

EXCERPT
Selected Poems

Riding the Absolute

poems

Roger Ladd Memmott



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CITATION

Riding the Absolute

This is a deeply philosophical collection of poems, assaying the ultimate questions, but doing so with élan and music. The title poem points the way into this book, and into the central problems of meaning-making in our time. "Riding the Absolute" opens with the speaker chanting how we are not the words we use, nor are we even the images that register on the retina and brain of the one who observes us. We are all memories of each other within each other's head, says the poet, and like castaways we "ride the absolute" into the emptiness and absence of existence. This is not a comforting thought, but it has a bracing shock of recognition and considerable truth.

That emptiness, that abyss of being, is palpable throughout this book. And hovering at the edges of it is something else: our capacity to sing in praise, to lament in our sorrows. As serious and existentially bleak as the philosophical core of this book is, there is also an emotional allegiance to the fragments and tendons of meaning we can preserve and nourish. This book celebrates our capacity to "solve the riddles of love & pain" or at least to attempt such. We live our lives "in ashes," says this poet, and are "firebirds rising anew/holding fast to the syntax of faith."

To put the matter another way, this is a book that dramatizes the dialectic of meaning and non-meaning, faith and despair, wholeness and fragmentary nothingness. This is without doubt the inescapable conundrum of our own time, and the poems in this book attempt to chart a path between, or among, these various dualities. Thus there are love poems that lean or tilt one way or another, but always they seem to find some kind of meaning in the face of what would take it away. One example that comes to mind is an elegy for the poet's dog, "Sissel in Heaven." One would think this might be more or less a spoof, but it is not. It is beautiful and tender, even as it is realistic and honest about the dog just being a dog. Love can tilt toward romance or lust, but these poems are intent on finding the path or line of the authentic in our innermost affairs of the heart. Probably one of the finest poems in the collection is "Keeping Diaries in Code"—a poem possessed by a desire for naming the existentially authentic in love.

In short, these are poems that are uncompromising in the desire to find or create at least one solid thing that human beings can count on in a universe of potential nothingness. That solid thing is the individual human capacity to sing, to connect with others, to understand the actual conditions of existence, and not only to understand it, but to name it as "riding the absolute."

Melanie Rigney - Editor
Writer's Digest

Riding the Absolute was chosen by a panel of judges as one of five winners in its genre in a field of over 1900 entries in the independent publishers' 9th Annual Writer's Digest National Book Awards.

“To risk is beautiful...”

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT is made to the magazines where several of these poems first appeared, some in slightly different form: *ByLine*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Reed Magazine*, *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, *Paintbrush*, *BYU Studies*, *Promised Valley Playbill*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *Eureka Review*, *Wye Magazine*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Pegasus*, *The Pegasus Review*, *Fiction 59*.

Daddy was a railroad man
Mama taught school
They went to church on Sunday
& preached the Golden Rule



Everything worth knowing my father taught me
Everything worth being my mother taught me



This book is for them
Orion
Nelda

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Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet: Between who?

Polonius: I mean the matter that you read,
my lord.

SYNTAX OF FAITH

Strangely lost by a right instinct
we revise & hack
working to get it right—
bad blood, not words,
deceiving us from ourselves.

Ask eternal questions
& we get instead
the moon off an oil slick
—image/split—
for instance: extending *behind* the eyes.
We get a yellow crayon, mad,
300 miles ahead of the pain
& close to the truth.

Such are the visions of becoming,
shared among friends
in the shadow of a stone fireplace
when the light begins to fail.
Such are the desperate moves
of a guitar player whose fingers know emptiness
& what it means to play
from a room the size of a wound.

To solve the riddles of love & pain,
we live our lives in ashes, firebirds rising anew,
holding fast to the syntax of faith,
listening again to the words we break
like pieces of prayer.

POINTS OF VIEW

What if we were cave people
& lived in caves & ate
Woolly Mammoth
& had no language
except signing & pictographs
on debatable walls?

What if we loved rocks?

What would we think
when lightning struck
& trees came undone,
their imploring limbs swaying
like civilized dreams &
fire smoothed away the dark?

What if you loved me,
would I bring you flowers?

What if we crawled into our TV sets
as though they were caves &
language meant nothing
(except in its humming,
its shimmer, its electric
skittering, shaking itself
loose & getting into
some young boy, a girl,
the stuttering beat of a heart
like roots or grafts going deep
into the flesh of generations)
& our emotions were as dull

as bread & the only thing left
was the curiosity of dogs sniffing
among the rubble for survivors
of another white hot blast
deep inside the guts of CNN?

What of our desire for rain?

If we were cave people & lived
in TV sets & ate the transistors
& had no way of communicating
except by graffiti on subway walls,
would deep thoughts and the language
of computers keep our children intact?

What if there was no way back
& gravity undid itself & the world entire
fell away & left us floating in space:
TV sets, automobiles, computers, the
fancy china of a five-star restaurant,
noodles & that sort of thing, a cow
floating by good as the nursery rhyme
that started it all, a saber-toothed tiger
goeey with tar & the little white blink
of the world eons toward eternity?

What if there was no way back
& when we flipped channels
reception was bad, even the
Flintstones—everything
scrolling
ghostly

& a high-pitched buzz.

FOR THE MOST PART

This is a house like any other
but for the small things.

Notice first the absence of memories:
Not a family photo in sight, but one.
On the hallway taboret, a “historical” novel
lying face down touts its reviews.

Albums and class yearbooks you’ll find
locked behind the glasspaned doors
of the dining room hutch.
O, you can see the spines, but nothing inside,
and the key is tucked in a safe place away from
the possibility of little hands
or someone who might want to know.

The only photo displayed rests slightly askew on the
fireplace mantel in an unadorned frame: this is a
memento of the grandchild who can’t be seen
beneath the dim waters of the foreground pond....

This is a place where happy memories
for the most part
make one sad.

THE UNIVERSE

The universe is like my mother's cabinet,
fierce stars, not towels and bottles of medicine,
so thoughtfully arranged, behind the closed door.

The universe is like my father's employ, rough atoms,
not freight trains trembling past switchfrogs,
space giving way to time, punctual as the earth
greeting the sun, the moon, the equinox of birth,
sliding backward into that split micro-moment
when all things converge, like the train that couldn't
then did in spite of all that death has to offer,
breathed life after life, with one huge breathing
to step over and across...like my mother's cabinet,
my father's train lifting away from the tracks with a sigh.

When you walk downhill, slow, pausing, a hand
on the gate, no longer growing up but older, it's
nothing like that. No, the universe is like my mother's
cabinet where poems are written & father's train goes
to meet the stars.

SISSEL IN HEAVEN

But for the fjords of Norway
& the pure strains of that voice
who would name their pup Sissel?

All dogs go there,
whether vicious, loving, or rank—
see the grace in their moon-cluttered eyes?

This is an important point as you call from the porch
(so blue in the face) —
and still she won't come!

Just barks her head off at cars passing by,
cars passing by...

O, heartbreaker!
Nuisance!

As important as dogs are in life,
why, like people, are they
so much more important in death?

Aggrieved, mending in anguish at midnight
grave-swollen earth,
railing beneath the watery moon in the oak,
desperate to know:
Are dogs stupid
or are they just dogs?

Faux German Shepherd, she—
now pedigreed by default,
yet weighted in memory
& goofy with love.

About the Author

ROGER LADD MEMMOTT'S short stories and poetry have appeared in dozens of magazines, including *Confrontation*, *Sou'wester*, and *Cumberland Poetry Review*. He taught Fiction Writing at the University of Cincinnati for several years and is the recipient of several writing awards. His most recent novel is *Nebraska's Map*. He lives on the West Coast with his wife and has two grown children.