

William Thompson

Recommended Reading

Lines of Flight, by Catherine Chandler.
Able Muse Press. \$15.95.

As a literary movement, New Formalism ran its course more than a decade ago, but many of its leading figures—Rhina Espaillat, for example, who wrote the introduction to *Lines of Flight*—still gather online at AbleMuse.com’s Eratosphere pages, where they join other writers in critiquing each others’ work and exchanging opinions about contemporary poetry, fiction, art, and politics. In 2010, the newly founded Able Muse Press published an anthology of Eratosphere authors and continues to publish a print edition of the *Able Muse Review*, as well as a series of beautifully designed books by individual poets.

As anyone familiar with the Eratosphere would expect, *Lines of Flight*, published earlier this year, showcases a variety of poetic forms deftly handled. Of the 60 poems in this volume, 23 are sonnets, but Chandler also is in firm command of sapphic stanzas, ballad stanzas, the villanelle, the cento, and the haiku, among others. Here, for example, is a very tricky Dominican form recently popularized by Espaillat, the ovillejo:

Moriah holds my hand in early June.
 Though soon
the lilies we admire will wither, still,
 she will

be happy for our fugitive vignette.

Forget-
me-nots we'll pick, blue thistle, fern rosette,
hawkweed, trillium, wild columbine:
an afternoon perennially mine,
though soon she will forget.

With its alternating long and short lines, the ovillejo (in English, “little ball of yarn”) lends itself to light subjects. The short lines must be combined to make the concluding line, and when done well the effect is usually charming. But Chandler, while exploiting its capacity for song, demonstrates that the ovillejo can also achieve real depth and power. A less serious poet might have been contented with the technical feat of knitting three short lines into a meaningful conclusion. In “For My Granddaughter,” however, each isolated iamb carries its own sense of regret (“Though soon”) or determination (“she will”) or consciousness of time’s flight (Forget- / me-nots . . .). Notice, too, how cleverly Chandler uses the word “perennially”: each plant she picks is a perennial, but she will also treasure the memory of this day year after year. And, in spite of the poem’s assertions, so will Moriah revisit this day each time she reads this beautiful poem in memory of her grandmother.

I’ve never fully believed that, as is sometimes said, it is harder to write well in free verse than in received forms, but I do know that the latter are much less forgiving of the merely competent. In poem after poem, Chandler shows herself to be the kind of poet whose imagination, to paraphrase Valéry, is stimulated by formal demands. The result in this case is genuine art.