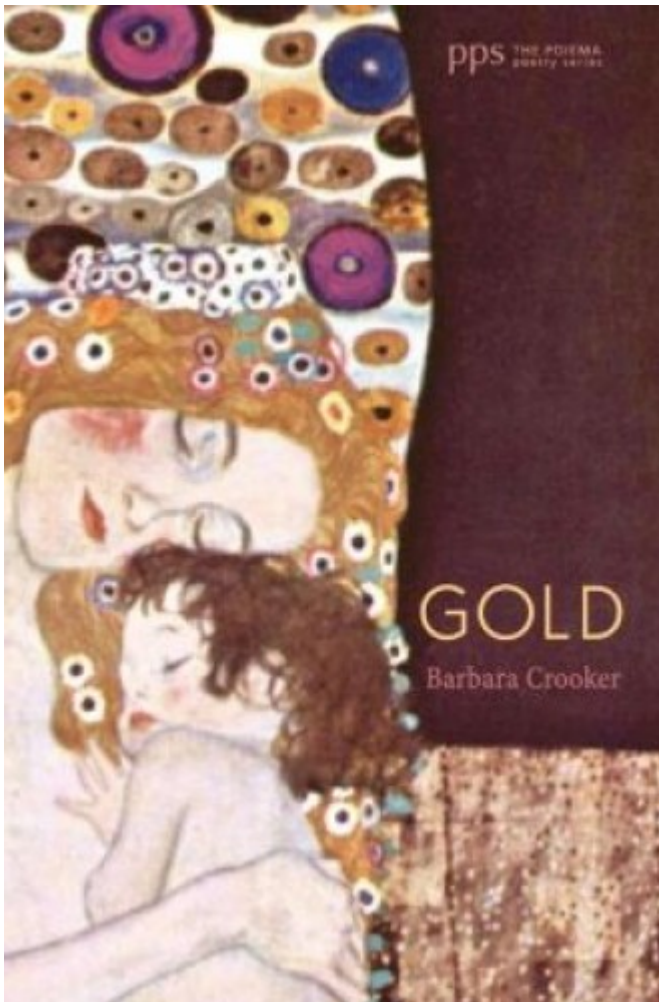


Gold, by Barbara Crooker

reviewed by [Tania Runyan](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Gold

By Barbara Crooker
Cascade

I find myself reading *Gold* at the height of October. Wind whips maple leaves and false sunflower petals into the sky, the colors as bold as fingerpaint. As the beauty intensifies, the sense of impending death—the first killing frost at the edge of all this

autumn glory—intensifies as well. Having recently entered middle age, I feel like I've reached that edge myself. Wasn't it summer just yesterday? But a muscle I pulled six weeks ago still hasn't healed. I'm a bit more tired and ragged. And this year I tune into beauty more than ever before.

Barbara Crooker, a prolific, award-winning poet and teacher, writes in the throes of such beauty. Her books *Radiance*, *Line Dance*, and *More* resonate with the lushness of heightened senses. Known for her interest in ekphrastic work, Crooker enters the shades and brush strokes of daily life with such a reverence for the physicality of the world that readers want to take notice, live better, and, in the case of *Gold*, die better.

Gold begins with a series of lyric poems about autumn, lines afire with cornstalks and chrysanthemums, finches' wings, stripteasing maples, and leaves going "presto chango, garnet / and gold." Although Crooker makes it clear in these poems, sometimes painfully, that "nothing gold can stay," she acknowledges nature's victory, even on the brink of decay, over the world's struggles with school shooters and a plummeting Dow Jones. But soon enough, Crooker foreshadows her own descent into grief in the poem "Late Prayer," in which she wonders, "Will I be strong / enough to row across the ocean of loss / when my turn comes to take the oars?"

Crooker's "ocean of loss," first mentioned in the poem "All Saints," surrounds the death of her mother. While both the speaker and her mother anticipate the approaching end, they hold on to all that is sweet—often literally. Her mother fills herself with sugary treats, and Crooker captures the sensual details with the urgency of her mother's appetite: "Right hand limp under the sheet, / she grabbed that donut / in her left, and squeezed. The pallid yellow filling / ran down her arm, and chocolate oozed between her fingers." This description of an ecstatic feast, the sweetest Eucharist imaginable, mirrors the poems themselves, which ooze palpably with life in the presence of suffering. Crooker not only accepts but praises death. She clings to the joy of spooning soup into her mother's mouth at the very end, of attending to her last "fluttering" breaths.

After loving her mother to the wrenching end, even down to her ashes, Crooker continues to grieve throughout the seasons, wishing she could tell her mother about the spring redbuds and writing her mother's name in the air with sparklers on the Fourth. Even when the poems turn to topics not explicitly concerning this passing, the pain seeps into other losses: the ever-increasing distance of childhood

memories, the aging body, and the death of friends. But still the balance of hope and beauty pulses in the poet's every walk, every museum visit, every encounter—even in the sprawling zucchini in the garden.

In a 2011 interview with Katy Giebenhain in the *Seminary Ridge Review*, Crooker remarks, "What I'm looking for in contemporary spiritual poetry is work that looks at sense of slant. I'm looking for words to help me be a person of God in a secular world, words that will give me hope in a time of darkness, words that will fan the fires of faith that sometimes flicker dimly." As a spiritual poet, Crooker indeed tells the story of faith slant, bringing the reader nearer to heaven by remaining so close to Earth. Exhorted to avoid clinging too closely to the ways of the world, believers often feel the need to detach themselves. However, as Crooker demonstrates, attending to creation and to life's quotidian tasks reflects the way of Christ and his incarnation. In "Vaudeville," the poet writes, "The house light / turns everything golden, and even though we know / what's coming, the next act, we start to believe / we can stay here forever in the amber spotlight, / that night's black velvet curtain will never fall." Living in the golden moment, the "amber spotlight" of God's beauty, is not an avoidance or denial of "the next act," but a victory. Do not be anxious about anything, Paul reminds us, but focus on the true, the honorable, and the lovely. Live in peace now. Soak in the light.

This autumn, like Crooker, I am allowing the waning sun to pour down on me "from the great glass jar of the sky." Warmed by the honest grief—and resulting hope—illuminating *Gold*, I will face the coming winter with my fires of faith fanned.