

Moving House: Poems

reviewed by [Peggy Rosenthal](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Moving House: Poems

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell
Word Press

A subtitle for this collection of expertly crafted verse might be “A Memoir in Poetry.” Angela Alaimo O'Donnell has arranged the poems so that they loosely follow the

chronology of her life. First come the dark memories of a grimly loveless childhood in the coal-mining region of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Her father was a miner, and in “Late Elegy” she says to him, “No poems for you, my father. / I was always too afraid. Your quick anger, your dark days.” After her father’s death, her mother brought home a series of overnight lovers, ignoring the children’s craving for “peanuts, chips, mints, / small signs she’d remembered us” (in “Other Mothers”). The poem “Grand mother’s Living Room” gives a powerful sense of O’Donnell’s childhood, lived literally and figuratively atop open mine shafts that might at any moment collapse.

Yet there’s a restraint and nuance in all these poems, no matter how bleak the memories. “Late Elegy,” for instance, starts with a play on T. S. Eliot’s famous line from “The Waste Land,” that “April is the cruelest month.” O’Donnell’s elegy for her father begins “April is the kindest month”—“kind” because her terrifying father died in April. But by the poem’s end she is missing him: “hoping to find you quick again, my father.”

Life in death; death in life. This is O’Donnell’s delicate balance throughout the poems of *Moving House*. I know of no other poet so immersed in human mortality yet without the least morbidity. The boundary between mortal and eternal life is porous for this poet, and it is at this boundary where her poetic imagination is comfortably placed. Several poems are set in graveyards; ghosts populate her poetic landscape. “December Roll Call” names some of the famous dead—Merton, Juan de la Cruz, Mozart—those “who left behind the brief life / crossed soft that blind border.”

O’Donnell is Catholic, and I sense throughout her poetry a strongly envisioned belief in the communion of the saints—that Catholic sensibility of connectedness with the dead, of a continuum between those of us now walking the earth and those who have moved beyond. The volume’s title poem evokes this through a beautifully chosen image. As the poem’s speaker packs up to move out of her house, an “old photo fell / from the closet crevice,” a photo of the previous owners smiling happily in the days before cancer and death overtook them. Wondering what to do with this photo as she packs, the poet finally replaces it in the crevice, identifying with its poignancy: “our own smiling selves / before the enduring hearth.”

Though death remains a present reality throughout *Moving House*, as the poems move into moments of O’Donnell’s adulthood much of the darkness dissolves, and she offers images of a brighter, fulfilled family life. The poems about her sons are

particularly touching given O'Donnell's own painful childhood. We share her grateful joy at simply watching her sons play baseball outside the window (in "Staking Claim"). The poem asks "Can I wish me a blessing?" and we eagerly assent. In "Waking the Children," she is beckoned by her sons' idyllic sleep-world to "wade deep into their sepia waters." Here is another borderland, but one that doesn't require loss in the crossing over.

Even in fulfillment, however, O'Donnell's poetic vision embraces loss. The book closes with "New Year's Eve Poem," in which loss and gain are characteristically balanced: "This is the year of accomplishment, / the accomplishment of loss."

I've noted that the poems of *Moving House* follow a loose chronology of the poet's life. But there is more to their arrangement than this. One of the arts that must bring great delight to a poet compiling a volume of her verse is the art of ordering the poems. O'Donnell is a master of this art. She juxtaposes poems so that they pick up each other's images and motifs. It is as if the poems themselves are placed in conversation, with the space between them inviting the reader into another dimension of reflectiveness. And so the whole of *Moving House* is definitely more than the sum of its individual parts, as insightfully crafted as each part—each poem—already is.