Title poem of new collection proves art can arrive in the middle of the night

PITTSBURGH—“The Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog,” the title poem of Alicia Suskin Ostriker’s new collection, just released by the University of Pittsburgh Press, came to the author in the wee hours of the morning. "It showed up on my screen in the middle of the night a few years ago," Ostriker said in an interview with the Prairie Schooner. "It was one of those nights when I wake up at 1 or 2 or 3 a.m. and go sit in front of my computer screen to see what happens."

To be blessed / said the old woman / is to live and work / so hard / God’s love / washes right through you / like milk through a cow . . . "It’s a poem everyone seems to enjoy, but I thought it was a fluke," she said. "It wasn’t like anything else I was writing. A year later, though, more of these poems began arriving . . . I feel a bit like that other old woman, the one who lived in a shoe. I have so many of these poems, I don’t know what to do."

What Ostriker did was gather them into a unique collection that blends whimsy with wisdom. She offers readers a sequence of poems that will surprise and delight—in the voices of an old woman full of memories, a glamorous tulip, and an earthy dog who always has the last word.

“The informal mastery of these poems is marvelous,” said Tony Hoagland. “Ostriker has devised a style that is offhand-seeming, a voice that is effortlessly concise, and a subject matter that has leapt far past the personal. Bawdy, ruthless, insightful, and compassionate, these poems feel like play, even as they take you through configuration after configuration of the mortal condition. Everyone should read them; they’re beautiful, and universal.”

Ostriker is one of America’s premier poets and critics. She is the author of fifteen poetry collections, including The Book of Life: Selected Jewish Poems, 1979–2011; The Book of Seventy; The Mother/Child Papers; No Heaven; the volcano sequence; and The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968–1998, as well as several books on the Bible.

She has received the Paterson Poetry Prize, the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement, the William Carlos Williams Award, the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award, the National Jewish Book Award, and has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award. Ostriker is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers University and teaches in the low-residency MFA program of Drew University.

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