

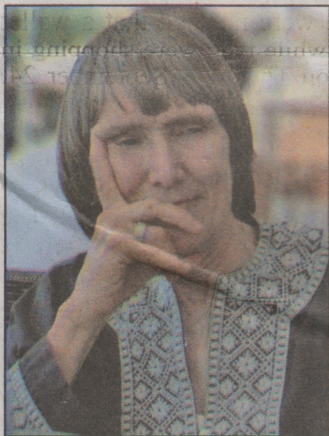
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# Fruit of a lifetime of poetry, presented in five sections

**Scudder H. Parker, "Safe as Lightning"**

**Rootstock Publishing, 2020.**

Safe as Lightning is the fruit of a lifetime's dedication to poetry, its poems presented in five sections separated by Adelaide Tyrol's beautiful illustrations. The order of the poems, Scudder Parker writes in his introduction, is determined not by "history, subject matter, literary form, or style"



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Laura Stevenson

but merely by "the affection (or at least affinity) one poem seemed to feel for other poems." All, he adds, are responses "to the invitation life keeps offering," and they share what he hopes the reader will "find familiar, or at least in some measure, recognizable, experience." Parker's hopes are amply granted: Vermonters will recognize their experiences in his poetry as easily as they will recognize the elm, the toad, the hummingbird, the log in Tyrol's sketches. Parker's observations of the life before him, mostly expressed in free verse, are so immediately accessible that readers feel the full effect of their depth only

in retrospect.

The tone in the collection varies tremendously. For comedy, we find "The Unruliness of Broccoli" in the garden, shouting "Can't you see I need more compost here!" Similarly, the felines in "Feed the Cats" insist that "nothing is more important than feeding them." Their morning demands remind Parker of communities that believe "their supplication drags/the laggard sun up/the morning's sky." And should he work from home, their suggestion that their evening feeding should be served at 1 pm "rouses/them from the daily round/of dedicated relaxation." The mood is entirely different, however in "Relinquished," which meditates on unnoticed loss:

"Back of the drawer, back of the closet, back forty, back of the mind. The knife that once sliced everything you ate— years untouched."

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The poem expands into descriptions of grown-over mowings and decaying farm machinery, then moves to relinquished friends: "Tuna casseroles you no longer share/with families you were sure you knew/in villages you now rarely drive through." And finally, the poignant conclusion:

"Silences accumulate; stay there without drama or decision. Changed without changing, cracked paint, widow dry-eyed and un-grieving. So hard to admit—yet you must admit—you call this home, but you are always leaving."

While casual readers may appreciate Parker's meanings without considering his use of poetic form, those who read more closely will admire his deft inter-weaving of structure and subject. Most noticeable, perhaps, is his poem "Humility," about the death of a deer tangled in the fence the poet has been so proud of constructing; it's written in the interweaving stanzas of terza rima. Earlier in the collection, "Old Home Day Parade" describes the celebration, "Late in the time of dying elms," as the town's elderly citizens wait impatiently, comparing the coming parade to earlier ones. The poem is by far the longest in the collection, evoking the length of the parade; but its reminder of dying elms gently parallels the passing of generations, even while the parade itself is a tradition that seems not to change. Behind the humor, sorrow, and quiet depth of Parker's poetry lies a career very different from those of "full-time" poets who are involved with academia, MFA programs, and poetic awards. A Protestant minister for over two decades, a four-term Vermont State Senator, a political activist, and a policy consultant in renewable energy, he has also been a man deeply aware of "how much stays unsaid" about familiar sights. The result is everywhere visible in his work. Never sentimental, enhanced by carefully-honed skills of a trade deeply loved and respected, Safe as Lightning should inspire busy readers with folders of poetry that lie half-forgotten in drawers to take them out, look at them again, patiently improve them, believe in them, and share.

