

POETRY PUZZLES

William Alba combines visual and poetic whimsy in his book "An Oz Album."

BY JAMES IDEMA

Robert Frost defined "The Figure a Poem Makes" in an introduction to the 1949 collection of his complete poems. "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom," he wrote. "The figure is the same as for love."

William Alba, a Santa Fe tutor, could have had something like that in mind with *An Oz Album* (Pulley Press), a chapbook of his own delightfully eccentric verse, interspersed as it is with fragments from the writings of Sandburg, Blake, Dante, Woody Guthrie, Whitman, and L. Frank Baum (author of *The Wizard of Oz*). In a whimsical tribute to Walt Whitman, for example, Alba frames verses from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" between lists of the zip codes of the places the author has lived and their corresponding dates. Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and other characters from *The Wizard of Oz*—including the Wicked Witch of the West (aka Sister Frances Dolores, his first grade teacher)—drop in on the fun.

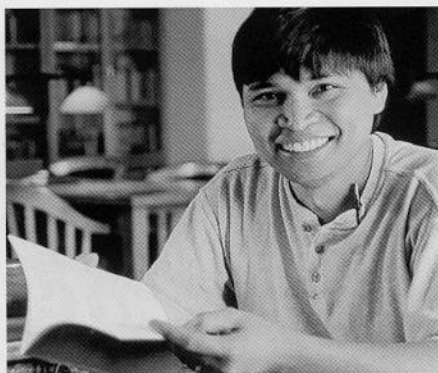
We open the book to a boldly abstract four-color map of Oz and close it on a highway map of Chicago. We discover that Oz and Chicago (where the poet lived for four years before coming to Santa Fe) have had major influences on his writing. Their landmarks appear throughout.

This is a poem he calls "Madison/Wabash." It is printed in bold type over a faint reproduction from Sandburg's "Chicago."

There's different kinds, I want to say.
There's different kinds of pain.
It takes all kinds: your ears go deaf
from squealing trains.

Your eyes get stares when you forget,
and smile at a commuter.
A blast of cold chills your soles.
The broken heater.

Your temples tense. Your mind goes flat
as highways, suburbs, prairies.
The land is flat for miles and miles.
You wait. You wait.



"A BEAUTIFUL BOOK IS A CONSERVATOR OF KNOWLEDGE," SAYS ALBA.

Your tongue tastes smoke.
That's nothing new.
Your throat turns dark as night.
The sun falls down as lights appear.
Not stars. Lights.

Here is a pair of winsome, haiku-like poems under the heading "wakes of innocence":

1/ memory of 1968
this Monarch alights
on my chest, opening,
closing, opening its wings

I run through the park:
look, mommy, look -
it flattens and flutters away

2/ mystery
the one I love
like my constant dog
is never in my dreams

the places I've lived
recur after I move
like the seasons in a year

Some of the material in this small book is set in acrobatic arrangements and various sizes of type, some of it minuscule strips across the top of a page requiring serious squinting to discern the message, which is, in this case, to follow the yellow brick road. Several poems describe driving experiences. One limns road rage on Chicago's Edens Expressway. It is composed in the shape of a balloon. The invocation is reprised in tiny type in the shape of a butterfly.

When I met Alba, he was teaching a summer writing and thinking workshop for high school students in a Bard College program held at St. John's. I told him my first reaction was that his poetry, which I found compelling and entertaining, but at the same time challenging in both content and typography, seemed a cross between Wallace Stevens and e.e. cummings. He seemed to find the observation amusing, which is how I intended it. Still, when I suggested some readers might be put off by having to turn his book upside down or reach for a magnifying glass to read it or leaf backward to confirm elusive references, he defended his approach earnestly.

"Poems are the hardest writing to make public, to get read by people I don't know," he said. "My poems are revealing and intimate, so I needed to publish them myself. But I wanted most of all to make a beautiful book, something one cannot see on the Internet. A beautiful book is a conservator of knowledge, not easily discarded, and its content should engage the hands and body as well as the mind of the reader. Touch is as important as sight, which is why I ask the reader to handle my book, move it around."

Please don't attack these pages hoping to squeeze messages from my verses, he seems to be saying. Rather, loaf, as Whitman says, invite your soul, pause frequently, read aloud, open yourself to my experiences and, of course, read them more than once. As T.S. Eliot entreats us in the opening lines of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit." ❖