we come to see how Nick's family background shaped his life and decisions. For example, in "Holocaust Child," we read how the experience of Nick's mother as a refugee inflicted traumatic "pain / marking Nick's psyche like a port-wine stain." Other poems depict scenes from the sisters' childhood and young adulthood. The background stories add temporal and psychological depth and complexity to the main narrative.

How to Cut a Woman in Half consists of sixty-four sonnets, in loose iambics, that skillfully use rhyme and slant rhyme. Many of the poems end in rhymed (or slant rhymed) couplets, but many do not. The variation keeps the form fresh, as well as flexible enough to accommodate the collection's variety of tones. In a memorable and powerful poem, "Suicidal Ideation," Harrington imagines that state of mind as "dark starlings . . . / invading your hanging backyard feeder," a "nonstop attack" where "in waves, like bombers, they dive and peck." The poem has interesting sonic qualities, especially repetition of the k sound that comes to the reader's attention around line seven, with the "screeching and squawking" of the starlings. The final couplet, set off from the body of the poem, does

JANIS HARRINGTON is a four-time Applewhite finalist, including a third-place poem, and in 2023 won the contest. That winning poem will be in *NCLR* 2024. Find her other finalist poems in earlier issues. Her work has also appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing*, *Kakalak*, among other venues. Her first collection of poems, *Waiting for the Hurricane* (St. Andrews University Press, 2017), won the Lena M. Shull Book Award, given by the North Carolina Poetry Society.

COURTESY OF JANIS HARRINGTON



not employ end rhyme, but uses internal rhyme (the birds “blot out all light, transforming noon to midnight”) and a recurrence of the k sound: “No escape. A full eclipse of hope.” As in this last line of the poem, many lines have nine syllables, lending the poem a plain-speaking, laconic quality.

The book’s tone is not unrelieved gloom. The poet’s prior experiences and her distance, however slight, from Nick’s death provide room for exasperation, frustration, humor, even a bit of satire, all of which, like grief, are inescapable. The narrator’s experiences with her sister’s pets – “a string of dysfunctional animals / dating back to our childhood” (“Pet Sitter”) – provide opportunities for pathos as well as comedy, including the mock-epic confrontation between Annie’s dog Hugo, a poodle-bichon frisé mix, and a pug named Homer (“Iliad”): Hugo “halts at a gate, / launches a ferocious recitative,” and then “Homer appears . . . tail straight / with outrage.” A moment mixing comedy and pathos occurs in “Alarm” when the narrator attempts to prepare for her sister a “fake meat loaf” that is vegan and gluten-free, “so thick a mixture, / it overheats the new blender’s motor” and triggers “the smoke alarm, / shrilling my failure to heal or nurture.”

One of the great strengths of *How to Cut a Woman in Half* is the construction of the narrative. Although the sequence follows a familiar chronology – from a loved one’s death, to the funeral, to the scattering of the ashes, to the long period of mourning and recovery – it strategically reveals

Nick’s and the sisters’ pasts and the untimely loss of the poet’s husband. The poems are so arranged that the title poem, “How to Cut a Woman in Half,” applies with equal force to both sisters:

Fate, a cruel magician, vanishes her husband,
leaving her table with half as many plates,
shower rack missing half its towels,
bed half empty. The trick: after the blade falls,
she shrinks herself into half of her former life.

This poem occurs not long after the sequence’s midpoint, and almost exactly in the middle of Part Two, immediately after four sonnets on the extended dying of the poet’s husband. The narrator is deeply involved in the progress of her sister’s grief, handling the many practical matters that require attention after a death as well as providing comfort and support. Her loving service helps her complete the long-delayed healing from her own husband’s death: being “daily witness to her reckoning with loss, / released my heart’s stubborn resistance” to accepting her husband’s fate (“Acroyoga”).

One of my favorite poems in the collection, “Prayer for My Sister,” describes the narrator’s attempt to cheer her sister by driving “to see the superbloom / promised by winter rainfall.” On the way, Annie is aloof and silent. But then they top a hill:

Jeweled colors splash to the horizon:
yellow fennel, poppies, verbena, blue lupine.
Annie parks on the shoulder, opens the door,
finds a path into the meadow. Shedding
her jacket, she lifts her face to the sun.
Let this temporary parole from distress
remind her that beauty and joy still exist.

Orange Tulips by Joan Barasovska is the poet’s coming-of-age story told through powerful confessional poems. After the introductory poem, it consists of fifty-four poems in three sections: “Too Young,” “All Wrong,” and “Only Now.”

“Too Young” begins with poems of innocence, but portents of trouble accumulate, like the father’s vulnerability (“His Heart”) and marginal position in the family’s power dynamics (“Physics”). In “Sore Throat,” the child imagines she causes the sickness to which she is prone – “I’m a little girl who believes she can / make herself sick just

by being sad // . . . I want the gentleness that only sickness gets you” – while the mother, upset and angered by her constant illness, is unsympathetic. The family dynamics may not explain the mental and emotional difficulties that overwhelm the narrator as a child and young woman, but they do explain why she conceals issues until she can no longer do so. In “A Dark Door Opens,” the first poem in “All Wrong,” she “hide[s] in bed,” “go[es] to a few [college] classes / but only hear[s] a roaring sound.” She “can barely talk.” On New Year’s Eve, she “throw[s] / [herself] down the basement stairs.”

Some of my favorite poems come near the end of “Too Young.” In “1963,” at the age of nine or ten, while crossing the Schuykill River Bridge with her Girl Scout troop, the narrator fixates on the idea of jumping: “I don’t ask Miss Kelly why people jump. / She knows about hikes, knots, campfires. / Starting today, I’m the authority on jumping.” Equally fine is the next poem, “Girl on a Bus”: “She can’t know why / she’s cried all day at school.” As in several other poems, the third-person point of view provides distance and perspective. It is the voice of the mature poet that emerges at the end of the collection. The poem looks ahead to future events that *Orange Tulips* recounts – the narrator as a teenager and young woman – and to events further in the future, when the narrator is wife and mother, that are largely beyond the book’s scope.

“Too Young” also contains signs of the child’s future as a poet – the imaginary stories and worlds shared with her brother, in “My Little Brother,” and with a friend, in “Found Magic.” This gift reappears in “Friends on the Inside” when, as a patient in a locked psychiatric ward, the narrator “write[s] down the accidental / poetry of overheard hallucinations.”

The poems in the middle section, “All Wrong,” confess painful events and states of mind that must have been grueling to write. The understated style works beautifully, as in this section’s title poem:

I walk and walk.
I only feel well
on trains and buses.
I draw odd diagrams
in small books.
I don’t wonder
why I’m done for.

The style encompasses the cryptic – “split wires / cold sweat / dark day” (“Waking at Noon”); the explanatory – “The pros knew the ins and outs of sharps” (“Hurting”); the dramatic – “Gigantic George stands naked in the waters” (“George’s Big Night”); the confiding – “What would you like to be doing in five years? / I answer, too quickly, I’d like to be dead” (“Melvin”); and the confessional – episodes of self-harm and suicide attempts. In a moving confession, “I’ve Never Told It Before,” the poet describes how a confidante in the hospital apparently carried out the poet’s suicide plan using a broken piece of light bulb.

Though the poet spends “[d]ay after day in a barrel” (“Caesura”), there are glimmers of hope, especially in trees and in prayer:

O tree I prayed to . . .
I knew you, lovely one,
. . .
God spoke from your
buds and leaves . . . (“Young Tree”)

In “No One Knows About This,” the trees “lie down to rest,” an image of the exhausted poet: “They unclench their roots, groan.” But like her, at dawn they “yank themselves upright.” “Keep Her Safe” offers another prayer, now in third person: “keep her from rooftops / . . . keep pills in their bottles // . . . Lord, send rescue.”

Inexplicably, on a day the poet cannot place – “A Tuesday in May? / My December birthday?” – her life changes: “In one breath I could stand



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