
Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez. *A Light to Do Shellwork By*. Scarlet Tanager Books, 2022, 68 pp. ISBN: 9781734531350

<https://scarlettanager.com/a-light-to-do-shellwork-by-poems-by-georgiana-valoyce-sanchez/>

Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez's long-awaited debut collection is, at its core, a book about family, though family is ultimately a very large concept for her. Dedicated to her Chumash father, John Joseph Moreno, and her O'odham mother, Rosita Olea Moreno, *A Light to Do Shellwork By* highlights the myriad connections that endure over time, through place, and along the varied pathways of human lives. In characterizing the book in this way, I am self-consciously trying to avoid words that suggest the blending of different heritages or traditions. For one of the most immediate impressions produced by Valoyce-Sanchez's work is how meaningless tired tropes of mixed identity and culture (which tend to suggest divisions needing to be reconciled) are for her. Rather, the poems in this collection highlight how, in her experience, being an Indigenous person in California is about having a sense of deep connection with a rich and complex world, one that is eternally present and marked by unities, not gaps.

A Light to Do Shellwork By opens with a prose poem titled "The Gathering," a piece that is simultaneously very precise in its presentation of a location (Gaviota, CA, the historical site of multiple Chumash villages and petroglyphic art) and timeless in its depiction of a moment (the beginning of ceremony). Like many of the pieces in the collection, this is a simple poem on its surface that contains great profundity underneath. The sun rises. The smells of coffee and bacon mix with the sounds of people waking. An elder blows into a conch shell to call the people to prayer. The people come. In that simplicity resides the poem's fundamental meaning, which provides a keynote for the book. Ultimately, it is the moment of gathering, presented as an act of continuity and community untroubled by the passage of history, that is the sufficient climax, the essential act. The poem needs no other subject. And what Valoyce-Sanchez goes on to do throughout the book is to continue this act of gathering, weaving together family memories, ancient stories, and a range of places that crisscross the southern California and Arizona landscape.

In one of the early poems in the collection, "The Dolphin Walking Stick," Valoyce-Sanchez recalls her father engaged in an act of storytelling as he shows her an object of great importance to him (and now to her). As the poem progresses, the reader is reminded that in the Chumash creation story, an important moment is the migration from what are now called the Channel Islands to the mainland, using a rainbow bridge created by Kakunupmawa (the Sun) and Hutash (the Earth Mother). During the journey along that bridge, some of the Chumash people fail to follow Kakunupmawa's instruction to not look down at the waters far below. Losing their balance and falling into the sea, they are subsequently transformed into dolphins, a moment that establishes an enduring relation between two now distinct, but connected People, some living on land and some in the deep waters of the central California coast. The presence of the walking stick as the focal point for this moment of storytelling weaves together multiple layers of meaning tied to this knowledge. For what Valoyce-Sanchez's father is teaching her is that the Chumash homeland, the dolphin people leaping from the waters, coated in their rainbow glister, and the relations between them, are all imminent in her being. Father and daughter literally walk with these stories every day, if they only

remain aware of that fact. With that knowledge, the poem suggests, one finds oneself at home through a walking stick, which is indeed a symbolic object, but also so much more than a symbol:

He says
 sure, you look for your Spirit
 symbol your totem
 only it's more a waiting
 watching
 for its coming

You listen
 You listen for the way it
 feels deep inside (3)

The sense of deep connection I am highlighting here appears in numerous ways throughout the collection. Valoyce-Sanchez takes care to highlight the *continuous* ways that she experiences the desert landscapes of inland southern California (and Arizona). In the prose poem “The Inland Sea,” those connections are reinforced in multiple ways. Describing a wildflower bloom near Indio, CA, Valoyce-Sanchez foregrounds the reappearance of familiar colors (the blue, white, and red one finds throughout the pictographic art in the mountains above Santa Barbara and emphasized in Chumash cosmology) as the source of a sense of perpetual grounding. (In another poem she calls this feeling of groundedness “the universe we are.”) As Valoyce-Sanchez and her mother take in the sight of the flowers, her father comments on the presence of fish fossils in the desert rock. In the end, the union of “seashells and flowers” paralleled in the union of the family itself (and recalling the union of land people and ocean people in the origin story), bespeaks yet another form of gathering (21). Later in the collection, in “The Red Shawl,” (described as a “one-act poem”), Valoyce-Sanchez again uses an object (the red shawl of the title) to emphasize the connection between three women, each embodying a specific stage of life—youth, middle age, and old age. The culmination of this poem (which is indeed written in the manner of stage directions for a short performance) centers on the old woman, who becomes the focal point of another gathering:

The young woman leaves the spotlight
 head bent down she hesitates
 before reaching for the middle-aged woman's hand
 Together
 they walk toward the old woman
 and sit beside her
 ...
 The old woman laughs
 a pleasing cackle of delight
 I am alive she says (27)

Even when a poem takes as its subject a scene of apparent discontinuity, Valoyce-Sanchez finds ways to reinforce her central theme of connection. In “Almond Trees,” while on a car trip through Banning, CA, Valoyce-Sanchez's mother comments on the absence of what were once (in the early 20th century) ubiquitous almond orchards. Valoyce-Sanchez's treatment of the theme of changing

physical space does not emphasize loss, however. Rather, her mother's memory and vision render the seemingly absent past present again: "There is it there/it is/she says pointing/ to a thirty-acre scar/of bare earth/seeing/so many almond trees/that aren't there anymore" (32). Similarly, in "Starry Night," Valoyce-Sanchez focuses on the ghost town (a term she complicates) of Picacho, CA, which is located on the border with Arizona. Many Californians would think of Picacho as an abandoned mining town, now buried underwater after the completion of the Imperial Reservoir, if they thought of it at all. For Valoyce-Sanchez, though, the site of the town (which was founded by her O'odham great grandfather, José María Mendivil) evokes something different. Her poem recounts a camping trip, walking in the hills and looking at the stars. Recollections of star-stories of the Seven Sisters (the Pleiades in Euro-Western traditions) shared by various Indigenous peoples dominate Valoyce-Sanchez's thoughts on this "profound Picacho night" (52). And in such a context, the meaning of the place loses any sense of loss it might have taken on in the hands of another writer. "Ghosts walk among us," in Valoyce-Sanchez's version of this ghost town:

Great-Granpa
 long dead the old Picacho townsite
 transparent in starlight

Gramma Daddy Mama
 Breathing in our midst
 the light of stars long dead alive
 and shining this dark night. (53)

Placed as the penultimate piece in the collection, the title poem offers perhaps the most condensed expression of Valoyce-Sanchez's core artistic values in this book. Dedicated to her father's memory, "A Light to Do Shellwork By" recalls "The Dolphin Walking Stick" in certain respects. The poems' situations have some similarities, with father (now old) and daughter again sitting alone and talking together, but now driven by the appearance of sunlight filtering through bedroom window curtains to reflect on abalone shellwork. Abalone shells come in many colors, of course, but in Chumash decorative art, one often finds an emphasis on three central colors and their associated elements--white (wind), red (fire), and blue (water)--all of which I mentioned earlier as recurrent motifs in the collection. Valoyce-Sanchez highlights those colors, among others, in the poem, while also referencing her father's focalization of the connections between sun and ocean. All of this, I would suggest, calls to mind again the story of Chumash migration highlighted in the earlier poem:

My father turns his head to acknowledge the sun
 The light the light
 he says
 and the light within

It's a good light to do shellwork by

The ocean sang in my father's hands
 Abalone pendants shimmered rainbows (61)

In this moment, Valoyce-Sanchez highlights how extension from the past is a form of connection to it, in the way she compares the writing of a poem to the act of working a shell:

I hold my father's hand
my own shellwork words
my poet's eye noting the light (62)

This use of the theme of light to connect father and daughter/past and present/land and water appears also in "There is a Fire," the final poem in the book. There, Valoyce-Sanchez recalls a dream her father had, one month before he died. While swimming in darkness in the sea, and growing increasingly weary, he saw the light of fires on the shore. Seeing in this an image of those "who made it" (in what surely also recalls the earlier act of migration), he gains new hope. Valoyce-Sanchez describes herself as driven by that same kind of vision and hopefulness, rooted in a sense of connection:

I am sure I have seen
the same light in the eyes
of the Seekers
who dare to believe
and follow
their own good destiny
despite all of the odds
against them (64)

When she reflects on the firelight of her father's dream, Valoyce-Sanchez notes that this light "cannot die" as "It is more ancient and sacred/than the universe" (65). As such, she observes, "It will always flare forth/like sunrise/bringing life/to our sleeping world" (65). In this moment, one might hear the echoes of her father as storyteller in "The Dolphin Walking Stick," as when, in his final reflection on the tale of Chumash migration and relation in that poem, he notes "Someone told me that story/long before I ever heard it" (5).

This sense of a world of imminent presence, full of profound connections waiting to be found in moments of clarity, is what drives this collection. As poet Denise Low correctly notes in her forward to the book, the history of Indigenous California is one characterized both by "egregious losses" of land and an "ongoing miracle" of cultural survival (xi). When one reads *A Light to Do Shellwork By*, characterizing the land as "lost" becomes much more complicated, however. And it seems to me that one also begins to view such survival not so much as a miraculous occurrence, but rather as an inevitability.

David Carlson, California State University, San Bernardino