

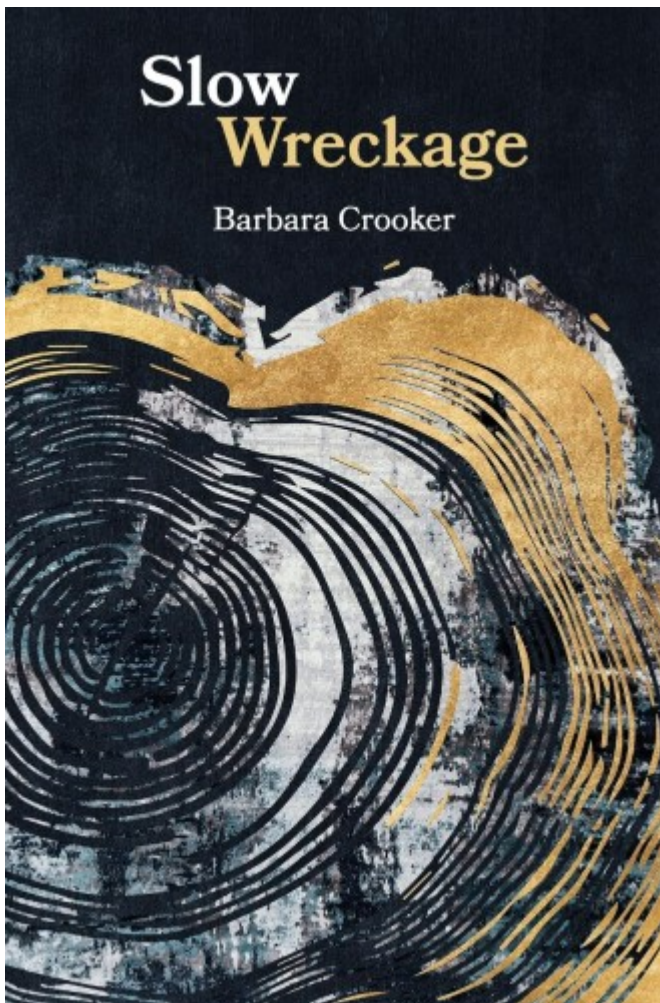
Wreckage and euphoria

Barbara Crooker's new poetry collection is a journey through loss that reveals the world's beauty.

by [Steven Peterson](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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## In Review



## Slow Wreckage

Poems

By Barbara Crooker

Grayson Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

On the dedication page of Barbara Crooker's new poetry collection, we read that her book is "For Richard, *da cuore*." The Italian phrase can mean "with all my heart," or even "from heart to heart." The Richard in question is her husband, who died in 2021 after 46 years of marriage. And so, from the very start of this volume we are alerted to the kind of journey these poems will take: to loss, decline, and death. What can counter these inevitabilities? The artistry of Crooker's poetry suggests some answers.

*Slow Wreckage* is Crooker's tenth book of poems. She has always been a sharp noticer, especially of the natural world and the visual arts. Reading her poetry feels like putting on a new pair of glasses: suddenly the beauty of the world appears with perfect clarity and detail.

Part of the pleasure in reading any new collection lies in discovering if the poet has arranged the poems to create a narrative, to tell a story. That is certainly the case here. The 68 poems in this collection are stepping stones that lead to something that transcends any individual poem. Reading *Slow Wreckage* from start to finish feels like traveling through time to something that eludes temporality.

The beginning of the book throws us back into the poet's past, sometimes through memories from her childhood, sometimes by just looking into a mirror today:

Why is my scalp, pink as an eraser,  
showing through? What happened  
to my snappy ponytail that switched  
and danced when I cheered?

Many of these memories are happy, but one poem cautions: "Time cannot run backwards / no matter how hard we try."

In the book's next section, Crooker explores what she calls "the body's slow wreckage." Here, courage and humor often sustain her. A sequence of poems with particularly tangible titles ("Degenerative Disc Disorder" followed by "Acupuncture")

followed by “After Rotator Cuff Surgery” followed by “After Oral Surgery”) focuses Crooker’s unsparing eye on what is happening to her physical self.

Turning to the current state of the world doesn’t help. The next section of the book observes a political culture becoming so mean, so blind and greedy, she turns instead to scripture. Quoting Paul’s words to the Ephesians with her title “*I do not cease to give thanks,*” she adds:

Just past the Day of the Dead,  
and I’m thankful for every friend who has blessed  
my life, gold coins in a wooden chest. Who said  
no man is an island? We’re all peninsulas, I guess,  
joined to the mainland, part of the shore.

She turns next to the great painters, especially those who found a way to make breakthroughs in their art in old age: Georgia O’Keeffe, Henri Matisse, Mary Cassatt, Claude Monet. In Crooker’s poems, these painters see with a new kind of light even as their lives draw to a close. In a Matisse still life there stands a glass of water so real, so shimmering, that the poet writes, “I know that when I raise it to my lips / it will give me some of what I’ve been longing for.” The fortitude of these and other artists makes Crooker declare: “I’m not ready to quit.”

Gratitude is the theme for the book’s fifth section, although it is introduced by a poem titled “All My Poems Lately Are Elegies.” Filling these pages are memories of friends now dead, some her fellow poets, others those who helped her or inspired her along life’s path. And yet, the gut punch of loss remains: “In the houses of mourning, / the holidays weigh like a heavy sack. / In the corner, the empty chair.”

*Slow Wreckage* concludes with a set of poems that consider the passing of the calendar year in Crooker’s home garden in eastern Pennsylvania. It’s nature poetry, yes, now infused with the wisdom of life and faith:

You can till the earth,  
hoe the rows, but each seed is an act of belief  
that somehow in the dark something  
is happening

The poet's year in her home garden—a year after so many years of loss—moves from early summer through autumn and into winter, “this blank landscape, / the black alphabet of trees.” But it doesn't end there. Spring arrives. The poet observes from a lawn chair on “a day of brilliant blue” and concludes, “The shadow of the vulture on the lawn / cannot dispel this blue euphoria.”

Barbara Crooker's own steadfast euphoria is a gift to all who read her poems of wonder and grace.