

Pencil Man

Praise for *Pencil Man*

In her masterful new collection, *Pencil Man*, Sue Ann Gleason writes: “Memory is the rain that soothes scorched earth.” Yet this chapbook is not only a remembrance or memorial for her lost father; in each new poem, she builds the narrative of a family of immigrants who made do, using food as a form of love. As these pieces move between the rich past and harrowing present of caring for an ailing father, we are each led back to our own stories of grief, and the redemption we feel each time “a whisper from the spirit world” brings our loved ones back to us again. Though I didn’t want this collection to end, by the final poem, we have also fallen in love with a father who “sees art everywhere,” finding beauty in the simplest of everyday things—spring peepers, fence posts, the deeply etched lines of a smiling face. Sue Ann’s poems gently remind us that we might do the same.

—James Crews
author of *Unlocking the Heart: Writing for Mindfulness,
Courage & Self-Compassion*

Sue Ann’s work is lyrical, wise, and sharply observed. A deeply moving tribute to a father, *Pencil Man* stands also as a poignant altar to memory. This collection brims and sings, reminding us to love with fervor, magnitude, and earnest attention.

—Joy Sullivan
author of *Instructions for Traveling West*

Sue Ann Gleason's *Pencil Man* carries us through the tender and complicated rooms of grief, how memory paints a father. Whether it is "dark and sweet as the night sky flecked with fireflies and the promise of forever" or "a sun-spent tomato clinging to the vine," the loss in these pages is only amplified by the living. The father's portrait, backlit with laughter, squeezes every ounce of life from watercolor spit drawings, lemon cake, and roadside whim. This stunning collection, filled with delicious nostalgia and endless ache, allows the reader to walk hand-in-hand through the recounted joy and relentless echo—how the heart never stops reaching for the love that shaped it.

—Kelly Grace Thomas
author of *Boat Burned*

Sue Ann Gleason's poems are crisp, elegiac, heart-rending and heart-mending. In her moving collection, *Pencil Man*, she beautifully conjures her remarkable father, the immense impact he had on her, and the long and disorienting loss of him. Her poems are full of sensorial shocks like "the aroma of coffee as dark and sweet as the night sky flecked with fireflies and the promise of forever." And, they are also full of resonant images of everyday life, reminding me of William Carlos Williams' argument that there is "no poetry, but in things." Sue Ann's poems will help you to touch the veil between life and death and be transformed in the process.

—Dawn Lonsinger
author of *Whelm*

Pencil Man is a poignant and visceral collection of poems that brought me to tears numerous times. Sue Ann Gleason eloquently and tenderly conveys her love for her father, taking readers along on their journey through life and beyond. These poems span generations and cultures, dancing with themes of aging and loss, all interwoven with food as a memory vehicle. I feel like I am right there with the author for every meal, every visit with her father, every dream. A truly touching poetry collection that I highly recommend.

—Sonja Ringo
author of *moral atlas*

In *Pencil Man*, Sue Ann Gleason builds a monument of awe in the face of grief. Every poem is a song of reverence and nostalgia accompanied by a measured balance of rich detail, a birds-eye view of a vibrant life. Sue Ann's voice is honest, observant, and fresh. Each poem carries a human truth that we all yearn to understand. This collection is a sensory experience brimming with lemon zest, salty laughter, and the warm ache of a daughter who wants to celebrate the memory of her father. By the end of it, I think I love her father as much as I should love mine. I have a new understanding of what it means to be a family. I will carry this collection with me, and share it with others, for a long time. Sue Ann reminds us that grief can be a fog, a recipe, and, often, a paintbrush.

—Patrick Ramsay
author of *Butterflies are Rare in Beehives*

Pencil Man

POEMS
Sue Ann Gleason

For my father
who taught me everything I know about unbridled joy

Copyright © 2021, Sue Ann Gleason

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner,
without the permission of the author except for brief quotations
embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First Edition, 2024

ISBN: 979-8-9850435-1-8

Cover art by Maaïke VanderMeer

Book design by Carolyn Sheltraw

Author photo by Lesley Bohm

Table of Contents

Comfort	1
He Died & I	2
Roots & Wings	3
Languishing	4
Lemon Brine	5
Pencil Man	6
Portageville	7
Chocolate for Breakfast	8
Elder Care	9
Ask Me	10
Ode	12
Rain Pending	13
The Chaplain Says	14
Roadside	15
i dreamed of you last night	16
The Daughter from Virginia	17
Spit Drawings	18
Mangia	19
Westbound	20
Quake Softly	23
Wing & Feather	24
Notes	25
Acknowledgments	27
About the Author	29

Comfort

The nursing home asks that each article of clothing be marked with your name. Permanent marker. Nothing that can unravel in the wash. I consider the Merino wool sweater because I want you to be wrapped in a shatter of softness. Mom says, *Oh no, don't bother. They'll just ruin it.*

I buy it anyway.

You aren't speaking much at this point, but I watch you soften into white jasmine dusk, and I tell myself you're comfortable.

On the day we buried you, the sky broke open. From relentless storm to shock of sunlight. Sky, so blue. I thought I was finished writing this story but threads of that sweater, unraveling still.

He Died & I

It's August. Our water glasses weep. Servers balance shellfish towers; the couple beside us, laughter as salty as the oysters they eat. I take a call from my dad's caregiver halfway across the country, listen to the voice on the other end through a clatter of plates.

"Come," she says.

My father, in decline for a decade. One day a bear hug, the next a shadow. Stent surgery — innocuous — but for my dad, a heart brain connection gone awry. No more winsome stories. No more pastries wrapped in layers of parchment paper. No more, *I love you to the moon and back*.

Mussels left untouched, I book the next flight to Colorado. Moonlight taunts. Mattress groans. Phone calls to the nursing home: *Is he okay? Is someone there with him? Is he conscious?* I don't remember the ride from airport to father. Only that he waited. Eyes closed. Skin as translucent as the veil he now crosses when we meet between realms.

The people we miss will greet us in pre-dawn dark when we wake with worry. Greet us when the veil is thin. Greet us like the silence of freshly fallen snow leaving only footprints in its wake.

Roots & Wings

This is not a story where the writer visits the city of her birth, or sits on the dock of a summer cabin on Keuka Lake one leg dangling, the other curled in a hug.

Her grandfather does not fill the bowl of his pipe with cherry tobacco, strike a match and puff plumes of smoke into the air after a day cracking stone.

Nor is this a story about her grandmother steaming jars in scalding water, canning tomatoes, putting up a bounty for the blustery Buffalo winter—a landscape that couldn't be further

from her homeland, Sicily. This is not a story about a lemon tree or the bright puckered pearls that chimed their way into lemon pie, lemon cake, lemon cookies.

It isn't even a story about a family of foragers, the weeds Grandpa picked alongside the railroad tracks that later became batter-dipped cardoons, flash fried and crunchy in a cast iron skillet.

It's a story about a flicker of faith, migration of memory, kitchen whisperers and kinship, rosary beads wrapped around a grandmother's hands. A North Star, a father.

Languishing

“When you lose someone who is larger than life, the whole world feels smaller.” —Nikita Gill

before the stent surgery and the phone call, the first post-surgery visit to Colorado where you meet a wisp

of the man you once knew. before he misplaced his glasses (maybe twice in one day) the final straw

the day your mother placed him in assisted living the home with bright sunny lobby, giant bird cage

comfy chairs. rosewood table adorned with *Runner's World* magazines. before the phone call where—

even in windswept mind, he was still able to say, *She's kicking me out* (longest sentence since the surgery)

before you entered the bowels of that building, noted the threadbare carpet, beige-colored meals, short-

tempered staff, poinsettia languishing on the windowsill in the heat of summer.

Lemon Brine

A late night rendezvous, father & daughter at the kitchen table, an avalanche of art supplies between us: India ink, the mysterious *gum* eraser,

pens and pencils, watercolor paint. Mesmerized by the precision of his lettering, until one day I discover I've adopted the very same script.

Weekly trips to the Columbia Market. Olives soaked in lemon brine; cold cuts sliced to order; snails climbing the edge of a whisky barrel.

From butcher to bakery to the produce aisle I play the same chord, making art on a plate or with words, or in the way strands of colorful yarn

become a story of remembrance. How he woke me each morning ten full minutes before the alarm to be sure I'd hear it. The groan. The grin.

Bagels he brought all the way from Buffalo, laughing as he unpacked a trunk filled with pepperoni and Provolone cheese.

Memory is the rain that soothes scorched earth.