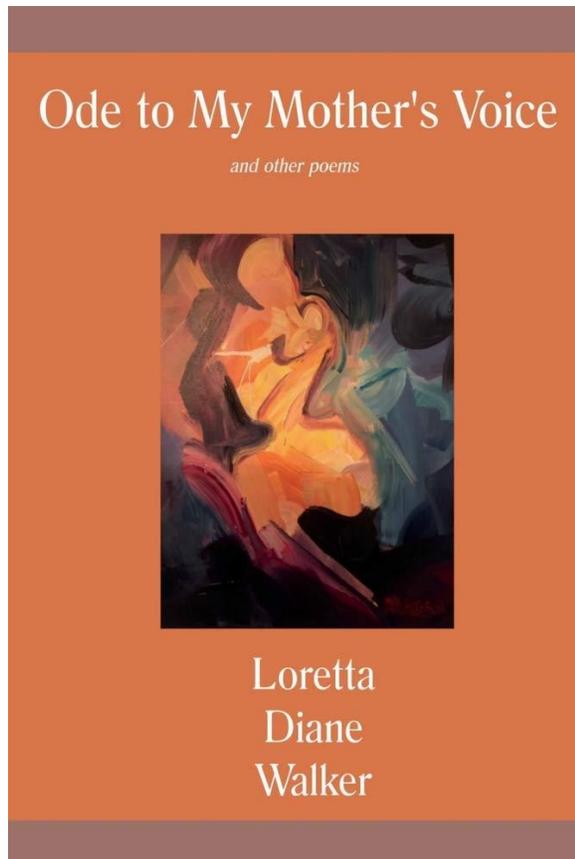


## Beaumont Book Beat

### *Ode to My Mother's Voice*— Celebrations of Beauty and Joy in Moments of Darkness

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For centuries, poets have written odes. The ancient Greeks wrote odes to celebrate athletic victories. One of the most famous English poems is an ode—Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” which is the poem where the oft quoted passage comes from that “beauty is truth and truth, beauty.” Pablo Neruda wrote tons of odes to everyday objects, like socks, a tuna fish, and an onion. Loretta Diane Walker enters this poetic tradition with her latest collection, *Ode to My Mother's Voice*. In this collection, Walker celebrates what we often choose to cover in darkness.

Loretta Diane Walker is an elementary school music teacher who lives and teaches in Odessa, Texas and she lets us glimpse this rugged world. In the opening poem, “Descending the Stairs of Day,” she takes her readers on a visual tour through Odessa. The first stanza poses the question: “Who are the swans? Butterflies? The beautiful and sacred / creatures living in the geometry of this distant city?” Instead of literal butterflies, she paints portraits of moments of human beauty—a postman who “ignores the gazing eye of this day” and “stuffs mailboxes with desire, surprise, expectations,” a street sweeper in sensible shoes whose hair “unsullied in the ruffling wind,” and a street musician who “licks and buzzes his lips.” The sunrise becomes the butterfly the speaker searches for in the opening lines as “orange spreads across the morning sky / like a fluttering monarch.” Walker finds beauty in more than simple physical landscapes, but in metaphoric landscapes, too. As an African American woman, the speaker faces racism, discrimination, and hardship, but she reminds us that this is also a resonant source of her strength. The poem “My America” contrasts her experience of a hopeful America where “a black man” jackhammers “the presidency’s white wall” vs. a mural in the Odessa Cracker Barrel restaurant with a caption that reads “Our America: From Oil Well to Refinery.” For the speaker, America means freedom, it means violet lilies, it means struggle, but ultimately, it means hope for a better tomorrow. The poem closes with an image of the speaker sleeping “with fertile, oil-less dreams / in my corner of America.”

Perhaps one of the speaker’s greatest hardships is her battle with breast cancer. The poem “Warrior” allows us a glimpse into a difficult but beautiful moment of the speaker wearing a scarf as she teaches her class of elementary students in a hot room. “When dribbles of sweat bead my brows,” she tells us, McCray, a diligent student, sits “poised like a warrior” and notices her discomfort. “Take that thing off your head! You’re Hot!” Cray exclaims. The speaker unveils her head, “now a bare tree where students

nest their eyes.” Though she expects them to laugh, their laughter never comes, and Cray, the young student, offers his “kind hands” to “cup the tears” she tries her best to hold back. “Canvas” celebrates another moment of human kindness in cancer’s aftermath. “Cancer whispered its way into my right breast; / its quiet cruelty changed the fabric of my body,” the opening line states. The speaker meets Kayli, a runway stylist that Walker dubs, instead “a miracle worker” armed with a pallet of eye shadows, powder and blush who gives makeovers to cancer survivors for a fashion show. After her makeover, the speaker falls “in love with the gift smiling back” at her. “I look around the room at the other beautiful survivors / in this tiny room congested with kindness,” the speaker tells us, just before she prepares herself to walk down the runway with pride.

Perhaps the most profound grief we experience as humans is seeing such ailing in the ones we love. *Ode to My Mother’s Voice* explores this experience as the speaker tries to find moments of beauty as she says goodbye to her beloved mother. While some of these poems do mourn the loss of the speaker’s mother, they also serve as a celebration to her life and her gifts of wisdom and love. The poem “Ode to My Mother’s Voice” contrasts the mother’s dying whispers with her former vivacious soprano rendition of “Amazing Grace.” It is a heartfelt poem where the speaker reminisces about the former days of her mother singing in church, singing while doing housework, singing over a hot kitchen stove. She longs to hear that voice again, but it is only possible in her memories. “I can’t exhale,” she tells us, “until her voice is an ostinato of life.” Walker even finds a difficult, complex beauty in the moment of death in the poem “Letting Go.” The poem opens with the mother’s last moments, her tongue “a clutter of words,” her mind “a hull of memory,” her fists opening and closing “as she searches” for the speaker’s palms “to press against the splintered lines in her hands.” We see suffering. However, after the second stanza, the poem turns into something more metaphysical, more

beautiful. Death becomes a woman lifting her skirt to run across a field. It’s “the universe” collecting “withered petals of pain dropping / from the flower of her body.” It’s a release to “the belly of her beginning—“ a suckling of stars “from the Milky Way.” The poem ends with the daughter releasing her mother as she lets “her dew-soaked ankles slip / through the broken chains of my fingers.”

Loretta Diane Walker is truly one of my favorite poets writing today. Her odes can easily stand toe to toe with the long tradition of Neruda, Wordsworth, and Keats. Walker writes with an honesty and a bravery to delve deep into the emotional complexity of contemporary life. Her work is rich in imagery and ripe with beauty, but it never away from the most difficult of subjects, such as racism, pain, and grief. *Ode to My Mother’s Voice* is a beautiful collection of poetry that triumphs in the victory of beauty over darkness. I think the last poem in the book, “Into the New Year,” says it best:

Together, even as light streaks our tears  
Maybe, even for a moment, we can create  
A small galaxy of joy.  
On the clear staff of morning,  
The sky will compose a new song.