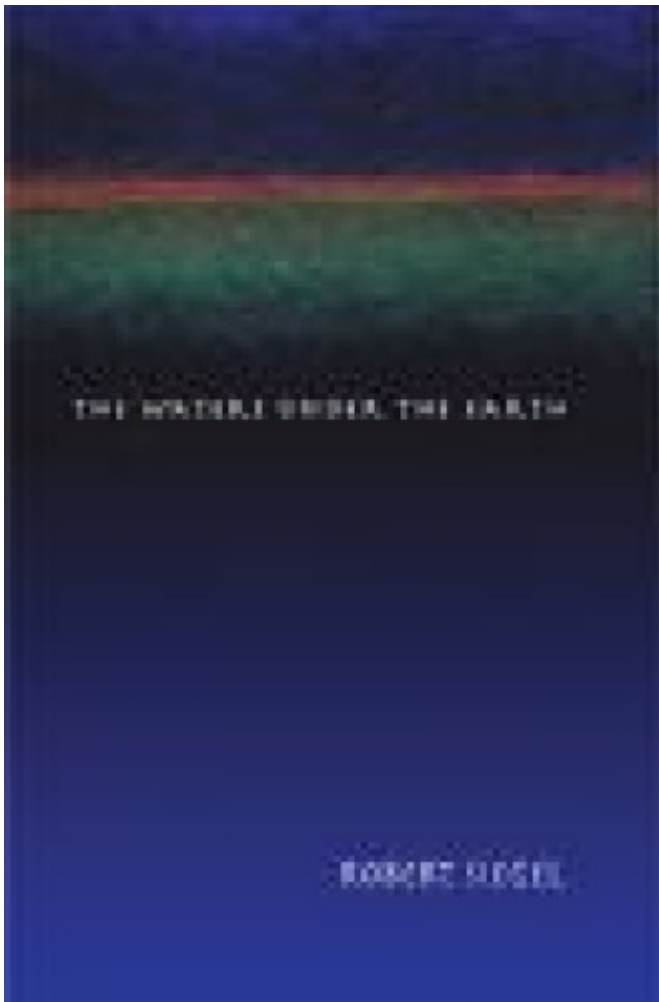


CC recommends

Books in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Waters Under the Earth

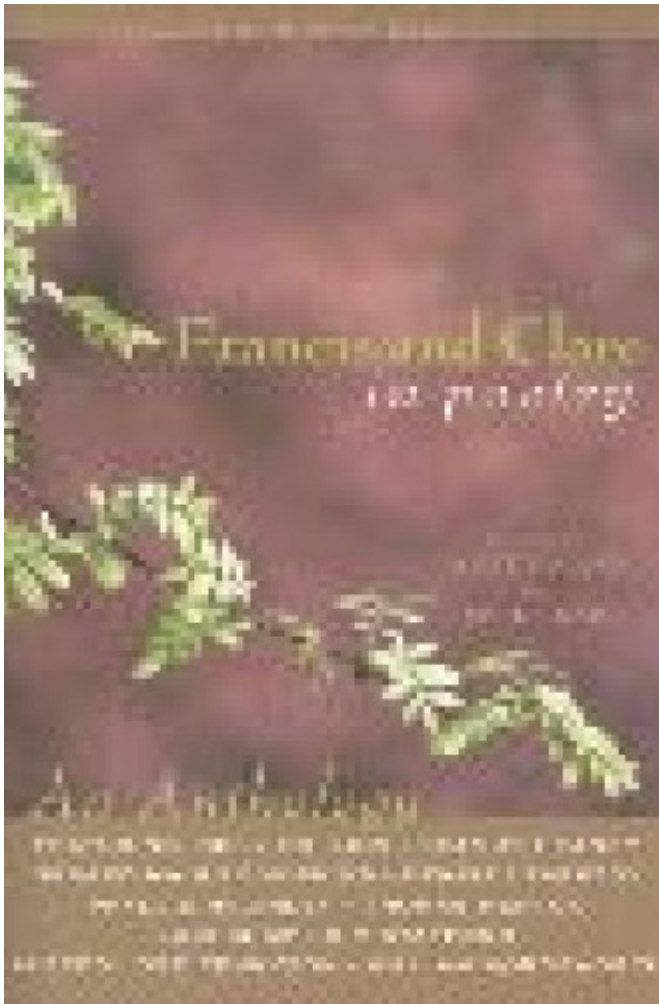
Robert Siegel
Canon



To the Green Man

Mark Jarman

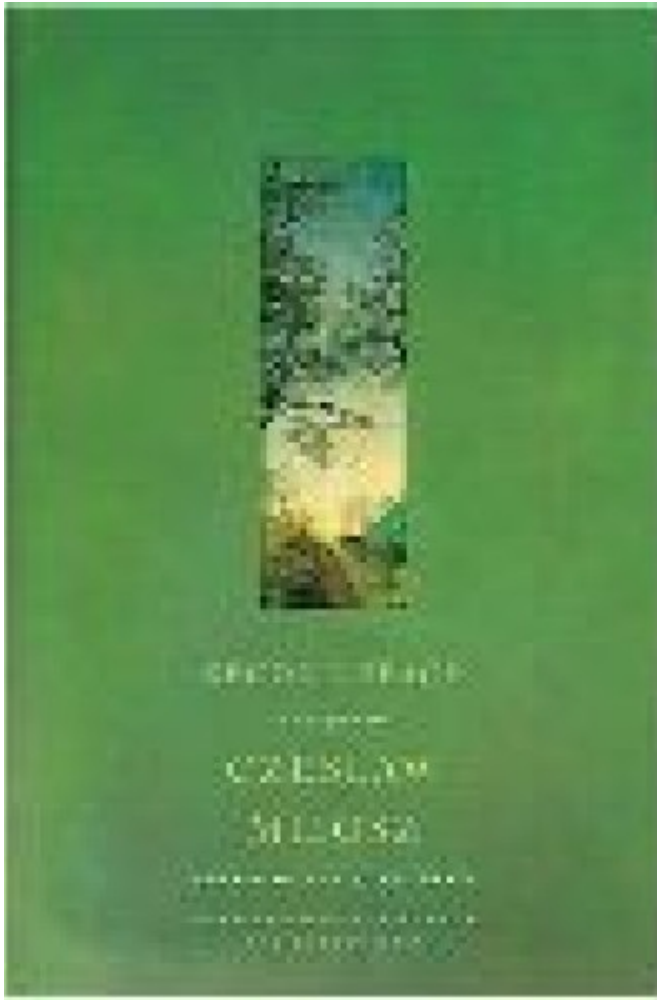
Sarabande



Francis and Clare in Poetry: An Anthology.

Janet McCann and David Craig, eds.

St. Anthony Messenger



Second Space

Czeslaw Milosz

HarperCollins



Ghost Pain

Sydney Lea

Sarabande

This is a satisfying sampler of Robert Siegel's work: scenes from farm life; stories from scripture; a series of poems about fishing; poems about bats, turtles, alligators, mussels, rats and moles; the best poem that has ever been written about the poetic line; and a long poem recapturing memories of his father—all in inimitable Siegel style. These are beautiful poems in image, language and form. Writing about the Eucharist, he says: "All come / with a sense, dim or clear that what they amount to fails / . . . leaving us to press the mystery / against the roof of the mouth, to hug the ghost / once fused with flesh and still enfleshed in us, / until our spirit answers Abba, and we know / by living contact what we can't deduce."

Lea's poems are often torrents of words, creating longer lines and therefore longer poems. They often tell stories that catch you by surprise with their striking oddness and the frequent pattern that moves the subject from degeneracy to hints of redemption. The second part of this collection is titled "A Man Walked Out" with an epigraph from Psalm 40: "and He hath put a new song in my mouth." The journey from the first poems to the "new song" of the Psalm is, in e. e. cummings's words, "banged with terror." These are brilliant poems that anyone with an interest in the journey of faith should read.

These are lyrical narrative poems about God, about his silence, about his faithful and unfaithful servants, about spiritual struggle, and about the surprises of this world. The author remembers many walks with his young daughters and their discoveries of "Claire's Secret Ocean" and "Zoë's Secret Sea." Only now does the author see that these walks were meant "to calm and change the color of my thought, / To ease its glaring pressure for a moment." "There have been times," he writes, "I thought my head would crack, / Only to have you both demand ice cream." He describes his own childhood in church, reading Hart Crane's poetry on the sly while listening to his father preach. In another poem he imagines God saying to Adam and Eve, "This time nothing's forbidden."

From Dante to Wordsworth to Gerard Manley Hopkins to Thomas Merton to contemporary poets (many of whom have appeared in the Christian Century), the poets featured here have been touched in some way by the story of St. Francis, the most beloved Catholic saint, and his contemporary St. Clare, the founder of the Poor Clares. Both embraced a life of poverty and piety, and both offer alternative mystical visions even for (maybe especially for) those anchored in the ways of this world.

This is the final book of poems from the Nobel Prize-winning poet who died last year at age 93. It is profoundly theological in its considerations of doubt, belief and theodicy. Particularly notable is "Treatise on Theology": "A young man couldn't write a treatise like this, / Though I don't think it is dictated by fear of death. / It is, simply, after many attempts, a thanksgiving. / Also, perhaps, a farewell to the decadence / Into which the language of poetry in my age has fallen. / Why theology? Because the first must be first." This is the poetry of a man who has lived a long time and suffered many losses. The final poem, "Orpheus and Eurydice," is a poignant tribute to his wife, Carol, who died in 2002.