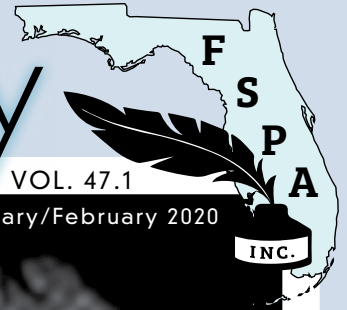


Of Poets & Poetry



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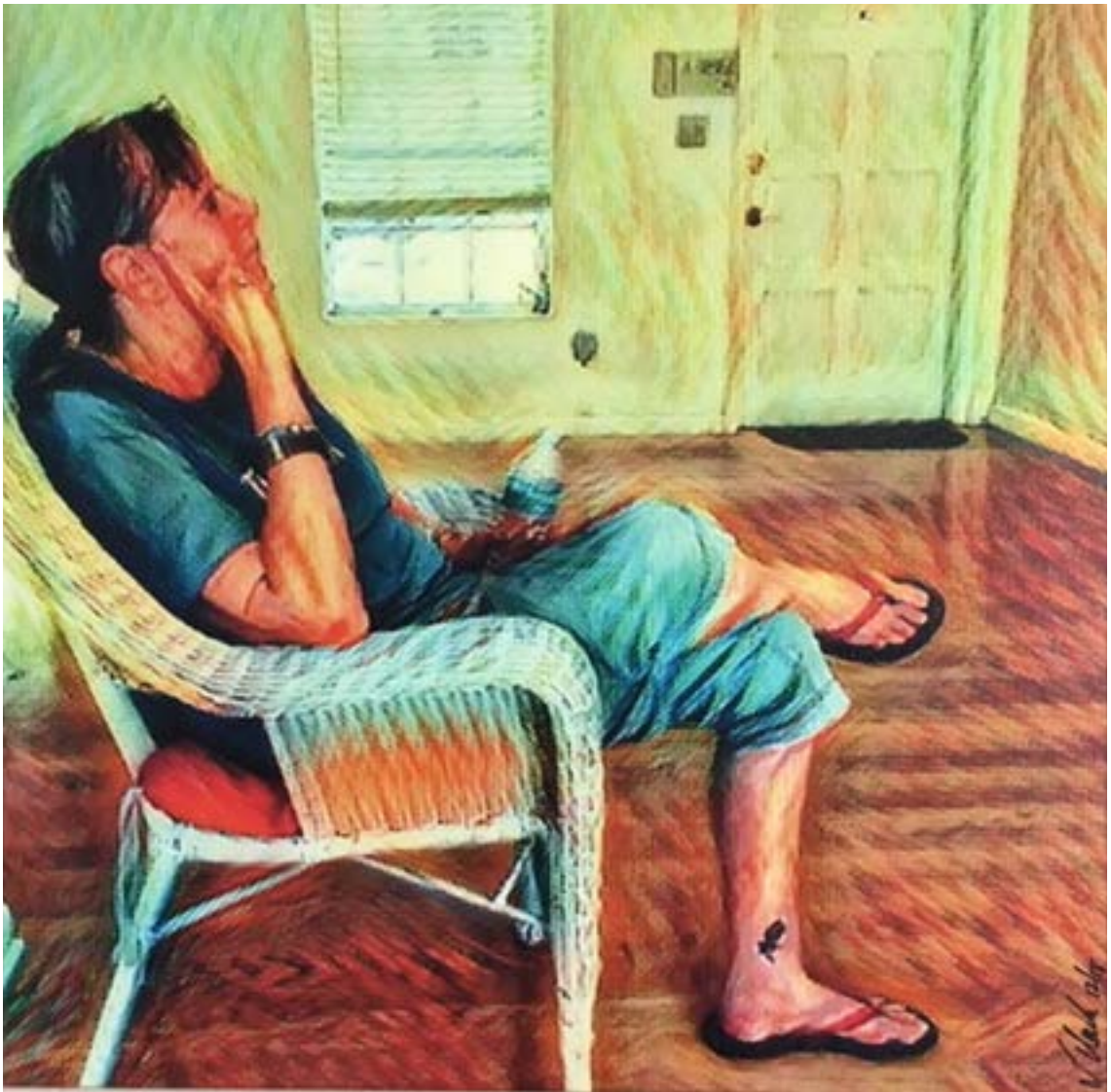


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C.M. Clark

“...poems emerge
from a rag and bone
shop,
where I find myself
most often both
deaf and dumb...”

— C.M. Clark



A Portrait of the Poet, Digital Image by Larry Clark

A conversation with the poet...

C.M. Clark and FSPA member Janna Schledorn

C.M. Clark’s poetry has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *The Paddock Review*, *Ovenbird*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *the South Florida Poetry Journal* and *Gulf Stream* magazine. Her work is also featured in Demeter Press’s anthology, *Travellin’ Mama*. She served as inaugural Poet in Residence at the Deering Estate Artists Village in Miami, and has been a featured presenter at the Miami Book Fair. Author of full-length works *Charles Deering Forecasts the Weather & Other Poems* (Solution Hole Press, 2012) and *Dragonfly* (Solution Hole Press, 2016), Clark’s chapbook, *The Five Snouts*, was released by Finishing Line Press (2017). Her forthcoming new collection, *Exoskeletal*, was published in May, 2019. Clark has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Miami, and has taught writing and literature at Miami Dade College.

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Schledorn. You have four books of poetry out now. Can you tell us a bit about the process – from idea inception to completion and publication?

Clark. Yes, the issue of process! And the most humbling question for me as a writer. It embarrasses me to admit the stumbling and uncertain directions my work habits seem to follow. Unlike many writers I know – and know of – for me, individual poems emerge from a rag and bone shop where I find myself most often both deaf and dumb, where the language I hear is being simultaneously translated by non-native, untrained linguists, while I do my best to handwrite the dictation as it's given to me! It's only later when these raw materials are unearthed and laid bare that I am able to sit with them – with an editor's eye – and shape the words into a more pleasing and comprehensible form.

Over time, I learned that my work as a poet actually parallels the strategies used more often by novelists. In another life, I would have chosen fiction as my poison of choice, inasmuch as it is narrative sequencing – plot, character, setting – that catalyzes my creativity.

Given the narrative quality of my process, readers often ask how do I know when a collection is done, insofar as there is no real beginning, middle and end to these stories? I suppose I just know a collection is complete when the characters are done speaking.

Schledorn. Your latest book, *Exoskeletal*, takes as its premise the narrative of a group of travelers on an updated and somewhat ethereal Silk Road. Can you tell us about some of the characters (Alice Lin is my favorite) and their relationships?

Clark. I hope this doesn't sound evasive, but *Exoskeletal*'s characters often elude me, as well. Whereas Alice Lin may seem to be the central protagonist, by no means is her identity easily discernible. Like the rest of us, she is someone to whom life happens. Her mutability, really, is no different from the porous and shapeshifting boundaries of our own most secret selves.

My hope in framing the scaffolding of this collection was that readers could identify with some, if not all of the speakers. Like most of us, Alice has a family: at least two daughters, a grandmother whose iconography contains Alice's childhood memories, a partner/husband who moves fitfully in and out of her days. There are other family groups and voyagers we meet along the road, including Tirza, a young Muslim girl, even a cameo appearance by Temujin – aka Genghis Khan – along with his wife, Borte. They are all fictitious or fictionalized, they are all imagined – as the book's disclaimer warns.

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They are all no one but themselves.



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Schledorn. We've talked some about how you start with an idea for a book. I would imagine not everyone starts with an idea for a book, but rather we have piles of poems from workshop prompts or powerful overflows of feeling. Surely, you have those too? How does one cull through, know what to keep or toss?

Clark. Not trying to be stubborn here, but I intentionally make every effort to subvert the lyric/personal thrust that much poetry assumes. My poems are neither lyrical nor personal; in fact, anything personal that finds its way into my writing is then transformed into something else: repurposed, recycled into something a character enacts. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, poetry is not an expression of emotion, but an escape from it; as if baleful and toxic experience can be sanitized, and brought under a surefire control by the rendering of these human struggles into the language and architecture of poetic making. So, every emotion experienced can be made "useful," and lose its power to terrify and threaten, by attributing it to another voice that lives and manages life within a poem. Good thing those voices are far more adept at living than I am.



Schledorn. This is hard work! What are some specific tools, tricks, traits that are most valuable for compiling and completing a book of poetry?

Clark. As I mentioned earlier, for me, the most important technique each collection presents is its architecture. Even when individual poems seem to arrive in a more random, iterative manner, there always must be a home for them eventually within the larger framework of a collection's narrative. For example, my current new collection in progress with a working title of "State Road 60," is designed to contain the history of a Florida extended family whose lives are scattered somewhere along this highway – from Tampa in the west, to Indian River. Along the way I happened to be working on a seemingly unrelated piece about how we experience our body's uncertainties, especially as we mature and age. One thing led to another, and there it was: a poem about sea birds on the Atlantic terminus of the road – "Thyroid Insinuations and the Sand Hill Cranes." It's not about forcing poems to comply

with a pre-existing intention, but rather about keeping the larger picture in mind.

Schledorn. So, once this architecture is completed, what then? How important is networking? How did you find publishers? What resources, and institutions and people, are there to help?

Clark. As someone who began a poet's career rather late in the day, I quickly realized that networking was everything. Building some form of reputation – getting your name and work known – these would be the steps needed to ensure audiences, readers, acceptance emails (instead of rejections), invitations to literary events, and eventual publication.

I realized it would not be enough just to be a good poet. You had to be a known poet, as well. Many poetry journals today have expanded to include online formats, and this practice has been a blessing and a curse for emerging writers, both young and old. There would be more publication opportunities (even if online publication exclusively), but also more competition for that cherished page or two where your poem could finally leave your aching parental

(Continued on next page) hands to exist in the wider world as a finished work and life-on-its-own.

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I learned quickly that poetry friends and literary colleagues would be the best source of information regarding publishing opportunities of all kinds. And unless you are one of those lucky writers whose ultimate satisfaction derives from the creation alone, you need to find readers somewhere to complete the process of poetic creation. If a poem is made and there's no one to hear or read it, has its true intention been realized?

Reading a lot of contemporary poetry, becoming knowledgeable about how, where and when to submit your work – these journeyman activities are also vital. Print resources such as the AWP Writer's Chronicle and Poets & Writers magazine, as well as the invaluable online resource and submission engine, Submittable.com, are also stock and trade for a working poet who considers their writing to be more than a means of self-expression, or a casual hobby. To be taken seriously means you must take yourself seriously. And do the work of submitting, submitting, submitting.

Schledorn. You have worked with Miami Book Fair and the Florida Literary Arts Coalition: How does work with these kinds of organizations contribute to your success and enjoyment as a poet?

Clark. Writing is lonely work. I've always envied artists – dancers, musicians, actors – who get to work in teams, to inspire each other, share creative practices, and interact during the process of creation. Having opportunities to encounter other writers, to work side by side with them, is very important for me personally. It is too easy to get lost inside my words, to lose perspective.

Working as a professor of writing and literature at Miami Dade College for years, I enjoyed an extremely close connection to the Miami Book Fair through the many years as it grew from a small gathering in downtown Miami, to the world-class event it is now, each November hosting hundreds of authors and over half a million visitors during this ten-day event. This is a writer's dream – to read their work alongside the greatest poets, novelists and non-fiction writers working today; to participate in amazing panels and programs – as both presenter and audience – virtually from morning to night.

In a more modest setting, but no less meaningful, I have also enjoyed reading and presenting at the Florida Literary Arts Coalition annual conference "Other Words," where mostly in-state writers – along with some from throughout the southeast region – have an annual opportunity to gather and debrief. These occasions serve as a writer's professional trade show: we share war stories, bemoan frustrations, enjoy each other's successes. The publication of my sister – or brother-poet's new collection means that somewhere there will be a literary press interested in my work, too.



Schledorn. When you read last year for National Poetry Month at Eastern Florida State College in Melbourne, you mentioned how much you enjoy public readings and working in a collaborative environment. Your move from Miami to Sebastian, to a less-populated, less urban area certainly affects the opportunities for participating in that poetry community. What are some ways smaller communities could work toward building and fostering a vibrant and supportive poetry scene? What would you like to see in your town?

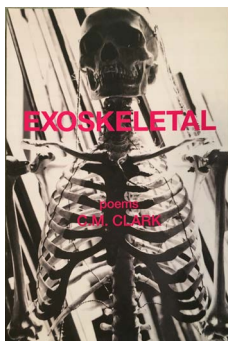
Clark. You're right! It's been a huge change moving from Miami to Indian River County. I have found that even though the opportunities to take my show on the road may be fewer, there seems to be more intimacy and real connections made with audiences within the closer-knit environment of the East Central Coast.

I was very fortunate early on to connect with the Indian River Poet Laureate Sean Sexton through a mutual friend. Sean introduced me to the [Laura Riding Jackson Foundation](#), an amazing group of selfless literary devotees dedicated to enhancing the literary life of Indian River in honor of the mid-20th century poet Laura Riding Jackson, who lived and worked in the Wabasso area.

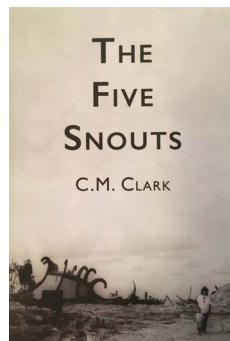
The Foundation has provided me with an unmatched opportunity to meet local writers and to participate in their activities, such as a wonderful weekly writers group I attend, and the annual Poetry Bar-B-Q, which celebrates poetry every year, spreading the word, building new audiences. Let's face it. Poetry is a tough sell during the best of circumstances. Sometimes we all feel we are reading and writing for ourselves, for each other alone.

I would love to see more opportunities for local poets to read to the public and share their work – maybe at local bookstores and libraries. And, to move beyond the occasions of Poetry Month in April. Why can't poetry be on tap twelve months a year?! It may be an acquired taste – after all, poetry is like the sushi of literature. But once you try it, you can learn to love it, and to crave it.

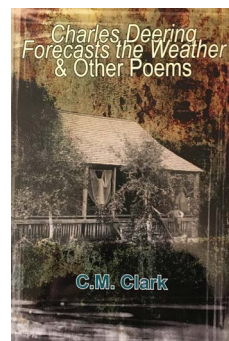
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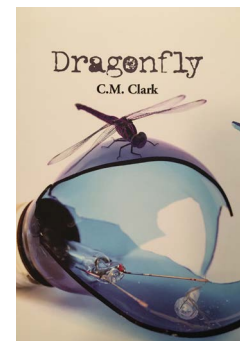
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POEMS BY
C.M. CLARK

THYROID INSINUATIONS & THE SANDHILL CRANES

It was before she saw the dunes and the paved roadways,
the symphony of zippers that give way, electrifying
twin concrete lanes cracked
in the corners, sugared with sand, and as sure

as magnetic poles rule the longitude line from Greenwich
mean to a gated mews facing 60 West,
the silvered teeth snap shut, clacking their reluctant closure,
now a soldered wound overheated and healed, but only

for now.

Such simpering, the bored diagnosis. Adamant to trust
those calculations of enzyme and excess, triglyceride
pressure quotients, the drip
drip

drip of aortal determination. Better try
elsewhere with your stents, the
calipers and speculums always colder
than promised. It's

just a small gland, like others
pocketing their endocrine rhythms in secret
adherence to a lodestar, a set of mirrored instructions
as yet

unencrypted.

She remembers the katydid calls
and who can resist? A voice
that falls
into the soprano's cleaved register. But

along the curve
as the road curls west and away
from the known cleared lots, also in their time
silenced by concrete's slump and pour,

never wasting one peck
or one misplaced feather, their slender necks --
uninterrupted -- lean like sand dune grasses, waiting
without hope.

Just a seamless blur
in their massed grouping,
the collective stubbornness imitating
what passes in some circles

for hunger.

POEMS BY
C.M. CLARK

CONGRUENCE

"We triangulate." Alice sees
them in her mind. The pink
one and the citrine. Tang then

sweet. The curved dunes
of Kinzu Pass seem insurmountable in this
light. But the air is light lighter

than sand.

And there's their beaten highway.
The weigh station where trucks get put on
pause and protein cells conspire

to the thirty-ninth maternal
generation. "I hear her breathe."
Alice breathes, the light curls off

her dun cheek. We are
here, the sisters commensurate,
the female gone to ground and

utterly isosceles.

POEMS BY
C.M. CLARK

YOU WILL NOT MAKE RELICS

This time Le-Ah brought flowers. She wrapped
them in oiled paper to discourage
the black flies, the army ants, the

rampaging legions of the under core – set
to work their spell. This chained plot she named
her garden, not hers really

just plowed and pruned by one blunt-cut grandmother
dressed in cotton and knit socks, one
never-mirrored face

to face. Yet the gardening gloves
fit hand to glove like a
glove. Le-Ah

never saw the irony in the empty day. There were clouds
obscuring the sun and their eyes gazed sideways –
the wind.

Now the day is daylight's end.
There are no geese to separate,
their plucking subdued – the light

closed in cloud cover – the shade
clear across the yard of sandgrain and
slide. Le-Ah slips

away, dogged to stealth
in the corners of traffic – last feed
last peat ember – bed and food

a reluctant camouflage.

The condo in Xi'an was spacious, the garden cool and
two flights down. In summer
insects flew, finding the pinholes

in the kitchen screen. But room to wander
from room
to room.

(Continued on next page)

POEMS BY C.M. CLARK

Movement to a space framing absolution,
cheek by jowl enumerated – and slip-streaming site
by site, small, one key cut the illusion

of security. The papers of note keep
company decomposing watermarks,
fingerprints under black light

the milestones and threshold markers,
the mule's retort. Joint tenants
of an old world

limned by paper.

The sand has a voice, the raptors,
the wings of falcons sheering cloud wool.
The spring coats of young camels, the males.

In Xi'an the desk drawers opened
and closed, the fires banked, the windows oiled
hinges oiled, newsprint, cleaning casements

with vinegar, its presence loud, loud
the street traffic, the feet of females prosaic and secular,
the males bouncing angels' virtual choirs.

Dinner tables and low-riding clouds
in spring. Basso profundo, the fathers and brothers,
the sons by marriage, like clouds interred.

The grounding horizon, the limit line –
a scarab that entered the wrong
ear, the wrong untraveled

voyagers, the singing higher, the loss
of range
and hormone and sheer

accompaniment.

POEMS BY
C.M. CLARK

THE UNDERTAKING OF ALICE LIN

My father says remember the ace of spades. He
called for the burial on a windy morning, the wind
like March gruff along the steppes, the wind

before rain and end of drought and frost and stasis. Utter
lethargy that crimps the eyebrow hairs to curl.
The crimp and cramp of organ and tissue

unused to adapt any longer. The blood
readings showed no catastrophe, but pain
oh pain said otherwise. The spade

was handled often and well, nicks in the wood,
dents in the metal curvature, hungry
for dirt for more for

earth. The tradition of this tribe, these nomads who
knew little of earth, just sand, called
for the upside first signaling

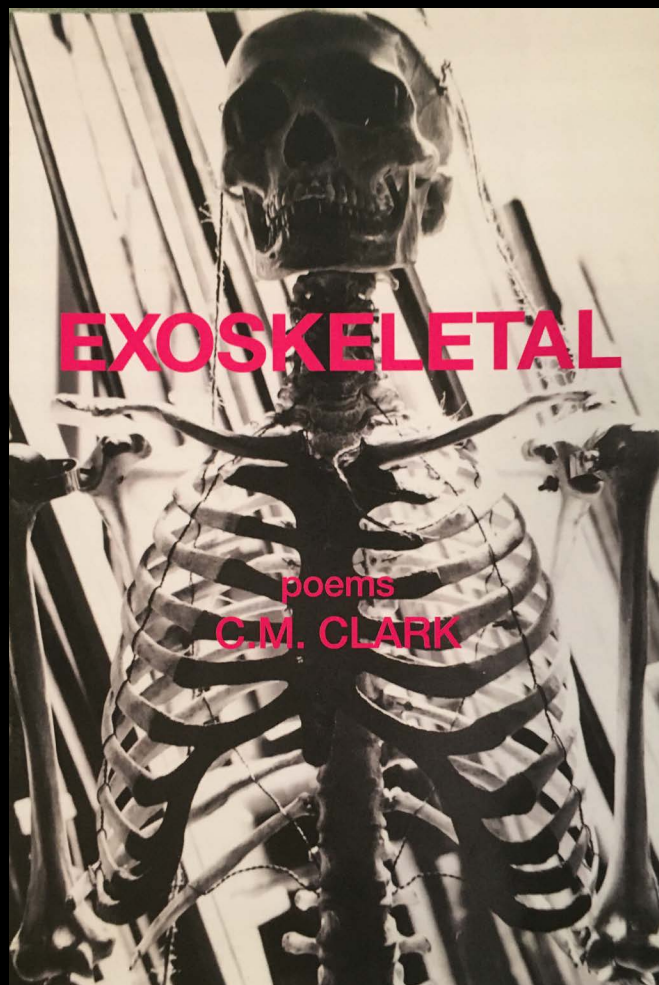
reluctance. No, no one
no one wants to heap earth on the plain
pine wood, but

we must we must turn
turn and shift the shovel
rightside, deep hungry and concave

side up. And this earth is the flip
side of reluctance - this
we must. And flowers

flowers to soften the absolute
purity of earth, the frail color and
softness saying

we must.



EXOSKELETAL

poems
C.M. CLARK

C.M. Clark's EXOSKELETAL

In this new verse narrative, poet C.M. Clark compiles the postings of provocative characters in motion along a hypothetical Silk Road of tweets, memes and other viral oddities. Their stories are strongly grounded geographically - some entangled in a quantum way. Imagine a holographic rendering of the bones, the muscles, the tissue and the DNA all gathered to shape a new archaeology. Whether taken as a whole or experienced individually, these poems chart the unsettling grey area between your favorite escape room and an MRI of the soul.

Some creatures really do wear their bones on the outside.

Buy it now – link

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