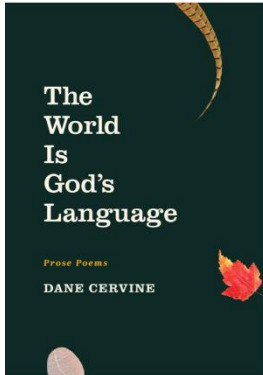


The *Sticks & Stones* December 2022 newsletter, from poet and reviewer Erica Goss in Los Gatos, California, includes an insightful review of *The World Is God's Language* book of prose poems from last year:



REVIEW #73:

The World Is God's Language by Dane Cervine
Sixteen Rivers Press, 2021

Dane Cervine's latest collection, ***The World Is God's Language***, uses prose poetry to illuminate encounters with religion, sex, and the environment, both as a child and an adult that opened his eyes in significant ways. In this book, Cervine reaches beyond the surfaces and tensions of communication, revealing unexpected insights about his own and others' motivations.

In the book's preface, Cervine lists his influences, chief among them Santa Cruz poet Gary Young, who "helped to shape a Japanese-style short form, a kind of blended American haiku and *haibun* in prose-poem format, creating a new poetic focus for Western poets and readers." The poems, short prose paragraphs arranged two per page, cultivate a narrative-in-conversation, as they comment on similar topics from various viewpoints. This technique creates an intimate reading experience that verges on the voyeuristic, but Cervine doesn't allow that sensibility to overwhelm his work. His poems take us to the edge, but don't push us over it—instead, we're left with a poignant last line, a snippet of wisdom, or an opening into the next poem.

For example, the book's first two poems, "Breast" and "Secret Lover," have titles that indicate confessional topics; instead, each of these poems is a tender reflection on unexpected manifestations of physical love. In "Breast," a child catches a glimpse of a "luminous orb falling from my mother's bra as she changed clothes...All I knew, in one moment, was how it begins: the shape

of loss, sweet curve.” The same innocent wonder informs “Secret Lover;” the speaker wakes “wrapped in my own arms,” gripped in the sensation of an erotic dream. The “secret” lover is himself: “I linger in this embrace. Who else could love me from the inside out?”

How Cervine ends his poems, with lines that evoke the feeling of surprise, an important element of haiku, connects the book with an understated narrative thread. In “Salvation’s Weight,” the speaker watches his pastor father deliver a sermon: “he’d speak as though dragging heavy buckets up from a deep well.” The effort required to conduct this spiritual work is not lost on the son, “just old enough to sit with the adults,” who recognizes the contradiction in his father’s words: “*We are saved by grace, not works...*” and yet it’s the work of achieving grace that impresses the son. The poem’s last line, “Lifting each excavated word to light, watching it evaporate in the air,” shows us that the son learned a very different lesson than the one his father intended.

“Taking My Time” takes on a teen boy’s growing awareness of humanity’s most irresistible and terrifying elements: sex and death. In the poem, he glimpsed “a torn page from *Playboy*,” but instead of continuing to stare at it, he “turned, ran back outside to play because it was too soon.” Too soon for him to open that particular door of perception, “the way, now, I shrug my shoulders at death.” In the companion poem, “Closer Than Imagined,” three teens “gathered to pray...adolescent hearts sure salvation was imminent.” A force is present, but not what the teens imagine—as Cervine captures in the last line of the poem, “I find it closer than imagined: this heart, still fire, beyond any saving.”

Cervine brings that probing sensibility to poems about his experiences in places as diverse as Bali, Congo, and a Benedictine monastery in the hills above the Big Sur coast of California. In “The Interpenetration of Worlds,” set in Bali, the speaker watches the path of a dragonfly over a koi pond, wondering what it sees, the pond “a depth it cannot fathom.” At the same time, “the koi, in

return, must catch sight of a strange blur from another world.” In “Strange Beauty,” the companion poem, we learn that children in Bali catch dragonflies, then “run laughing to their mothers with their delicious prisoners, roast them over coals, pop crackling dragons into open mouths.” The poem ends, “It is a lush world—each wound a strange beauty.”

The prose poem form, with its haibun influence, is a vital and appropriate vehicle to tell the stories in ***The World Is God’s Language***. Direct and sensual, these poems are a blend of wisdom and naiveté, of hope and resignation. Readers of this book will discover a rich tapestry of human experience.

[Dane Cervine’s](#) recent books include *Earth Is a Fickle Dancer* and *The Gateless Gate: Polishing the Moon Sword*, a cross-genre work of Zen koans and prose poems. His work has appeared in journals including *The Sun*, *The Hudson Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Catamaran*. Dane lives in Santa Cruz, California, where he work as a therapist and is the former head of Children’s Mental Health for the county.