



The Sand Carriers

Val Villarreal Jr.

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This memorable work makes its mark through its original and eloquent expression of ideas.

The Sand Carriers is Val Villarreal Jr.'s unadorned collection of poetry. Its poems stand independently and speak strongly on their own, with often lyrical phrases that give rise to evocative images, exploring themes from death and pain to love, loss, and regret.

The collection comes without introductory material to clarify its purpose or tie its pieces together. Instead, the poetic structures themselves do the work of capturing and holding interest. They are presented with generous amounts of white space that allow them to breathe on the page, with an occasional extra splash between lines.

Similarly, variations in line lengths provide contrast and build momentum, particularly in the poems that deliver the greatest impact. A careful selection of words and punctuation—including deliberately placed dashes and sometimes surprisingly positioned semicolons after single words—signal clear places to pause and absorb meaning.

Largely marked by an overriding sense of melancholy and isolation, this collection of relatively brief entries sometimes skips a beat in sequential numbering and stirs up profound frustration related to matters of the heart. Some points reflect real-life experiences; they remain the most elusive of the collection's images, as with the "tyranny called life" in "A poem with no name." Questions about rain and getting wet after "cautious termination" also remain unanswered.

Other poems take mystifying turns. After tackling dark subjects like graves, lines in the sand, lack of freedom, and missteps, some endings finish on forced-feeling rhymes. Other endings are awkwardly declarative or flat.

The collection's strongest pieces eschew rhyming altogether. In "A leaning," Villarreal successfully creates a vivid Parisian scene, along with the painterly image of "the setting sky." In "Standing cold," he explores the "depths of night" by capturing the unsettling but on-point sensation of disappearing. Many other equally powerful poems wrestle with tears, rust, and hauntingly out-of-step shadows.

The best poems here are those that unlock wistful emotions. Simple but beautiful combinations of words create a prolonged, reverberating musical effect. Thoughts about memories, missed connections, and love are insightful, tapping into personal yet universal experiences.

Beyond its insights about missed connections, this memorable work makes its mark through its original and eloquent expression of ideas, particularly related to "the skin of life." Observations such as that "all of time's vowels sing" are artful and moving. Some poems have the flavor of compelling vignettes. Lines play with what's familiar.

The most powerful poems in *The Sand Carriers* are scintillating, and they will leave a lasting impression.

ANDREA HAMMER (December 29, 2017)

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