

Foreword to *We Mad Climb Shaky Ladders*
by Pamela Spiro Wagner, CavanKerry Press, 2009

What you hold in your hands is foremost a book of poetry. By that I mean it is much more than a testimony to a diagnosis or pathology or terminology. The poems emanate from the place of the poet's illness but they are resolutely poems—well-written, sensually alert, quick to turn and notice and startlingly honest. They dwell on both sides of the equation of life and art: testifying to the powerful and tenuous links between the two and demonstrating that art is capable of holding its own regardless of circumstances. Some of those circumstances have been shattering. The sheer tenacity that it can take to write poems makes itself felt here in ways that are both uncomfortable and reassuring.

The word “mad” may conjure up notions that are either arty or primitive. Neither would apply in this case. One of the more stunning qualities of these poems is their composure, their lack of interest in histrionics. The poet's ability to examine her behavior is both edifying and harrowing. A poem such as “Offering,” that speaks to the narrator's burning herself with a lighted cigarette, is remarkable in its ability to turn and turn again as it considers the behavior. The commentary that Mary B. O'Malley provides for this poem tells the reader that this was Pamela Spiro Wagner's “very first poem.” One realizes that once this poem was written this poet could write any poem because she has the ability to indulge metaphor yet not let up a jot on the terror of real circumstances. Whatever else has befallen her, in her poems she seems incapable of backing down. She has that primal confidence one looks for in a poet.

What is committed to the page has its own life. These poems have that life. The commentary is by all means important and moving and informative but the poems will call to you in that inimitable way that only poems can call. Here is a voice that cannot be duplicated and that enters into situations armed only with language. Those situations are rarely easy for any poet. Even the sparkle of a joyful moment may be daunting when one tries to put it into limpid yet forceful words. To go where these poems go testifies to the scrupulous, indomitable spirit of the poet and also to the spirit of poetry.