

**Rhina P. Espaillet**

## **The Frangible Hour, by Catherine Chandler**

(University of Evansville Press, 2016)

As a long-time reader and admirer of the work of Catherine Chandler, I expected great pleasure from *The Frangible Hour*, and have been, in fact, delighted to find that all the familiar virtues are present: the effortless mastery of form, the lyricism, the fresh use of nature imagery that appeals to all five senses, the capacity for communication on many levels, they're all beautifully here. But I was wrong not to prepare for surprises, and it was the title itself—that exotic “frangible” applied to a measure of time—that immediately put me on my guard. How can time “break,” after all? And if it can, does the speaker say so gladly, or indifferently, or with regret? What do the poems propose we do, or ask us to feel, about hours—or days, or lives—that fracture while we live them?

Like the title, the book's organization is a surprise, and a clue to its intent. Unlike the work in *Lines of Flight*—Chandler's first book, published in 2011—the great majority of these poems are serial, strongly narrative, with characters and details that would be at home in short stories, and a tendency to pull incidents together and shape them to thought of some kind, as an essay may do. In “Four Songs of Parting,” for instance, the departed mother shifts, in memory, from the strong, matter-of-fact woman brushing her daughter's hair without any compliments, through the mourned loved one who will never return to say those longed-for words, to the ordinary woman capable of foolishness and disappointment, to the saver of trinkets, baby teeth, locks of hair that prove, finally, “that I was once the apple of your eye.” The short story buried in those four separate poems is all the more effective for being composed of fragments, the bits of a relationship recalled too late to constitute a living whole.

Two poems —“Resonance” and “Threnody: On the Razing of Sandy Hook Elementary School”— deal with people lost who left unfinished realities behind in the lives of survivors. The poems work themselves, this time, not into a story but a buried essay, a meditation on loss and the impassable tracts it leaves behind in our consciousness.

One of the most elegant and haunting series in the book, “Days of Grass,” uses the familiar passage from Psalm 103:15-16—“As for man, his days are like grass...”—to depict the end of seven lives by means of seven types of grass. The effect is biblical, but also ironic, because the very device that highlights the ephemeral nature of life is used to link seven unrelated deaths, human and animal, into one memorable—and universal—view of that final experience. Whatever the Psalm says is scattered and irretrievable the poet has nevertheless gathered, briefly but persuasively.

“Almost,” a five-part series commemorating the near-death of the poet’s daughter, again employs horticultural imagery: cinquefoil, a plant whose leaves fold over to protect the flower, as a mother might seek to shield a beloved daughter. This time the series begins with an alarming telephone call in the dead of night, continues with the hospital vigil, pauses with Lorca’s “black horses” of unimaginable grief, and closes with “the little notebook” the daughter will never see, but which marks how “the mundane and blessed act of writing” has kept the mother sane. All of us who write discover that inexplicable power of the word at some point, and wonder how and why it works.

In “One-way Street,” four gorgeous sonnets that are halfway to becoming short stories present the inhabitants—again, both human and animal—of a community I’m tempted to identify as the world and its misfits. Each one leaves the reader wishing for the rest of the narrative, again creating the sense of something broken that is being pulled together, but only temporarily. And that series is followed by another, “Composure: An Elegy,” for a father who is described as “a model of total equanimity” by a daughter struggling to achieve the composure of acceptance. This series, though, unlike the one it follows, is a prosodic sampler: two highly distinctive sonnets, then what I failed at first to recognize as a curtal sonnet, then a sonnet in enjambed couplets, and then—the formal surprise I least expected—a ghazal on the phrase, “a song of praise.”

What will Catherine Chandler’s next book be like? Will it be fiction, as parts of this book make me suspect, or even contemplative prose poems, or formal work taking a different tack? Whatever it consists of, I know enough now to expect surprises, and am looking forward to those, in whatever form this unpredictable and always rewarding poet presents them!