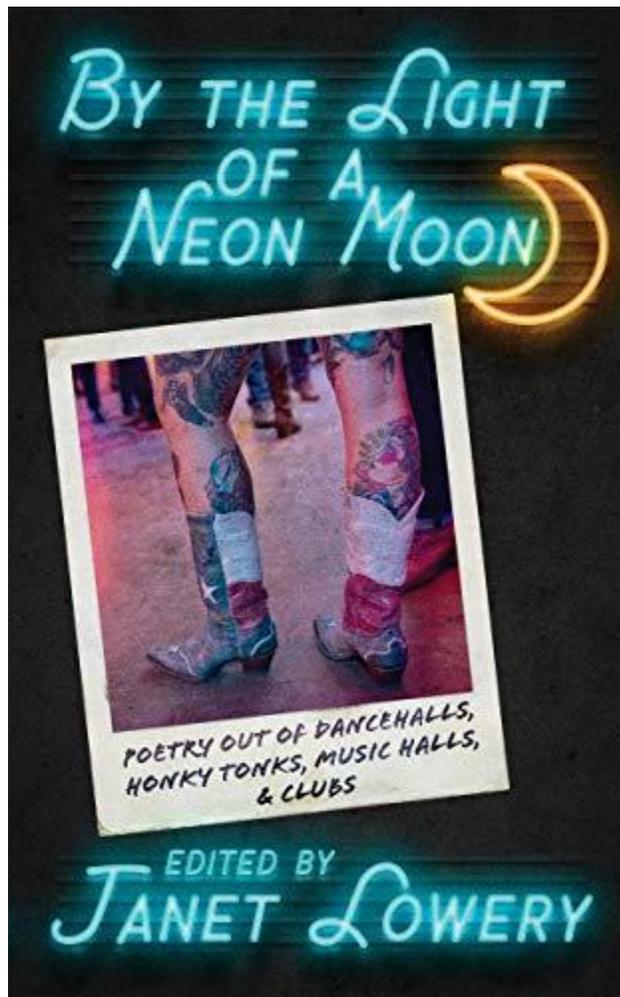


Beaumont Book Beat *Poetry in Unexpected Places*

By the Light of a Neon Moon
Poetry Anthology
Edited by Janet Lowery
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When you think of poetry, what kind of subject matter comes to mind? Most people think of the “big subjects” like love, spirituality, and nature. After all, that’s often what we read when we’re studying poetry in school, and maybe it makes it feel a little foreign. But poetry can also deal with the dust of the everyday. *By the Light*

of a Neon Moon, an anthology published by Madville Press, deals entirely with poetry about the dance halls and honky tonks of Texas. In this engaging collection of poetry, you’ll find silly poems about bad dancers, advice about love you can only learn on that boot-scuffed floor, and long, nostalgic strolls down memory lane to a simpler time when dance halls were the center of Texas communities. And while the honky tonk might not seem a likely subject matter for a poem, after paging through this anthology, you’ll be convinced that dance halls, indeed, are inspirational stages where the “big subjects” beg to be pondered.

Take, for instance, former Texas Poet Laureate Karla K. Morton’s poem “Words from My Father.” The poem begins with a father instructing his daughter on dancing: “Let him lead you. / Stay up on your toes...” As the poem unfolds, the dance becomes a metaphor for love—“Trust him—backwards, blind.” I can almost hear my own father’s voice: “Hell, you could lead if you wanted, / but chivalry is a gift / the woman gives the man / to make us feel strong.” And just as the dance hall can be the setting of romance, heartbreak can happen there, too. The poem “Back” by Juleigh Howard-Hobson, speaks to this. The poet sets the scene with comparison of “the pedal steel notes” to heartbeats, and the subject, a man, scans the dance hall for his beloved, though by the middle of the poem, we learn that he’s just reminiscing about a happier time. The closing couplet punches: he watches the doors to “see if she appears, but the dance floor / doesn’t hold her, she’s not there anymore.” It wasn’t until the end of the poem that I realized it was a beautiful rendition of a Shakespearean sonnet! And speaking of poetic form and heartbreak, Beaumont’s own poet Laurie Kolp has a triolet included titled “The Way We Danced Before I Became Another Ex in Texas” that particularly dazzles with its rhythm, rhyme, and sentiment.

Many poems take readers on strolls down memory lane and revel in the sense of nostalgia that an old, historic dance hall can't help but stir up in the heart. The poem "Old Flame" by Winston Derden is a good example of this. The poem opens with a description of a "slow Wednesday night" at the dance hall with "Merle and Tammy, Patsy and Hank / singing songs of another time." Those simple times have passed, and along with it, so has the speaker's idealism. "No money to be made on a night like this," he laments, but he keeps "the lights on / to see the old couples dance." One old couple become a symbol for love as they "close the evening out...barely touching, intimately in touch." The tone shifts at the end of the poem, bringing readers back to reality: "From the first I saw them / I believed in love." "Zydeco Shindig" also revels in nostalgia, but with a little Cajun flair. The poem takes place right in our backyard, in Port Acres, in a "shabby shack of a dance hall" where seniors "dance to the squeak of the accordion." The speaker watches, "misty eyed," as her mother joins the other octogenarians on the dance floor and transforms "to her teen days of giggling, flirting and having a fling." The poem ends with a declaration: "Laissez les bon temps rouler!" "Integration 1964," a poem by another one of Texas' former Poet Laureates Dave Parsons, also waxes nostalgic, but with more realism. When the speaker hears a "Motown Group" hit "one of those ecstatically high / shrilling passionate sax notes," he's taken back to "the dance floor at Charlie's / Playhouse in after-hours deep East Austin," or, "the bad part of town," in the 1960's. Then, as a "giddy tourist" he was oblivious to the realities of racism and inequality around him. Instead, he remembers the "wee-hour fried chicken" and was too high to worry about "cooks / spitting into our honky customers' gravy." Instead, "we were flying our lives / through the sixties and we didn't

have a clue / that we were like the Ugly Americans."

The dance hall might seem a strange place to intermix the spiritual, but a few skilled poets pull it off. Leah Mueller's poem "Waiting for Resurrection" takes readers into a broken down and closed up dance hall where all the speaker sees is "wreckage," but still, she imagines the miraculous occurring: its restoration. In another poem by Dave Parsons, "Two Dogs Howling at the Moon," the act of singing becomes almost holy—"somehow, interwoven with the potential of rapture." My favorite poem in the anthology is "Dress Code at the Dance Hall" by yet another one of Texas' former Poet Laureates, Alan Birkelbach. The poem begins in a dance hall bouncer's voice: "Son, I'm afraid there's a dress code," he tells us, but it's not the kind of dress code one would expect. It isn't about the brand of hat you wear, how fancy your jeans are, or the type of boots on your feet, but rather, "humility, manners, and grit."

If love, loss, and even the spiritual can all take place at the dance hall, then certainly it can be the stuff of poetry, as the poems in *By the Light of a Neon Moon* prove. They explore this rich facet of American culture with wit, grace, and honesty. I highly recommend this anthology for anyone who enjoys country music, dancing, or poetry. You'll be surprised at how both fun and inspiring these uniquely Texan poems are.