

# A Mosaic of the Self: Joanne Leva's *Eve Heads Back*

By Terence Culleton

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<https://www.joanneleva.com/books/>

Our prosy era narrows its eyes when confronted with the mystery of self, reducing it to any one of a predictable set of narrative formulae. There are witness stories, victim stories, tales of trauma and survival, all delivered in memoir mode. It's understandable, I guess, that poets often fall in line with the prevailing tropes. After all, we want to be read, maybe even interviewed on NPR.

Joanne Leva wants to be read, which is why her poems are so entertaining and so comfortably grounded in the pragmatics of daily life. Leva is apt, however, to play around with received formulae rather than marching in lockstep with the zeitgeist. She knows poetry's mission is to give voice to self's mystery without attempting necessarily to solve it—ie., to reduce it. Leva gives herself to the task with sparkling humor, and not a little humility, recognizing that the banal details of our lives are one aspect of who we are and that they require everyday language to subsist.

As the collection's title suggests, there is a formula blowing through the poems, and it's an ancient one, but Leva plays against it as often as with it. The mythic energy in *Eve Heads Back* arises, perhaps paradoxically, from Leva's embrace of the quotidian self. Her mastery of the language of this self allows her to resist reducing her mystery upward, as it were. The quotidian never drops out of the archetypal mix. Most of the time, Eve is a mom, not The Great Mother; Adam is just a "guy" and never anything close to a Biblical Patriarch. He leaves lame notes to Alice the hamster-feeder, for instance, in a poem whose title, "Bonus," suggests a perhaps sordid and un-Biblical back-story. There are a Cain and an Abel, along with references to a murder, but this latter is attended upon, or not, by medical personnel and hospital administrators, an unavailable chaplain, and an incompetent print duster. No voice sounds out of the whirlwind declaring the primal murder. There is also a daughter, who has a bit of Red Riding Hood about her, as well as a dash of Goldilocks, but who also happens to like scrapple and eggs at the local diner.

In short, Leva is very comfortable with the liminal nature of self, its in-between-ness. She realizes self is both all the different things it appears to be *and* something by and large greater than any sum of its routines and appearances.

Leva's Eve contends, for instance, with all the socially determined expectations that are loaded into women's lives. She is a cooker of dinners, a flirter at bars, a divorced white female (DWF)

“ad-ing” on dating sites. She’s a mom who’s mystified by her boys and tough on her daughter. Several poems tell of a literal, but of course also metaphorical, audition as a radio broadcaster, which doesn’t go well because, maybe, her regret over asserting herself in her marriage has undercut her attempt to follow through on her self-assertion—that is, to have a public voice. In a poem titled “Eve’s American Dream” she is billed as a speaker at a sort of patriotic rally in which a gramophone plays “God Bless America” as she emerges, “a statuesque/part myth part/modern woman.” She’s Eve’s dream-self, of course, so she need say nothing. As she “steps forward” the poem ends.

Typically, narratives are post-experiential, the assumption being that experience *defines*. Leva’s playful intelligence leads her to dicker with this too-easy assumption. The title of the collection is novelistic, suggesting primarily the Biblical Eve, but also, at a few removes, Odysseus, or even Jane Eyre. In one poem, perfectly titled “Interrogation,” Leva allows Eve to suggest the character of Penelope as a type—a wife and mother dispossessed in her own home as a result of her husband’s absence. This insistence that experience multiplies possibilities instead of narrowing them is, among other things, freeing.

Many of the poems are short—third-person notes-to-self, almost. Taken together, they present a mosaic whose interstices are as important as its “pieces” in realizing a unity that is *felt*. The narrative point-of-view, too, shifts occasionally between the predominant third-person mode and the more intimate first-person. In Leva’s sure hands, this interplay opens the poetic material outward and upward, allowing the entire saga of dispossession and return to breathe. Yes, it’s the poet’s life we’re reading about, but it’s other things, too. It’s women in general, men in general, life in general, and not only in the here and now. Eve has always existed and she always will.

Ultimately, Eve’s “return” to some putative Eden is embodied in the parallel activities of gardening and writing. In “On Pruning Fruit Trees,” Leva instructs:

Remove overbearing branches  
and undercut  
until the saw binds,  
  
then press down  
until you hear  
it snap.

The organic necessity of the short lines here—who can’t hear the cutting, the snap?—combines with the suggestiveness of words like “overbearing” and “undercut” and “binds” to let us know the garden is the mind itself, in its largest sense, and that the Voltairean admonition to “cultivate your garden” requires as much an exercise of imagination as anything else.

Thus, in “Eve Signs Up for a Poetry Workshop,” we read: “A poem knows//her value./She is not defined//by opinions,/but by the One//who makes her.” This poem ends with the observation that making her takes place “diligently/in the fog of fear.” The collection’s final poem, though, “Mystery Gift,” makes clear how worthwhile it is to persevere through that fog. “Eve is a theater,” the poet declares, so she is

[a] drama that springs  
from everyday life.

Eve is the City  
of Dreams,

Mother  
Goddess,

a current  
to the past,

an old fear  
that compels the first

and final peril.  
So it goes.

No last-line summation, Vonnegut-esque as it is, could be more casual, more modern—or, for that matter, more ancient, too.

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Terence Culetton’s third volume of poetry, a collection of sonnets entitled *A Tree and Gone*, is now out through Future Cycle Press. It’s available at <https://amzn.to/3qDrRqN> or through his website: [terenceculettonpoetry.com](http://terenceculettonpoetry.com).