

BOOK

A brave gamble

Dual memoir about rekindling artistic purpose from the wreckage of previous lives kathy.k

'PURVEYORS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW: TWO ARTISTS SEARCH FOR MEANING'

By **Kate Calder Klein**

The Troy Book Makers (2022, 296 pp.)

To say “No one is coming to live my life for me” is the point at which one embraces autonomy, freedom, perhaps death. It is the moment at which these two women became artists.

PAGES

By *Amy Boaz*

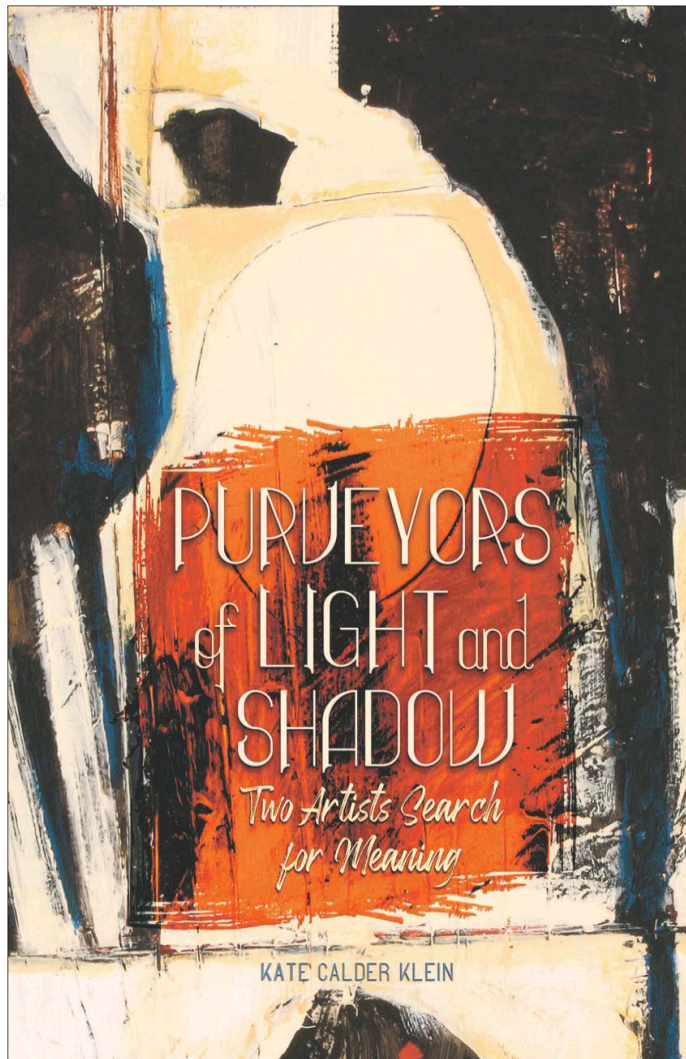
They meet when both are “at a crossroads,” writes Calder Klein, a former

teacher who is telling their story and is known throughout as “Kate.” She and her husband, tourists from Massachusetts, are meandering by car through the villages along the High Road to Taos and stop in a studio owned by artist Lucy John Yeager (not her real name — known here as “Lucy”). Kate is interested in Lucy’s smoldering abstract paintings — such as the one on the book cover, “Child of Darkness” — yet even more interested in hearing how Lucy came from a corporate career in Seattle to embrace the artist’s life in a tiny rural Hispanic village in Northern New Mexico.

“I died, you know,” hints Lucy in a harrowing tale of illness and rebirth through art. She wants to tell Kate her story, or rather, she wants Kate to tell her story. It becomes a 10-year project, the telling of their stories to get to this published form — about two women harboring buried ambitions who are “willing to imagine, a little afraid to want more, and certainly not expecting it.”

The tale involves silences, lies, self-deceit and the bitter toll of wrenching free of long-ingrained psychic patterns.

In 1996, Lucy’s near-fatal hemorrhage revealed a diagnosis of Crohn’s disease that had gone untreated since her teens. A product of parents who



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Two artists meet at a crossroads: their stories involve plenty of self-sabotage and also inspiration.

themselves were traumatized by incest, poverty and a self-perpetuating cycle of low expectations, Lucy was the less-favored daughter who was taught never to expect too much, because she would only be disappointed. Ultimately, she resists those parental admonitions, and becomes a successful marketing executive in Seattle, but at a terrible price to

her personal health.

In trying to tell Lucy’s story, Kate has to maneuver around her friend’s “pockets of shadow.” She wonders if, because of Lucy’s deteriorating health and “stubbornly thin recollections,” she will ever “conjure the magic my friend trusted me to make.” Kate recognizes the part she has to play in this brave

reconstruction of her friend’s life: “Only by entering my own unsettled space ... would I have any hope of understanding the part I played in this story.”

Kate has felt ambivalent about her own career as a teacher of writing and literature at a community college in Massachusetts when she first meets Lucy. And in a weird cosmic strike akin to being hit by lightning, Kate is literally struck speechless when she returns from visiting Lucy in New Mexico. She endures months of vocal rehabilitation and eventually has to give up her teaching job. This forces her to write, and specifically, to write Lucy’s story.

It gets weirder. Despite returning to painting for the first time in decades, and vowing to go it alone, Lucy meets a man who turns out to be other than what she thinks, despite his protestations of love. A man with a grave personality disorder. A pedophile, in fact.

Gleaning Lucy’s story, Kate has to work with memories in whatever form they present themselves. As she writes, “If they came with a warning label, it might have read something like this: A certain amount of settling in the aftermath of life’s nastiest ordeal may cause variations in size, shape and quality.”

The trauma of past lives gives shape “Like shards of an ancient clay bowl for which only a few pieces, properly arranged, could suggest the complete form,” the diversity of art Lucy produced over the “painful arc of her journey,” from genre painting to abstract, is wondrous, and bestows on her success and recognition. The memoir the two women produce together gives them confidence in their endeavors.

And in a kind of beautiful addendum to the achievement of both of the artists, the author concludes with several studied, meticulous descriptions of six of Lucy’s paintings during a time of emotional pain — not in terms of what they are supposed to mean, but to depict the play of light, color and form. The author simply strives to give “the paintings a chance to speak for themselves.”

SOMOS literary salon will host a Zoom meeting with the author on Sept. 18 at 4 p.m. Visit somostaos.org or call 575-758-0081 for more info.