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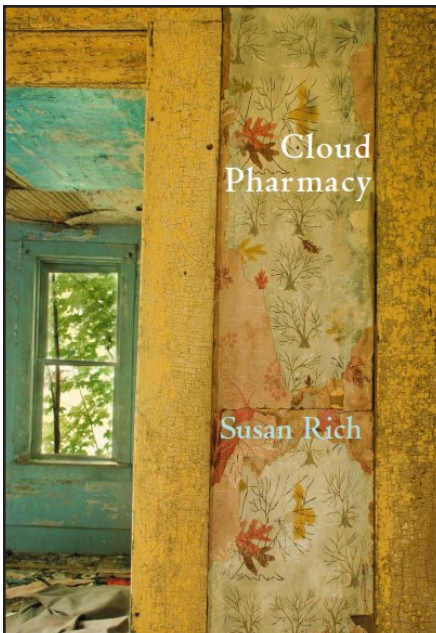
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Cloud Pharmacy

by Susan Rich

“Cloud Pharmacy is a book of lyric fire. In our epoch of quick and shallow literary conversation it is rare to come across such level of attentiveness as one finds in this book.”

—Ilya Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa*



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“In a central sequence, Rich explores nineteenth-century photographer Hannah Maynard’s proto-surrealistic images, looking in grief-heavy places for revelation.

The result is wonderfully strange and unsettling; this is Rich’s most haunting collection yet.”

—Kathleen Flenniken, *Plume*

Susan Rich is a poet, editor and teacher. She is the author of *The Alchemist’s Kitchen* (2010), a Finalist for the ForeWord Book of the Year Prize in Poetry and the Washington State Book Award. Rich’s other collections include *Cures Include Travel* (2006), and *The Cartographer’s Tongue* (2000) winner of the PEN USA Award for Poetry. She co-edited the anthology *The Strangest of Theatres: Poets Writing Across Borders* (2013) published by McSweeney’s and the Poetry Foundation.

Rich’s honors include The Times Literary Supplement Award (London), a Fulbright Fellowship to South Africa, and residencies at the Tyrone Guthrie Center in Ireland and at the Fundacion Valparaiso in Spain. She has been awarded an Artist Trust Fellowship, a 4Culture Award, a Seattle CityArtist Award, a GAP grant, and participation in the Cuirt Literary Festival in Galway, Ireland.

Educated at the University of Oregon, Harvard University, and the University of Massachusetts, Susan Rich lives in Seattle and teaches at Highline College. She is co-founder of Poets On The Coast: A Writing Retreat for Women and an alumna of Hedgebrook.

Susan Rich writes about poetry, travel, and the creative writing life at www.thealchemistskitchen.blogspot.com. For more information on Rich’s latest work, visit her on-line at www.susanrich.net



Q & A with Susan Rich: Author, traveler and educator



“The trick photography and multiple exposure self portraits blew my mind. Here was surrealism before surrealism was invented. Here was a woman artist trying to find her way in a world that largely ignored her genius. Here was new territory for my own work.”

-Susan Rich

Q: You open *Cloud Pharmacy* with a quote from art critic and poet John Berger: “What makes a photograph a strange invention--with unforeseeable consequences--is that the primary materials are light and time.” Why this quote?

The epigraph that begins a book is an idiosyncratic object. As the author, I think of the epigraph as a lyrical code to the poems; a slender key. For my previous books, I really struggled to choose just one quote, sometimes including two different ones until days before the book went to press.

Cloud Pharmacy was different. When I read John Berger’s words, I realized that his declaration on photography’s genesis describes a certain kind of poetry as well. At first glance, it’s a deceptively simple statement; we know that photographs demand good light, even after dark. “Timed exposures” is part of the vocabulary of the medium. In my book, the poems employ light and time as basic materials. Another way to state this might be that poetry needs a cultivated distance from lived experience and the “light” of insight.

Q: Women and photography are often seen muses in your poems. How did you come to be drawn to early feminist art?

Like many things in my life, my attraction to early women photographers was by pure accident. Seeing one photograph by the Northwest photographer, Myra Albert Wiggins is responsible for my jump into ekphrastic poetry --- poetry inspired by visual art. While waiting for a friend to get off work, I stumbled on a show of Pioneer Northwest Women Photographers at Seattle’s Frye Art Museum. I’ve written about the heady experience in an article for *Oregon Quarterly*.

“Rich’s gorgeous poems affix moments, both magnificent and minute.
And in exquisite and playful poems, a pageant of a life in process develops
before our eyes.”

—Oliver de la Paz, *Post Subject*

Conversation continued from previous page...

For *Cloud Pharmacy*, I “met” Hannah Maynard on the shelves of a used bookstore. Only one book exists on the work of this Victorian photographer, *The Magic Box, The Eccentric Genius of Hannah Maynard*. The trick photography and multiple exposure self portraits blew my mind. Here was surrealism before surrealism was invented. Here was a woman artist finding her way in a world that largely ignored her genius. Here was new territory for my own work.

Q: This is your fourth published poetry collection. How does it differ from your past publications?

I’ve talked with a good friend of mine, an Irish poet, about the fact that each book gets harder to write, more difficult to justify unless the work pushes into new territory, risks something new. In *Cloud Pharmacy*, the poems tend towards a new kind of surrealism.

Q: The chapter layout is quite unique; could you explain the effect the section titles have on the movement of the collection?

In the past, I’ve arranged the poems into three sections. This time I played with that progression and inserted one more, “Dark Room” before the final curtain. The book begins with “Apothecary” which seems to me the place a Cloud Pharmacy should begin! It’s a physical place in which to get acquainted with the themes of the book, from the introduction of clouds, to the wildfires of early childhood, to what it means to live an examined life.

I shouldn’t say this but my favorite sequence is “Dark Room,” where the ekphrastic poems based on Hannah Maynard’s haunting self portraits live. This section feels the riskiest, the rawest, to me. In the final section, “Another Way of Telling” I question whether narrative truth can be believed. The title poem “Cloud Pharmacy” appears here so that readers will hopefully read to the end.

At times surreal, often leavened with a wry black humor, echoing Elizabeth Bishop,
these poems create an “ecstatic theology” in which ambivalence--does this
passionate heady speaker want to live “jig-sawed together” or “lonely as brooms”?
--is both song and argument.

-Catherine Barnett, *The Game of Boxes*