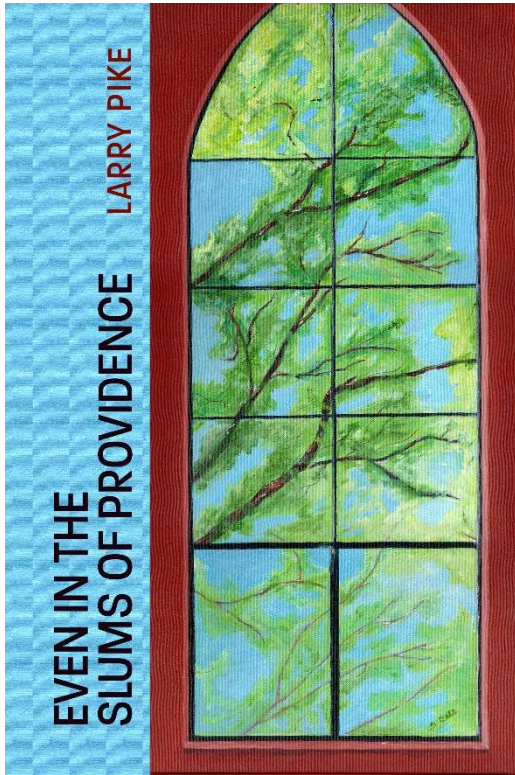


Poetry collection shows author's gift

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"Even in the Slums of Providence" by Larry Pike. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2021, 82 pages, \$19.99 (paperback).



"Of course it's precautionary, probably will be discontinued once the echo results are back, but being handed the nitro script jolts the pulse, stimulates sharp, darting pains, which would seem contraindicated. I feel a searing sensation accompanying the removal of tapes securing sensors to my chest, where I finger a suddenly smooth spot, considering a future that feels like someone else's, tastes fleeting under my tongue."

The visceral prose you just silently reflected upon is "My EKG," one of the exceptionally poignant yet somehow intimately familiar poems in "Even in the Slums of Providence," Larry Pike's recently released collection of poetry. For a moment there I sensed, in an almost intuitive way, what Larry was obviously feeling when he experienced the procedure at some point in the past. And although I've never been a huge fan of this particularly literary form, I'll have to admit that I was strangely drawn to the mental images this superb collection innately engenders in the reader.

"Even in the Slums of Providence" consists of 53 poems arranged in three sections: "Should Have Held Out for More Water," which is made up of the first 18 poems; "Solved for X Instead of Y," which is comprised of the next 19 poems; and "Luxuries That Exceed Our Grace," the final 16 poems. Pike explores the common experiences many of us have shared as our lives have steadily progressed – and although the circumstances and situations we have encountered vary in countless ways, the feelings they evoke are often irrefutable and universal.

Pike has a way of effortlessly connecting with his readers that I find inherently reassuring and even optimistic. His style is naturally fluid and almost spiritual; his words literally transport you to a different dimension which transcends space and time, yet somehow seems hauntingly familiar.

As the years continue to pass by at a discernibly increasing pace (as they do or will for all of us), I saw my own mortality mirrored in many of the poems. For example, see if you can relate to this passage from "The Camel's Back," one of my personal favorites from the initial section:

*“More and more I’m the oldest guy
out there, except when my friend Joe
joins the neighbors chatting
in a knot under the streetlight.
The shifting shadows make it difficult,
sometimes, to see the elderly beagle crawl...”*

A retired human resources manager, Pike has a B.A. in English from Mars Hill College and a M.A. in Communication from Purdue University. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *Seminary Ridge Review*, *Cæsura*, *Exposition Review*, *Cadenza*, *Capsule Stories*, *Jelly Bucket*, as well as several anthologies, and other publications. His play, “Beating the Varsity” was a Kentucky Voices production at Horse Cave Theatre in 2000, and it was published in “World Premieres from Horse Cave Theatre” in 2009; two additional of his plays have received staged readings. This is his first collection of poetry.

It turns out the deceptively mundane subject matter that forms the architecture for much of Pike’s work is magically transformed once he puts brush to canvas. Witness the following from “On Seeing Bart Starr in the Nashville Airport,” from the last section:

*“to be touched yet eluding grasping fingers, the graying
athlete hesitated behind a stocky sales rep wheeling
a sample case across his path, then slashed through
a hole that closed as quickly as it opened, a nifty,
instinctive move that halted my son who raised his arms
overhead, signaling nothing more than frustration in failing”*

I know exactly how Pike felt.

As Joseph Bathanti, North Carolina Poet Laureate (2012-2014) astutely observes, “There’s much to love about *Even in the Slums of Providence*, by Larry Pike. What I return to over and over, however, is the deeply contemplative tenor of these nuanced, beautiful, always direct poems. They remind us again and again of the daily sorrows and epiphanies that punctuate a life and the difficult enterprise of reconciling those extremes. Yet Pike obviously relies upon the muse of faith for his chiseled language, and *the holy wind that ignites the engine of imagination, / already circumnavigating the essential orbit of wonder*. The humility, the often Zen-like acknowledgement that the world is beyond our ken, permeates these poems. Often elegiac, but never maudlin, leavened cannily with gleaming wit, they chant long after you close this memorable volume.”

I could not agree more.

Again, I’m not what you would call a poetry enthusiast. And although my younger self ventured into the medium during my college years, I never had the gift that Pike displays on virtually every page of this exquisite little volume. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.