

IV. Reviews of Ladders Made of Water

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IV. Reviews of *Ladders Made of Water*

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1. *A Review of Ladders Made of Water*

Allen Allen.

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Another profound read from B.W. Powe that clarifies, better than any book he has written yet, what exactly he has been on about. I mean this in the best possible way. Describing our post-Covid era as a kind of nowhere land (or “now here land” intensely of the present moment) where so much is open and possible... but almost terrifyingly so because there is something harsh about it as well — the possibility that we may simply lose control or lose our way on this dizzying new frontier of possibilities, Powe is asking: Will humanity falter? Will the human experiment ultimately fail? It is a real possibility... What does it mean when all we know to be our world might very well fail or might already be failing? Should we still live as if there is beautiful possibility? Hmm...

Powe explores these questions and more — how we are on a threshold of energies at play, with nothing ever the same again as it more passively was prior to our more naive Covid times. What will emerge in the aftermath of such devastation... and devastation ongoing in parts of the world... Will we still be able to sense the mysterious and powerful oceanic pulse of the planet or become detached-numb to its rhythms and messages? Will we link our hearts and minds to the planet’s wisdoms or will we ignore these hidden signals...

Two recent films share profound insight to these signals we seem to be receiving (even if where they come from exactly is difficult to pinpoint): Chloe Zhao’s “Eternals” and Denis Villeneuve’s “Dune: Part One”... Powe reviews them both in concise but haunting reviews unlike any other film criticism you will find these days. For Powe, the films are loose metaphors for (or imaginative images of) our new world — in “Eternals” there are eerie suggestions of humans caught in battles between our base natures and alien-like supernatural beings, so that we are all but small parts in a cosmic conflict unfolding throughout the ages and which our

electricity-charged, tangled relationship with technology seems to mirror, with electric environments and contemporary technological abilities sometimes feeling supranatural; in “Dune” we find dreams as prophecy and the desert as a nowhere land where whirlwinds of vision and conflict can take shape, echoing our modern mind-scape that is a blurred mix of images and imagination and intuitions more so than it is strictly logical, all while authoritarian forces try to stamp out the possibility of a life beyond the confines of knowable structures... because to some the very possibility of a world beyond narrow limits is as an existential threat.

“Eternals” in particular has gotten a mixed reactions (relatively speaking, for a Marvel movie) from critics and audiences alike — and while the film did solid box office numbers and has its admirers, the masses seem slow to appreciate it on the whole, as is often the case with visionary work well ahead of the curve, which is a large part of what B.W. Powe is getting at with this book and which director Chloe Zhao is aware of as in one interview she wondered if maybe the movie made people feel existentially “uncomfortable” at a time when people are already having an existential crisis.

Powe seems to say not only is that the case, but there will be no turning away from either of these existential crises. His book is dedicated to fearlessly probing both the pandemic fall-out and the shaky footing we are on in a shifting (like Dune desert sand shifting) new world of uncertainties everywhere one looks. This uncertainty includes economically, which Powe notes Zhao’s film “Nomadland” has much insight to as well, how these struggles make our spirits bare but also more open to paths... Where before we may have thought realistically, now we realize reality can always be redefined; “irrealism” is the term Powe is more fond of.

Powe also ponders if the Canadian experiences of Denis Villeneuve, particularly Villeneuve’s experience with harsh Canadian winters may have helped inform his feel for the harsh desert terrains and imaginative undercurrents of “Dune.” The winter and Canadian terrain is one of distance; Canadians depend on technology to link these distances. Furthermore, the Canadian winter is one of blizzardy conditions that can blur the land into a kind of stretched out nowhere – a cold version of the hot desert with its sandstorms.

Powe is a Canadian author himself who once wrote one of the essential essays on Canadian identity in “Towards a Canada of Light.” He continues to carry the torch that uniquely Canadian thinkers like Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye originally lit as they understood Canada’s placing outside the mainstream to be conducive grounds for an outside perspective on the world. This is in contrast to other countries, such as the United States, caught up in the middle of the action, possibly without time to step back and observe or think...

Powe includes other musings on the various other uncertainties we find at our current crossroads — AI in particular is a spooky venture, although Powe also finds, too, humanistic ironies and humour in the advent of AI. Elsewhere in “Ladders Made of Water” are his recent poetry and “rock opera” lyrical writings. Through these we discover a truly alternative voice of dissent, against the panicked coldness we too often find around us.

Powe goes to places others simply won’t. These include contemplation of: Depression (melancholia) and the overwhelming aspect of the Information Age (and the internet’s organization of it) as it piles so much history on us. Powe wonders where imagination will fit

into this dawning hyper-evolutionary age we suddenly find ourselves thrown into. We must quickly learn to swim through these dreamy currents created by hyper-evolution and Powe worries we may “wake too fast.” The emotional turbulence of waking too fast could cause spiritual damage.

“Ladders Made of Water” is an absolute must-read for imaginative filmmakers, artists and technology explorers, spiritual minds, Canadian poets and audiences in today’s world that wish to be a little more attuned to the flow and depths (and hopefully someday the stillness and wellness) of our currently troubled global phenomenon... our human apocalypse... When I say “attuned”, I do not only mean mentally but also in the heart — the navigation of the heart being increasingly a lost art... Powe hopes we can retrieve this lost art at this eleventh hour that, if we still believe yet — believe in the power of vision, communication, consideration, thought and thoughtfulness — could just be the turning of the clock forward towards a bold new time.

Powe has said the book is actually only a primer for a future work, “Mysteria”, which is his magnum opus. If this is the primer... I can’t imagine how awe-inspiring “Mysteria” must be. “Ladders Made of Water” stands on its own, though, as a work of tremendous humane sensitivity in a time becoming ashamed of such feeling... Read this while you still can.

Allen Allen
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2. A Bold Vision of Peace & Pieces: A Review of B.W. Powe's *Ladders Made of Water*

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B.W. Powe is a writer, poet, York University teacher, and philosopher. Recently, he published a new visionary book called [*Ladders Made of Water*](#) (Stream Elsewhere Press 2023), a collection of absorbing and moving pieces ranging from poetry, lyrics, lectures, movie reviews, aphorisms, and fables. Like the algorithm feeds that flood our phones, computers, and tablets every day, *Ladders* transitions from subject to subject, in variant tones and moods.

Powe reviews a few films (*Dune Part 1*, *Eternals*, *Nomadland*), and proposes a character monologue homily on *Harry Potter*. The movie reviews are far from the snarky, critical attitude that dominates most modern criticism. Instead, he offers readers movie meditations, exploring how these films relate to the current crises of our time.

Powe connects *Nomadland* with Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. In the review, he shows how we, whether aware of it or not, are journeying in a *Nomadland*. Powe says: "We're nomading, you and I, always on the pilgrimage we didn't know we'd started, inside someone's quest on the vague thresholds looking for vapour trails."

The crossroads is a primary theme in *Ladders Made of Water*. In another poem titled "The Thin Red Line," he shows another rendition of this idea: "The dream path is a thin red line with many intersections. / The path must be spare because it's harrowed by traps and tangles."

The crossroads encompasses Powe's underlying vision: we are individually and collectively journeying through the crossing and curving roads. These roads can lead to different results. In *The World Being Mashed Smashed into Bits: A Panoramic Fit Countering History's Crush*, he opens with the words, "Peace Piece." Roads we go down could bring us peace, shred us to pieces, or (and?) do both.

Ladders Made of Water presents a double vision of peace and piece. The peace side is restorative and healing. The vision of piece opens the wounds of our day, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, ecological catastrophes, technology, wars, and growing societal division. Powe explores the *via negativa* beside the *via positiva*, the ascent and descent, the light and darkness, dual and non-dual, clarity and obscurity, transcendence and immanence, the breakdown and breakthrough, the everywhere and nowhere. Sometimes these opposites lead to the same thing, are different, or exist together.

The interplay between piece and peace is fascinating; the opposites collide with each other, leading to a vision of multiplicities. Things are not either or, this or that. They are multiple. In *The Medium and the Light Speech*, Powe perfectly captures the piece and peace working together: "Stretching and imploding ... The Self, seeking transcendence and yet experiencing the magnetic draw toward cataclysm." These examples embody his visionary approach, a challenging but enriching approach for the imagination and intellect.

On the piece side, Powe identifies the current and potential transformations emerging from technology. His sensitivity to technology's effects comes from his background: Powe was mentored and taught by Marshall McLuhan, arguably one of Canada's most significant intellectuals and philosophers. From the 1950s to the 1980s, McLuhan's work prophesied the significance of technology and media for the coming decades. He saw how the digital realm would evolve and change our consciousness. Powe builds on McLuhan's prophetic perceptions through his poetic sensibilities.

In his lecture *One Must Be Absolutely Hypermodern*, delivered at McGill University, he states, "Technology is the total environment. Gaia has become Cosmopolis. This is what I've called in other places the Genesis Overdrive ... The evolution from Gaia to Cosmopolis is the beginning of greater fast-time metamorphoses." In another part, the poem *Song and Shadow Catching* foresees a decaying world, similar to J.G. Ballard's visions of a swirling and unruly environment: "Merciless rain, heat-wind, parched earth, field fires / Overwhelming the song that carries our aspiring mind. / The song scorched, buried." These sections encapsulate a vision of pieces where the grand forces lead to a breakdown.

Despite the all-consuming chaos, Powe illustrates restorative peace. In *Rights for Your Imagining*, he gives readers a warming set of creative rights which cultivate inwardness: the ability to sense, perceive, seek, and harness the imagination to form inner strength. Right #18 states: "To be in a room reading, then leaving your room walking into a wilderness where you find more paths (Paths resembling the wrinkles in your hands and yet are like nothing you've known)." Powe reminds us in Right #15 to be "contradictory, elliptical, obscure, paradoxical, baffling to yourself. Celebrating the universal enigma within". These Rights are life-affirming; they point to a sense of spiritual transcendence and wholeness.

In *Manna*, Powe tells the revisionary fable of Adam and his son Seth. The tale wrestles with these questions: What language did people speak in Paradise? How can we rediscover this lost language? Through the story, Seth retrieves the language of creation in the Garden of Eden. Like a lost sheet torn from a deuterocanonical book in the desert sands, the story points to this idea, among others: we can recover the lost language of Paradise through the engagement of poetics and creativity. The fable illustrates the invigorating, restorative power of the imagination.

For those intrigued by *Ladders Made of Water*, I recommend a slow reading. Revisiting the sections over and over proved to be a restorative experience. The book unfolds gradually, each part offering new ideas, links, and insights. This is a hallmark of great literature — one can live with it, wrestle with it, and create new connections from it. *Ladders* plants the seeds for the growth of the imagination. B.W. Powe is a seminal Canadian voice: his work breaks through the black and white binaries of our era, giving readers a fresh way of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. And for these reasons, I cannot recommend *Ladders Made of Water* enough.

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3. The Visionary Moment: On the Work of B. W. Powe

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In the fall of 2016, when B. W. Powe took the stage at a conference honoring the media studies legacy of the University of Toronto, where these events took place, he set aside his prepared remarks and delivered an impromptu lecture on the visionary poetics of Bob Dylan, whose Nobel Prize in Literature had just been announced. It was the first time I encountered Powe, whose lecture was dazzling as he discussed Dylan's experiments with the technologies of musical creation as well as his place in a tradition that included such figures as Dante, Milton, Blake, Shelley, and Whitman.

A former student of Marshall McLuhan, Powe dwells in the realm of the visionary. As he writes in his *Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye: Apocalypse and Alchemy* (2014), "Apocalypse is heightened awareness, the moment of epiphany, where an individual sees into, or acutely apprehends, his or her time and place." (16). A moment of uncovering or unveiling, such apocalypse discloses one's time and place anew, allowing a glimpse into its part in the larger trajectories of history, glimpsed in sparks and flashes and revealing new possibilities. The apocalyptic moment is also a revelation of time and place in their tenuousness, as one comes to see the subterranean forces and the possible disruptions to come, as well as rumblings already underway. For McLuhan, as Powe points out, everything connects to everything else, and parts of the world that we invent—from fire to the steam engine to the Internet—in turn reinvent us in an ongoing process of interwoven influence.

Northrop Frye, the other focus of the book I'm considering here, the work of the imagination is vital to our very survival in a sometimes brutal universe. Further, as Powe, in a visionary moment, sums up one of Frye's central tenets: "All texts interpenetrate, forming one great text that is the way the human spirit fuses with the great Spirit of creation" (*McLuhan and Frye* 7). In Frye's reckoning, we are each caught up in a search for identity, the "soul itself wholly realized" (*McLuhan and Frye* 20), so that all must undertake their own exploration. The global intertwining of texts tells a vast story of creaturely striving reaching into the deep past of evolutionary history and continuing into a future that we planetary creatures, in our modest but significant ways, participate in creating. Powe shows how, for all their differences, McLuhan and Frye envision a human struggle for meaning in a complex and entangled world.

In relation to this complex sense of world and self, there is an especially apt moment in Powe's *Where Seas and Parables Meet* (2015), section 4 in a piece titled "Openings":

Here's a new mythic incident:
at the crest of the road...
when the bell tolls...
in the moment's heat...
in the confusions and rumours of distant forms and
shapes...

You meet the Sphinx. The great beast roars in confrontation.
But the sphinx doesn't know what it is.
It's a riddle, even to itself. It can't speak. The Sphinx waits
for your questions. (5)

The multiple ellipses indicate that, like many a disclosure of wisdom, this one is fragmentary, as it must be, for the holistic coming of wisdom is too much for humans to bear—"human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (176), says the bird in Eliot's *The Four Quartets*. Humans are limited to fragments, but the fragment will suffice. Something of significance is at hand, as the "crest of the road" and the tolling of the "bell" signal, even though we lack the full significance, for each of the details just mentioned is followed by the uncertainty of an ellipsis; but we've reached a shift of some kind, as indicated especially by the bell tolling out that something is at hand, and the crest indicates another kind of change, a shift of movement. What these signal is a radical unknowing, one wrapped in knowledge that something is there, "distant forms and shapes," but that so far exists only as "confusions and rumours." This is the world where we live. Even were the lines above not followed by ellipses, but were rather full sentences, we would merely have longer fragments; a single statement accounting for the whole of what exists would be either trivial or untrue. One helpful function of the fragment is that it reminds us that all our knowledge is fragmentary, on the move.

In the context of these considerations, the Sphinx is an apt mythological figure to appear. Holder of secrets, utterer of riddles, the Sphinx challenges any overarching system. She is the very figure of "confusions and rumours." The result of a static world is a system that demands mechanized conformity built on principles bereft of both heart and the deeper reaches of the intellect. With her riddles, the Sphinx opens a space for new discourses to emerge, and the risk is no less than everything, for failure to answer the riddle to the Sphinx's satisfactions means death. But so does remaining in the seeming safety of the same. As an emissary of the new, the Sphinx in this parable works in opposition to what Powe elsewhere calls psychotic Structure: "The Structure turns psychotic when it makes people justify its existence over the respect and love and imagination and dignity and liberty of a person" (*Where Seas and Fables Meet* 58). It is akin to what Kafka refers to with the metaphors of the Castle and the Law (*Where Seas and Fables Meet* 59). These are opposed to the flourishing of human existence. They reduce true mystery—that which surpasses human understanding—for the merely not yet known. It's fitting, then, that in Powe's fable, the Sphinx is a mystery to its very self: "But the Sphinx doesn't know what it is. / It's a riddle, even to itself. It can't speak. The Sphinx waits / for your questions" (*Seas and Fables* 5). Not even in control of its own language, The Sphinx awaits the question that unbinds its tongue. Speak to the silent mystery and it will speak back, but what it will speak is a question. This is how we exist in the world with regard to the mysterious cosmos of which we are a part. We speak into what we wish to know, and the answer is further questions and riddles that keep the spirit of inquiry on the in motion, interspersed with moments of silent awe.

Our rapidly changing world brings new opportunities. Many of these changes relate to the emergence of new communications technologies, which disrupt our older ways of understanding and being. I think of a moment in Powe's book on McLuhan and Frye where an especially powerful voice breaks through:

Electronic technology represents the significant convergence of mind and matter, spirit and force. The convergence has enlightening effects: people throughout the world appear to be experiencing the *om* (unity) of longing and

desire, the omega of destiny (the apogee point) in the communion of common hopes, and the closeness of all hearts and minds in the collective recognition of individual value which we see in the decisive championing of human rights; and it has terrifying, darkening effects—the abyss of suffering and injustice, the overheating of rage, greater opportunities of totalitarian politics, a mass suicidal impulse in the development of the atom bomb and other appalling weapons. (*McLuhan and Frye* 159).

We do ourselves a disservice when we look upon these new phenomena (and in the context of cosmic history, even the atom bomb developed a fraction of a second ago) using a framework of foregone conclusions, especially when those conclusions are either uncomplicated doom or unfettered optimism. It's much better to lead, as Powe does, with a curiosity leaning into the complexity of what we are undergoing—discerning “convergence of mind and matter, spirit and force” as well as “the overheating of rage.” Indeed, our technological advances unleash possibilities of destruction and repression even as they open opportunities for global communion and collaboration. Although these technologies have their own dynamics, we are not helpless before them; we can learn to move with them more creatively and direct their dynamics in the world.

But there is always the task of reflection leading to insight. The speaker of a poem in Powe's *Decoding Dust* (2016), “Sadhaka” (the title means initiate or beginner), insists that he has been unjustly imprisoned. Among the forces of deadly conformity, this figure seeks a way of remaining alive, of tapping into his own deeper energies that can put him into touch with the world's creative sparks. He receives an enigmatic letter from a “you” to whom he earlier wrote: “Soon I saw between your lines / an open space and a silence // I saw the lines / become a shape like a map” (*Decoding Dust* 6). The emerging map leads him to a place on the floor where he can tunnel to his escape. By night he continues the work of digging while during the day he reads and prays and, thus working, arrives in a new world:

When I came at last into
the sudden air, the wind

the breath beyond the lines
the breathing behind the map

I knew the story lived in my hands
I stood up

What would I do now
with a soul. (*Decoding Dust* 6)

With its “sudden air,” this new world startles, but the air, the breathing life of the map taking shape becomes the source of new life for the speaker, the confusing growth of a soul.

Again and again in these poems, there are signs in the forms of maps, texts, and proverbial wisdom, but the recipient is always tasked with the difficult work of discerning how to understand them. Meaning does not arrive whole, rounded off, and finished, but must be

interpreted. The wisdom that comes with the journey calls forth a further journey of understanding. “Dedication,” for example, discloses that “Some invisible paths dream of you” (*Decoding Dust* 23). I infer that the metaphor of the dream of me implies that the path is somehow distinctively mine, which also means that I must find and walk it on my own. As Powe writes elsewhere, we find ourselves in a “Cloud of knowing / Cloud of unknowing” (*Decoding Dust* 134), meaning that we shift back and forth between what can be known by common means and what can be discerned in a cloud of uncertainty and trust, and thus we manage our ways into an uncertain future with what fragments of the past we can carry.

I take it that it was in this cloud of knowing unknowing or unknowing knowing, the place of generative ambiguities and restful silences, that Powe wrote *The Charge in the Global Membrane* (2019). What is this metaphor of the membrane? It is akin to Teilhard de Chardin’s noosphere, the layer of mind, reflection, and self-reflection that emerges from the biosphere. The image of the global membrane reminds us that what is at stake is not merely a matter of thinking and reflection, as “noosphere” (from the Greek *Nous*, meaning mind) might lead us to believe. “Membrane” is more embodied, tactile, in its implications. Powe’s “global membrane” is a powerful image for meditating on, as each of us, an embodied consciousness, makes our complex way into a complicated future.

Generations of Electricity, Emerging World-Consciousness and Light-Dark Energies, the Donald Trump Phenomenon and the Spectacle of His Election, the Threat of Nationalist Movements and Separatism, Refugees, Pilgrimages of the Soul, Teilhard de Chardin’s Noosphere and Gaia, Identity Crises, Empathic Conditions and Conflicts in Sensibility, Media Wars.¹

Published in 2019, the book is as relevant now as it was then. It includes photographs, by Marshall Soules, of street art from different parts of the globe—Toronto to Havana to Barcelona to Rome. One image is of a woman with a cityscape emerging from her head, the buildings light red. She is blue, the space behind her, slate gray. Her right eye gazes straight ahead, vision of the day, vision of planning and reason. Her left eye is a spiral, vision of dream, of the visionary, the inner vision moving outward, emerging into consciousness, carrying the riches of a deep interior.

As Powe writes, “The charge in the membrane initiates an opening time, a new consciousness that won’t be suppressed. It also triggers a closing time of stunned reactions—stress that brings repressions and polarizations, the need to block the flux.” Given parts of the above list—which include refugee crises, political spectacle, and nationalist movements—one could easily be tempted to despair. No matter how dire things might appear, however, this “new consciousness...won’t be suppressed.” But we easily forget what he also writes, the “stunned reactions” to the new, the charge, the future. It seems that backlashes will always occur, and we need to bear in mind their presence without taking them for the world.

Whatever the backlashes might be, the times are still a-changin’, but the changing doesn’t look the same as it used to, even though the changes we are witnessing have grown out of the past. Can anyone, for example, imagine the Black Lives Matter movement taking place without the work of the civil rights struggles of the 50s and 60s, or the Me Too movement without the force of the waves of feminism leading to it? None of this is to deny the toxic entry onto the world stage of nationalism, populism, anti-immigration sentiment, white nationalism, and more, all of which Powe writes about in *The Charge in the Global Membrane* in a

¹ This book was published without page numbers.

multiplicity of modes. Part of what makes this work powerful are the multiple genres that Powe employs, one of which is the journal entry:

June 5th around 7 pm
No entries.

which is, of course, an entry, one that says there are no entries. It implies, perhaps, I'm resting, letting the charge do its work. I'm letting you know I showed up and indicating that sometimes it's best to let words go, even if I use words to say so. I take it that the image of the charge here is the confluence of natural, cultural, and political forces that we are experiencing. We are part of them no matter what. Sometimes it's good to step back and observe before deciding to become more actively involved again. The time of rest allows one better to discern what needs to be done.

The image on the following page appears as a smear of blue paint, a little darker than sky blue, dripping along the bottom edge, looking like rain rivulets of dark blue liquid sky. In the midst of the blue are the following words:

Here are manifestations of the charge
appearing at the time of this writing.
Be aware (beware) that all airings are
subject to change.

Present tense, present tensions.
We're living out-of-date.

Because our languages for the moment go quickly out of date, it's important to allow some silence, some white space, to allow the membrane's charge to take effect in the depths of one's being. For those of us—such as I—much taken with older styles of discourse—and uneasy with what roils around inside us, this silence brings on great tension. So sometimes it's better to show up and simply to write “No entries,” a sign that more is percolating, more entries are to come, though not yet.

Turn the page, and there is an image of a screaming brain with exposed eyes unable to close, and on the facing page, printed across a band of red: “Expressions of nationalist fervor are about preserving set identities at any cost.” This is a head stuck on the visual, which is of course important for thinking—more than half of the cerebral cortex is dedicated to seeing—but then a way of thinking overly reliant on sight is impoverished, for on its own vision objectifies, distances, registers surfaces alone. We need sound for dialogue, touch for intimacy. We need a mixture of all senses in dynamic interaction for nuanced understanding. This brain stuck on one modality, that of sight, is stuck on distancing, objectifying. No wonder it specializes in “Expressions of nationalist fervor”; nationalism relies largely on favoring those who look like me. One also needs repose to allow the fears activated by this fervor to settle down. “The worldwide membrane is more about ripples of sensibility than it is about ideologically determined positions.” This usage of sensibility registers, I believe, the deep down parts of us where thinking and feeling are part of a functioning whole, not separated, each to its own domain.

We need to find new languages of the kind that can speak into the present moment while facing into the unknown yet to be. One reason we need such speaking is to counter the languages devoted to exploiting our global troubles for the sake of ownership and control. “Outcasts flee across the globe, often bringing a suffering so intense that they move us with their pulses of grief” (*Charge in the Global Membrane*). As Powe also writes, the backlash against the charge—the counter-charge, if you will—is a kind of retrograde populism that tries to stanch the flow of people, information, and energies. There are planetary circulations that come about due to crises in the environment as well as political claims of ownership and control. “Outcasts flee across the globe, often bringing a suffering so intense that they move us with their pulses of grief” (*Charge in the Global Membrane*). The questions before us are not merely about the free flow of information, but also about the free flow of beings across the planet, seeking refuge and dignity. These questions concern ethics, including the ethics of basic survival; and they are questions of spirit, not that issues of body and spirit are ever really separated. “But the refugees and migrants often find hostility and reaction,” writes Powe: “barbed-wire barriers and the shout for increased border protections. This is the voice of the closing” (*Charge*). When we close in on ourselves, we cut ourselves off from the world in all its beauty and suffering.

Another painting: a deep blue strip bordered by gray spread diagonally across the page. Within the blue, there is a body that is all legs, buttocks, and head. The mouth is open, tongue protruding, eyes closed. Beside it is a skull without a lower jaw. An arm formed by two bones, and a hand holds a chalice to the skull’s mouth. It is not clear whether the legs are functional; they splay out behind the reclining figure. Floating near the skull, as if on its shoulder, as if it had a shoulder, is a corporal’s epaulette. The living though partial body is gagging, perhaps vomiting. The skull is partaking in some kind of communion. Neither is a full body. They are dismembered and seemingly in the act of being remade.

In discussing the Trump phenomenon, Powe takes up the insights of Kafka, who well knew that before the law, before the powers that be, one is expected to become small. Those working for Trump during his presidency “humbled themselves like Kafka’s tiny creatures who knew they had to squeak and genuflect if they were to survive” (*Charge*). There’s the old chestnut about the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The Trump phenomenon seems to have invented a new genre, something at once more farcical and more tragic, a genre that we perhaps do not yet have a name for. To speak into this phenomenon, Powe leans into the insights of the backlash somehow related to the charge. The internet has the capacity to alienate, to fertilize the ground for “alternative facts,” to lead us into permanent distraction. But Powe holds out for integration:

I submit: print and screen must depend on each other, the complement a marriage of Kabbalah and Alchemy, print and electronic media metamorphosing into renewing configurations of effects. Thus solitude and collectivity may mingle.

Neither a nostalgic longing for pure print nor a naïve vision of progress through pure pixels, Powe’s is the difficult vision of synthesis, updating the old with the new, facing into uncertainty. Where are we going? If we could know, would it be worth going there?

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4. Review of *LADDERS MADE OF WATER*

Bill Kuhns

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What a stunning discovery! How do we counter the rise of a soon-to-become superior intelligence — A.I. — amplified and surrounded by other supernal threats: of pandemic, war, fascism, and planetary meltdown? Powe proposes the wisest strategy I've yet encountered to our era's many grave dangers. He writes that "the alchemical opus" — the all-or-nothing requirement this hour makes of us — is in "cultivating depths during our time of technological expansion."

Those very technologies, of course, promise fresh sources of distraction and further delegation of skills and abilities and mental acuteness that are inimical to the depth-seeking Powe invites us to attempt.

As its title suggests, *Ladders Made of Water* encourages us to cultivate depths by learning, simultaneously, to dive deep and ascend. By doing both, Powe proposes, we can surmount and prevail over these threats all but engulfing us.

This book of poems, reflections, and aphorisms is a beautifully written roadmap — dare I say, survival guide? — into cultivating those depths.

The writing is lucid and searching, delicately probing a mysterious realm of shifting questions rather than seeking out the hard-trodden firmament of rooted answers. Powe's questioning is so visionary and wide-eyed it carries echoes of William Blake. "What are the inspirations that we need to preserve... / Inside vistas that may be whirling too wide"

Here is a work of rare moral and spiritual force, deeply true to its moment, luminous with flashpoints that I believe can serve as navigational starlight in that strange new darkness fast descending all around us. — Bill Kuhns

**5. POW – POWE – POW - Powerful – B.W. Power-full:
A Review of B.W.'s *Ladders Made of Water***

Robert K. Logan, Editor of New Explorations
logan@physics.utoronto.ca

POW – POWE – POW - Powerful – B.W. Power-full

B.W. Powe has done it once again with his new collection of poems, mini-essays, *stories, parables, song lyrics, meditations on cinema and our catastrophic moments*—*questions about our nomad experience of being hurtled into new evolutionary stages. In this short book, Powe takes us to an apocalyptic edge. It's a step—a streaming—beyond The Charge in the Global Membrane.*

As soon as I read the announcement of *Ladders Made of Water*, I ordered the book and read it in one shot once I received it. You will do the same when you receive the book. It is full of fascinating poetry, poetic images and short *scholarly and intellectually probing* essays that both enlighten and delight. A second reading that I read more slowly lingering on the poetry instead of blasting through the text in the excitement of receiving his book revealed more insights. This is a book you will read more than once or twice as I already have.

What is interesting in the book is the B.W. combines his academic scholarship with his poetic sensibility. And not just because this book contains both scholarly essays and poems, but because the academic text is poetic and the poetry contains insights into the nature of media and communications. In fact, it is hard to discern which are the scholarly essays and which are the poems. They morph and bleed into each other.

Consider this example from the essay, **A Presentation for the Recalling Jacques Ellul Conference** which contains these three poetic passages: among many others:

From Section 9.

I'm fractalling (is there such a word? I suspect: soon) ...
Flight into associating, meaning these links may not be direct—
Setting fractals to float...
And maybe the fragments will sift or roll together—

From section 10.

Ellul, Teilhard, McLuhan, Weil, Carson.
I'm running out of time to talk about them.
Do fractals run out? They spiral on, forward.
Do I aim to convince? I have only moments to relay.

From section 11.

In the five the fire of inward metaphysical vision, and the need to see, counters what can't be wholly grasped when the present surges so fast we can't name it. They knew (and know) the world rushes indomitably. The inner fire fades; the world, irrevocably altered in the eschatological story of technology, continues to transit forward. By this I mean the five sensed how our inventions throw us into...

I leave these sentences in an ellipse...

Here is a poem, ***Fastened to Crystal Tempests and an Aurora Borealis***, in which its 8th verse is a mini essay:

We live in a forgetting disunion dissent are part of democracy if we agree to continue with its uncertainties its enigmas its unwritten protocols of trust its willingness to allow contradictions and ambiguities its paradoxes and its nuances its constant balancing of competing concerns its contingent sense of freedom where we loosely agree to never allow definitions to be totalizing and final

So what is this book ***Ladders Made of Water***?

Poertry – Yes;

Essays – Yes;

Hybrid – Yes;

And an exhilarating trip as you climb B.W. Powe's *Ladders Made of Water* –Yes.

6. Review of B.W. Powe's Ladders Made of Water

Susan McCaslin, Poet.
smccaslin-at-shaw.ca

5.0 out of 5 stars Transformative Poetics in the Digital Age

Reviewed in Canada on March 25, 2023 on Amazon.ca
(https://www.amazon.ca/gp/customer-reviews/R5ZBDLC6KVLE5/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0BTRTBP14)

Verified Purchase at Amazon

B.W. Powe's *Ladders Made of Water* is a richly interwoven mélange of genres including a Media Ecology Association speech, a "Discarnate Rock Opera," poetry (lyrics, long poems, haiku), stories, autobiography, film commentaries, a conference presentation in which he unites Jacques Ellul, Simone Weil, Anne Carson, Federico Garcia Lorca, Marshall McLuhan, Arthur Rimbaud, Teilhard de Chardin, as well as conversations with his young daughter. Yet merely listing the contents of this book barely gives the prospective reader a sense of its transformational power. Powe mingles his insights by addressing both the ills and wonders of our digital age. With a devoted teacher's wisdom and care for genuine conversations with his students, he shares his own struggles and passions, providing openings into a non-dual way of experiencing the real. While addressing the dark times we face due to climate change, global warfare, and constant bombardments from social media ("fake news" etc.), he turns to unitive reality, the creative imagination, as well as "unknowing" rather than absolute certainty. Admitting one's uncertainties in this sense ties to humility. In these liminal places, silences and musicality, new ways of seeing and being in the world emerge. The evolutionary path he invites readers to share is what in mystical traditions has been called "the Via Negativa," the path of "unknowing," the way that opens to what Powe calls the Mysterium. Here the impossible is made possible by accepting the contraries of dark and light. It is a place beyond "single vision," where everything is implicated in a universe where all is interconnected, where fractals and "pieces" have the potential to incarnate "peace."

7. Reflections on B.W. Powe's *Ladders Made of Water*

Marshall Soules

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Before Covid-19 challenged us to rethink our patterns of inter-dependency, B.W. Powe and I collaborated on *The Charge in the Global Membrane* (2019). In that book, we explored co-expression: combining his text and my images to create a dialogue about the global network--or membrane—weaving a matrix of technology, emotional affect, and adaptation to change, both personal and collective. We were listening to and picturing the “expanding and contracting of the global heartbeat.” Since then, B.W. has written *Ladders Made of Water* (self-published, 2023), a prelude to a longer work he calls *Mysteria*.

B.W. is an innovator: when it comes to style and he balances personal reflection and global awareness with acumen. He is the consummate ecologist, awarded The Medium and the Light 2022 for his engagement with spirituality, technology, popular culture, and world literature. our collaboration on *The Charge*, I discovered hand his intellectual generosity, emotional deeply-held empathy, and concern for our shared He reminds me of Bill Reid's masterful sculptural of the Reluctant Conscript aboard *The Spirit of Gwaii*, the Black Canoe (1991), installed in Vancouver International Airport. (Photo by M. YVR, January 2020) →



content,
media
Award in
Through
first-
honesty,
journey.
portrait
Haida
Soules,

by

Here, I want to reflect on *Ladders Made of Water* combining Powe's words and ideas with images originating from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) where my wife and I traveled in January and February 2020. While visiting Hanoi in mid-January, the COVID-19 pandemic first came to public awareness and tourists started returning home for fear of being stranded or infected. (The Chinese New Year and the Tet Festival were celebrated on the same day, January 25.) Instead of returning home, we headed south, through Hoi An, Mei Ne, Ho Chi Minh City, then carried on to Cambodia and Laos. We returned to Canada on March 1, flying out of Hanoi to Vancouver.

It was a curious time, traveling from “shade to shade” with many adjustments necessary to assimilate historical suffering and loss, while feeling extraordinary admiration for these people who had lived through so much devastation and displacement. Those who survived were flourishing with uncommon industry, resilience, and grace. Often, we were surrounded, and moved by, incredible cultural vitality, beauty, and artistry: a mosaic of fragments, remnants,

broken pieces, soaring memories and aspirations, all of a peace.



Mosaic Red Bird in Flight, Hanoi, January 2020

In *Ladders Made of Water*, Powe orients his thinking towards two complementary concepts: *Eudaimonia* (flourishing) and *Veritas* (the greening). In his acceptance speech for The Medium and Light award, he sets the stage for this engagement. He recalls psychological and physical suffering to activate our empathy:

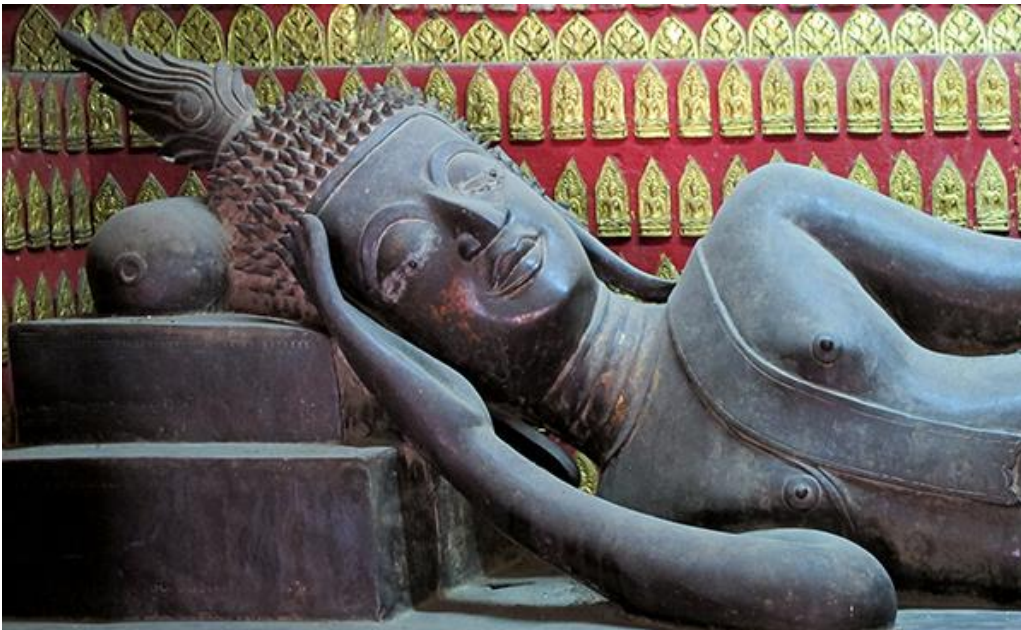
“It’s a spiritual concern to be engaged in asking what despair and desolation will do: what frustration and numbing--the increase of insensitivity among us—what insecurity and unease, exhaustion and meanness of expression—the narrowing of articulate thought—must do. This is part of the effect of living in the after-razed of the Pandemic.”
(no page numbers throughout)

He speaks directly to our experience of Southeast Asia in the “after-razed” of the 1970s pandemics of conflict. And of the current conflicts of our present time.

“These have been years when I’ve experienced too many losses. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can result in painful transits: more losses.”

Further reflection continues to shape our understanding of *Eudaimonia* and *Veritas*:

“I see these words implying: the work. I take the work to mean, the alchemical opus of our inwardness, cultivating depths during our time of technological expansion. The flourishing also means finding channels, contacts, openings, outlets, agencies. Silencing, restricting access to others – these harm our sensibilities.”



Bodhisattva Dreaming of Peace, Luang Prabang, Laos, Feb 2020.

“And I take Eudaimonia to mean:

To have some shelter from the storm. To have care, good health. To have degrees of safety. To be able to live without the threats of disease and war.

Extension and deepening, side by side, both moving in wave forms...

What Simone Weil calls “the embedded self” points to the intimate involvement in the process of extension and deepening. Imbedding is the crucial juncture, the tensed engagement and immersion. I write and teach myself into encouragement. I do this by embedding what I can into the words and talks.”

B.W. writes and teaches himself—and us--into engagement and encouragement. He cites the creating process of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei as “intolerable insolence”: “this means following your inward call and the outward momentum of our immediacies, no matter what comes.”

“I know: there’s only the work, going up and down on ladders made of water, and often back and forth on routes leading to disputable crossroads made sometimes of fire and always of our breath.”



Kung Si Waterfall, Laos, Feb. 2020

Intolerable insolence, in the section called “Fractals on Surrender Row (A)” encourages “Necessary resistance: against a life without inspiration.” And later in this “Discarnate Rock Opera”:

Everything’s at stake
It was always so
When you travel down *Surrender Row*
Pass it on

When we are traveling down Surrender Row, on a journey of self-recognition and atunement, moving where we must toward destinations to be revealed: We flow as water:

“We’re nomading, you and I, always on a pilgrimage we didn’t know we’d started, inside someone’s quest on vague threshold looking for vapour trails, even if we never leave our homes and we go nowhere physically. Living deliberate alienation—self-wounding?—while keeping to the trek, travelling towards the mountains that always recede, becoming distant mirages. (“The Eternal Aura of *Nomadland*”)

Powe is something of a nomad, travelling between Toronto-area, Ontario and Cordova, Spain, restlessly searching for inspiration, beauty, truth, and healing. He soars high, tumbles down the sky, swoops upwards with sound and image. He has Padre Roelas proclaim in his sermon: “I preach my ode to the vigilant who help languishing aliens in government pens, the misnamed foreigners whose one hope is a just inhabitable world” (“Homily on Harry Potter”). Are we all refugees, asks Powe, and refugees from what, and where?

Becoming vagabonds in the vagueness—

What are inspirations that we need to preserve?
(Fractals on the Move...)

* * *

Verdant Mosaic, Luang Prabang, Laos,
February 2020 →

From “Presentation for the Recalling Jacques Ellul
Conference, July 2022: One Must be Absolutely
Hypermodern”:

“I begin with fractals. Fragments of ideas
and voices. Fractals allowing me to freely
associate, make links.

Five figures. Ellul, Teilhard, McLuhan, Weil,
Carson. What joins them? Literature,
poetics: and the need to perceive shifting
technological currents: the imagination to
engage breakdown and breakthrough:
insights into evolutionary leaps incited by
the pressures of technology and history: a
sense of the apocalyptic essence of
threshold moments: visions of presence and absence—presence of spirit to inspire us,
absence of spirit, the dispiriting that can drain us.

...

I see this: we are absolutely hypermodern. Involuntarily, voluntarily.
I talk into the webs. Through a screen. I’m a trace on the internet. You’re traces in
virtual rooms too. We speed, dart: we disappear into pixels, reappear in image-space.
Existing in remote time. I pause to clean my PC keys.”



Mosaic Bits and Pieces, Hanoi, Vietnam, Jan. 2020

Powe updates Rimbaud's "One must be absolutely modern..." to catch the flight of the zeitgeist: "Rimbaud's insistence: be in the now, become instantaneous. Your century will fill you with its emotions, its inconclusive voyaging." We piece together the tesserae artfully to forestall the forces of fragmentation and brokenness. "Breakdown leads to breakthrough."



Breakthrough Mosaic, Luang Prabang, Laos, Feb. 2020

The Genesis Overdrive

“The new—always apocalyptic, the originating presence when we engage our domains. Our here and now may appear suddenly, beyond the screens we use to mask their effects on us. Then we see: we’re engulfed, immersed. Technology is the total environment. Gaia has become Cosmopolis. This is what I’ve called in other places the Genesis Overdrive.

...

All around we witness breakthrough leading to breakdown.

...

It took the terror and annihilations of *La Peste*—the Pandemic—to confirm the insights Ellul, Teilhard, McLuhan and Weil share: Gaia becoming Technological Imperium, Noosphere, Global Village, Cosmopolis, I-Screen Platform. We are inside the trembling webs of our own



inventing.

But *La Peste* seeped in. Our bubbles were breached. Nature reached in to remind us of our mortality. Gaia reminds us that at any time she’ll strike us with unmitigated turmoil.”



Charred Bodhisattva,
Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Feb. 2020

Perhaps the tropes of Gaia and the Anthropocene are casualties of our fixation with auto-poiesis--self-making—and these conceits are running their course. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway instead suggests we embrace sym-poiesis—or making-with. Humans may believe they have created the world with their Technique, communications, art, science and philosophy, when in fact the world as we know it is a “making-with” nature, a collaboration straining for equilibrium. We forget who and what we are cohabiting with at our peril.

The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to

make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. (Haraway 2016, 1)
<-- Spools of Thread, Luang Prabang, Loas, 2020

Haraway coins *Chthulucene* from *Chthonic*—"in, under, beneath the earth," referring to all living beings and mutable materials sharing the Earth with humans—and *Kainos*—new, fresh, on-going. In other contexts, *Kainos* is "the greening."

"Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair.... Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade. They are who are. No wonder the world's great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises have tried again and again to exterminate the chthonic ones." (2)

When we humans build of inter-dependencies, pay attention to these monsters who perform of virus, pestilence, or pandemic. Our can betray us.

Discarded Bodhisattva, Vientiane, Laos, Feb.



our webs
let's also
chthonic
the role

language

2020→



We pick up the thread to recognize how Powe admires the words and ideas of Simone Weil and Anne Carson: “Weil saw how World War 2 was a turning point for perceiving how tyrannical forces were unleashed from and into our psyches. She recognized how in this crux we were being charged by events. She asked, what happens when we enslave our spirits and minds to the powers of society and economy? What is the gift of teaching? What is attentiveness? What is gravity when we’re spiralling? What is grace when we’re pummelled by pressures to conform? How does power manifest in both allies and enemies? Are art and poetry enough to guide us?”

← Bodhisattva with Lingam, Angkor Wat, Cambodia, February 2020

“I turn to Weil for wisdom—to her conflicted self, and her paradox that suffering increases sensitivity to what the afflicted (all of us) endure. She comes to crises, and when the crucial seizes her, she agonizes, grasping the new.”

The ground we are standing on conducts the current moving through us. Direct or alternating, no matter. Powe is “fractalling”:

Flight into associating, meaning these links may not be direct—

Setting fractals to float...

And maybe the fragments will sift or roll together—

Carson’s *H of H Playbook*, another fractal constellation where...

“Carson tells a mythic tale through re-imagining translation. She makes Herakles slaughter the innocents—his wife and children—simultaneous with our time of madness, brutal compulsions. It’s the all-at-once: a sudden incident is accompanied by a perpetual story (revisionary myth). Her twist: heroism is dual; it brings destructive trances.... “Go forward in grief,” Carson

writes. A mantra for our moment. A mantra I keep.”

Reader, poet, philosopher, seeker, visionary—Powe honours his influences: Ellul, Teilhard, McLuhan, Weil, and Carson. In this honouring, this paying close attention, listening, he reaches for higher vantage, for healing vision. He is troubled by the current state of the world, no question. But this organic vision grows in fertile ground and thrives. We are aroused.



Gathering for War,
Phnom Penh, Cambodia, February 2020

In a section titled “Peace Piece,” Powe suggests his alignment with Haraway’s project of “making kin in the Chthulucene”:

“We wake up to war... what is it in us that denies
Yet we’re sharing calamities, witnessing
catastrophe—political, ecological, we share a
of being shredded...”

*

“Splinter mend darken glow: the kinships—infinite
eternal? The kinships we surely know.... Yet—
are those who grant advent to warfare the militant
corrosive triumph of linear history—
those who crave expansion through escalations
invasion—”

Guardian Demi-God, Angkor Wat, Cambodia, 2020



peace?

sense

there

and



Children Executed in Tuo Sleng School (Museum of Genocidal Claims)
Phnom Penh, Cambodia, February 2020

In *Ladders Made of Water*, Powe works hard on himself and on his text to balance pragmatic realism with sustaining optimism. When “we click on, transfer our beings to a screen...we’re miraculously in the momentary. I call these experiences the urge to absorb propaganda and afflictions and yet co-create and meet again in the Invisible School of Inspiration, Imagination, Perception, Witnessing and Wisdom. A school we could make anywhere.” He has empathy, not cynicism. He is a teacher, a father with a family; he cultivates friendships and allies. He cares about us.



Mekong River Sunset, Nong Khiaw, Laos, Feb. 27, 2020

In his Biograph, near the end of the text, Powe leaves us with a self-portrait: “Where’s Here Who’s Here.”

“A dreaming vagueness haunts what I do. I write my way into being sharp, into some perception. But I can’t tell all the way some writers do. I feel lucky to tell anything. Sometimes I think the routes I’ve taken over the years were made of water. And it keeps flowing elsewhere.”

...

“A confluence of routes. Following these, seeing where the currents go. Dreamlife, observations, learning, sifting. These are keys when I step from shade to shade.”

And he departs with the promise of *Mysteria* and asks us to be patient:

“*Mysteria* is a work with lyrics, stories, myths, ghosts. It depicts the intersections of Canadian, Arabic, Catholic, Jewish and Roma cultures, and reflects on mortality, offering dreams, mistranslations of Spanish poems and fables, sketches and blips, spells and mantras of mourning, images of wind and white light, witness voices speaking in wonder and worry...In *Mysteria*, I call to you.”



We will be patient, as we must when waiting for transcendent creativity and compassion. With *Ladders Made of Water*, we defy the paradox of descending and ascending in the here and now. We flow both ways: inwards, outwards, ascending, descending—the millennial paradox.

← Bodhisattva at the Still Point,
Vientiane, Laos, Feb. 2020

In the final piece, “The Palm-Phantoms,” Powe signs off with a compelling image about kinship, parenting, learning, exploring strange new vectors, going with the flow.

“The trees are looking into the water,” your little daughter says.

“The trees are inside the water now,” she says, stamping beside the puddle’s reflections.

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she steps into the puddle and gazes at the shapes rippling and reforming again.

“I wish I could be water...” she muses.

“Like water,” you reply, standing beside her.

“Be water...”



Tona's Children, Vientiane, Laos, Feb. 2020

All photos by Marshall Soules, January and February 2020

8. A Review of B.W.'s *Ladders Made of Water*

Elana Wolff, Poet, Thornhill, March 2023

elana@rogers.com

For those of us who follow B. W. Powe's writing, *Ladders Made of Water*—a slim volume of poems, pensées, lyrics, homily, and fragmentary prose pieces—reads like a bridge-work between his stunningly designed and prescient pandemic-threshold book, *The Charge in the Global Membrane*, and his in-process work, *MYSTERIA*. *Ladders* and *The Charge* share some of the same style features—impassioned chronicling of current events and trends, a prophet's cautionary pitch, and immersive visionary impact. Font-size, formatting and typeface irregularity add an impressionistic element to *Ladders*—a sense of falling this way and that, as if by changing waves and wavelengths. *Ladders* brings a reader up-to-date, and there's a real sense of urgency, even ominousness to the work—with “World War 3 convulsing Eastern Europe”; “Defined selfhoods gone, the trembling of consciousness in deepest thrall.” An alternate title for the book might have been, *Manifesto for the Severe Hour*. Powe calls to us at this crux—a time when nature, cultures, faith and appearances seem to be unravelling, in freefall. In *Ladders*, he makes a pitch for *MYSTERIA*—his forthcoming, “most personal writing” yet, and in closing cites the precociously uplifting words of his young daughter Elena Teresa, who, in observing the reflection of trees in a pool of water, says, “Papa, come and see this ... The trees have moved to this pool ... They always become water.’ She reaches into the puddle and stirs it. Look at how it all changes again.”