

# Poetry Reviews

Airstream Land Yacht  
—Ken Babstock

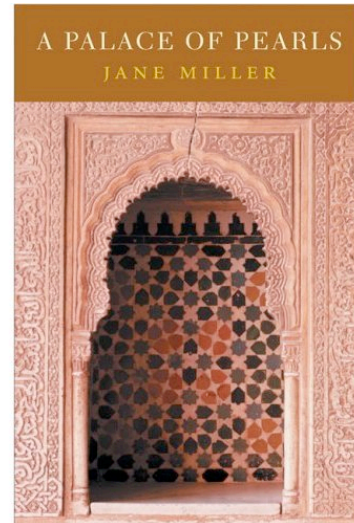
A Palace of Pearls  
—Jane Miller

Live Coverage  
—Pricisila Uppal

## A Palace of Pearls

A Palace of Pearls  
Jane Miller  
Copper Canyon Press: Port  
Townsend, WA  
96 pp.  
1-55659-222-1

Reviewed by Julie R. Enszer



The newest volume by Jane Miller is slim, tightly-crafted, yet dense in its range of ideas. These poems are the blend of politics, rich language, finely wrought images, and the imaginative leaps that we have come to expect from this poet.

In *A Palace of Pearls* each poem has a number that serves in lieu of a title. In poem 22, Miller writes about “grating a lime/in God’s hands” and leaps to the “Renaissance painters” where she is “as free-spirited as any Roman/thinking about the surface as it reflects the depths” then wending to

history is the last thing poems should tell  
and stories next to last so poetry is all  
a scent of berry like a splash of destiny  
which hints at the best life and after its small  
thrill passes like a lost civilization  
it can be solace and sadness as well

lines that are reflective of all of the poems in the book. Without punctuation and maximizing the impact of line breaks, Miller layers her images one upon another through each line and throughout the entire collection.

Conceptually, each poem holds its own, but it is the title and a concluding narrative called “Note on the Cover and the Title,” where Miller writes that “one of the most spectacular civilizations in history, the Arab kingdom of al-Andalus, [was] a model of ethnic tolerance in which Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions in art, language, science, and agriculture flourished,” that exemplifies her thinking around this book. The cover and title are taken from cultural elements of this civilization and many poems integrate images from al-Andalus and its broadminded atmosphere. Although the trope is deployed and engaged throughout the text, it is not fully realized. I left the collection missing a more explicit narrative arc.

Despite that, (which may be more of a limitation of mine as a reader than Miller as a poet) the poems of *A Palace of Pearls* delight. In poem 13, she begins,

My girlfriend visits Naples  
every bus ride she's shaken down for money  
men rub against her beautiful thighs  
and if she turns away for five minutes her bags are gone.

It concludes with the line, "IN THE SOUTH THEY WILL KILL FOR A POMEGRANATE," which reveals the prime structural element of the book: each poem closes on a line of all capital letters. Reading through the collection for the first time, it seemed odd. Certainly some poems, like this one, have finishing lines deserving of such emphasis, but not all do. The answer to this riddle is not exposed until the final poem, "Coda," a gathering of each of the last lines of the previous thirty-four poems into a single piece. For me, it was a magical moment of reading. Throughout my initial engagement with the book, I wondered about this curious technique. Individually the final lines are well-crafted and deliver in some significant way on each of the poems that they anchor; albeit some with more success than others. Still, I didn't see the strength of these closing lines as enough to justify such typographic attention. Then I reached the end of the volume. Aha! It was a lovely revelation, and for a reader who adores structure and formalism, it was a deeply captivating and surprising moment, one that ties the disparate pieces together as a whole and demands that the book be considered really as one poem, complete in its structural integrity.

**Julie R. Enszer** is a writer and lesbian activist living in Maryland. She has previously been published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, the *Web Del Sol Review*, and the *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*. You can learn more about her work at [www.JulieREnszer.com](http://www.JulieREnszer.com).