



Cloud of Expectation

Mike Westphal

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Cloud of Expectation is a sophisticated yet approachable collection of poems.

Mike Westphal's *Cloud of Expectation* collects lyric and prose poems that recall the author's childhood and ancestral past. A vibrant speaker connects the various pieces.

The book reads very much like a long modernist poem, reaching for epic status by remembering a past that is rich with structure and meaning. Stolid ancestors from Germany and bubbly Irish relatives make multiple moves, searching for their own Eden; their stories provide background and context for the young speaker.

The narrator expresses awe for nature and skepticism of popular anti-Catholic and anti-Communist sentiments. Poems are regionalist, often lyrical, and controlled. Arkansas, captured through details about its geography and settings, helps to situate, ground, and connect the poems, which move from Westphal's grandfather's Stone Palace to a creek teeming with wildlife. "The Creek" is a model of the visual imagery and crisp language that the collection favors, describing the natural world in striking ways:

*Leopard frogs: sleek princelings of the amphibian world
ballet dancer legs
in spotted Renaissance tights...Crawdads, eyes on stalks
peeping out of mudpile burrows
Tiny black points of awareness.*

The voice is youthful and energetic—attributed to inheriting his mother's joy, rather than his paternal family's quiet pessimism. Poems are nostalgic. The collection's prose poems are presented more self-consciously, but are strong examples of creative nonfiction.

While various poems are idyllic, prelapsarian, and pastoral, the collection defies pigeonholing. The rich, personal identities of the narrator, his family, and his neighbors populate the poems like characters in a play; they may appear and vanish on stage, but they are memorable and entertaining. The author's ability to convey the personal in universal themes of growth, maturity, and memory enliven these individuals who are relatable in their familiar struggles.

The poems capture a family structure in which both sets of grandparents lived close by—something that is highlighted as less common today. They include figures like Westphal's emotionally distant maternal great-grandfather, whose hardscrabble life is recalled, as is the death of his infant daughter. Fine details of joy and loss are woven throughout the collection.

The last poem, "A Thriving Burg," extends the collection's sense of home and collective identity with its Germanic echoes, but concludes on a jarring note, responding to those who "want their country back." Its smoking anger violates the gentle tone and pleasantness of the broader collection; it feels tagged on.

Cloud of Expectation is a sophisticated yet approachable collection of poems that captures a generation of German and Irish immigrants and their descendants sometimes thriving and sometimes failing in their adopted America.

PHILIP J. KOWALSKI (August 16, 2018)

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