



*Ghosts of Old Virginny: A History of Virginia City in Poems*

Milla van der Have

42 pages

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Review by Shin Yu Pai

What compels the artist to memorialize a place? In Dutch poet Milla van der Have's *Ghosts of Old Virginny*, the poet turns her attention towards remembering the forgotten inhabitants of a silver mining town located up the mountain from Reno, Nevada. As an investigative poetry project, van der Have's collection looks at the hidden history of Virginia City, to overturn the tourist fiction of Old Virginny as a cowboy town.



Milla van der Have writes poems and short stories and is currently knee-deep in a novel. Her poetry has appeared in *After The Pause*, *Cherry Tree* and *Otis Nebula* among others. She is the author of *Ghosts of Old Virginny* (Aldrich Press), a chapbook about Virginia City, Nevada.

*But each day history loses face  
to these slopes, to the gentle*

*longevity of the lizard  
the many lives of the moth.*

*And down below the horses  
roam, slowly giving way*

*to untenable views.*

Van der Have reads the environment and reaches past opaque histories to complicate the past, while also acknowledging that the history of Virginia City doesn't belong to her. The reader travels back and forth in time with the poet to embody her experiences as she reflects on modern-day Virginia City and its strange culture of ghost tours and historical re-enactments. In "Afternoon before the Civil War Weekend," we inhabit two times simultaneously:

*Down by the canyon the boys  
Still play. Their cheers  
rise up like bugle calls.*

*There's depth in whatever we do.  
Nothing is silent, a thing  
by itself. We fill  
the shapes of those that went before us.  
Or at least we grow into it  
like spires till touching upward  
to reclaim their fallen.*

As a collection, *Ghosts of Old Virginny* resurrects the stories of everyday people, while also exploring how these stories resonate within us. Colorful characters populate van der Have's poems, including real-life historic residents like the Washoe Seeress — a professional scryer and fortune teller; and Julia C. Bulette — a prostitute who launched a successful career as a brothel owner. Read alongside a collection like Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia*, the reader imagines the desolate experience of enterprising women fated to comfortless circumstances.

While highlighting individual stories, van der Have focuses on examining the hardships of mining the Comstock Lode and its attendant dangers. In poems like "What We Thought of in the Mines" and "Chollar Mine Call," an unnamed miner descends into the darkness of the mine. As he contemplates his mortality, a reader is reminded of the sobering reality that each trip into a mine could signify the end for a miner. Lines like "We don't go deep / there's no need to" speak to the mindset of the miner who re-emerges later into daylight after "loose-minded / prayers to celebrate / this second dawn." The poet invokes period language to conjure up the mine, using words like "tommyknockers" and "widowmakers" to pull the reader more deeply into her narrative.

Poems like "Last Days at Saint Mary's" and "On The Way Home" pull us back into van der Have's reality. She redirects her focus to finishing a writing project during the last days of a writing residency. After leaving, she considers how a place like Virginia City re-emerges in memory "on some bright Dutch river or when you / paddle a thousand silver lakes ... when the world yet again / gives in to land and you know / home is whatever you round up along the way."

Van Der Have arrived in Virginia City by coincidence. Her partner wanted to attend the legendary Burning Man Festival which takes place in Black Rock Desert. The poet

didn't want to camp in the playa and investigated nearby writing residencies. Her partner's plans for Burning Man fell through, so Van Der Have embarked on her adventure alone. She completed a residency in 2014, while staying at St. Mary's, an art center located inside a former Victorian hospital in Virginia City.

Impressed by the grandeur of the mountain desert landscape and its contrast to her home country of The Netherlands, van der Have accesses a sense of wonder and wildness in exploring the American West, which stands in stark contrast to the tidy and structured quality of the Dutch landscape. Wild horses, turkey vultures, coyotes, tarantulas, squirrels, and lizards inhabit her poems, anchoring the collection in the local ecosystem to bring attention to even the smallest of inhabitants. In Virginia City, the poet opens to a sense of nature that exists beyond the human, the stars exploring "in such multitudes, I couldn't even tell / the constellations apart."



