



Little Songs & Lyrics to Genji

Adam Penna

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A poem can be a self-induced therapy. *Little Songs & Lyrics to Genji* is in a way, two volumes of poetry, as Adam Penna presents two trains of thought on his works of poetry. The *Little Songs* half focuses on the spiritual side of the world, while *Lyrics to Genji* focuses on friendship and memories, among other subjects. *Little Songs & Lyrics to Genji* is a unique team of poetry, highly recommended. --Midwest Book Review

LITTLE SONGS & LYRICS TO GENJI is arguably one of the better books by a Long Islander since *Leaves of Grass* appeared on July 4, 1855, but whereas Whitman is a rhapsodist of long free-verse lines, Penna is a psalmist of concise formality. While Whitman renovated poetry, Penna builds on the tradition of religious lapidaries like George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins. And whereas Whitman celebrates the self, Penna invites God to enter his soul. This volume holds two books in one, and either would be a small treasure on its own. The first, "Little Songs," harkens back to Donne's Holy Sonnets. Though Penna's sonnet form has the requisite 14 lines of approximate iambic pentameter, it is unrhymed in the manner of Robert Lowell's Notebooks. In spirit these songs inhabit their epigraph, from Wallace Stevens, the part that says, "Poetry is like prayer." Addressed to a "you," at times maybe Moira, the book's dedicatee and the poet's wife, at other times the poet himself, these poems concern God, prayer, and love and how they mesh with the rest of life, frequently symbolized by trees and birds and birdsong. Penna's elemental meditations should encourage readers who despair over the narcissism and egotism of much other contemporary poetry. LITTLE SONGS contains fifty pieces, divided into two parts of twenty-six and twenty-four poems respectively. The first part introduces the vocabulary and symbology of the whole, and the second part elaborates on those elements. In LYRICS TO GENJI, Penna moves from the enclosure of the sonnet to a freer verse form, with shorter lines and longer poems addressed to Genji, a sort of muse, alter ego, and older friend, whose name (which means "two beginnings" in Japanese) occurs at least once in each piece. The poet alternately cajoles, teases, and queries Genji, whose appearance is like a grandfather's. In particular, the poet asks Genji about God and gods: "what god listens to that clanging [of church bells] / and doesn't feel annoyed?"

But Penna teases Genji with the thought that the poet is superior to the muse, for after the muse departs the poet has "the answer" to the repeated question "when," "in my book" (9), as the appearance of this poem 3 and the rest of the LYRICS, attests. In a sense, then, this poem is an "ars poetica," a text on how Penna makes his poetic art. Through his deceptively simple clarity, he recalls the line of great monosyllabic poets like Donne and John Clare, Stephen Crane and Frost, and the recent American poet laureate Kay Ryan. Finally, a word in praise of S4N Books, a small press in Brooklyn that specializes in spiritual books, for having the editorial acumen to select Adam Penna's manuscript for publication. The press did a beautiful job of making these serious poems into a book, one that has given me great pleasure through several readings and that will stay on my shelf in easy reach. --George Held, Book/Mark

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