Jack Giaour holds an MFA from Chapman University. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blue Lyra Review, East Coast Ink,* and *Zig Zag.* He currently lives in Massachusetts.
Maureen Alsop’s *Mirror Inside Coffin* is a winter thicket of emotion, at once deadly and beautiful, lyric and experimental, icy cold and burning with passion. This is a collection that creates its own emotional landscape, encouraging the reader to open all senses to the experience of language.

The first of the book’s three sections is titled “Mere One.” From the very first poem in the collection, “Approbation,” Alsop demonstrates her ability to create metaphor on multiple levels, engaging the reader’s emotions with every available poetic resource. The poems in this section rely mostly on natural imagery, but of a kind that is tense, fresh, and sometimes shockingly poignant. This section introduces motifs that recur throughout the collection, including motifs of light, divination, and birds.

“A Blurred Photograph of the Sunlight that Murdered your Father’s Happiness, or How Light Takes Leave of the Body,” the second poem in the collection, is full of these delightfully thorny images. It begins, “How odd the assembled horses seemed in the distance, standing / under the sparkle ball, crisp / in nutmeg silhouette.” While images like “sparkle ball” and “nutmeg silhouette” are powerful, even more conventional images like “assembled horses” have a gorgeous and deliberate sonic quality that engages the ear as well as the imaginative eye. This poem begins with sharp, specific images, but it ends in a dreamscape—“His voice streams in the boundaries / of waking which cannot be dreamed”—that calls attention not only to voice and language, but to the multiple worlds a human being exists in at any one time (real, emotional, imagined, dreamed, etc.).

The second section of the book, titled “Wherein Shall Dwell,” does not change from the first in style so much as in tone. Alsop is a masterfully subtle poet, and, without changing style or voice, she links the poems of this section by the darkness of their tone. The section begins with the poem “Dominion” and its first line, “The wild governments of death did not crowd us,” and the emotional stakes do not lessen from there. The next poem, “Augury Miscellany,” is also about death, but it nods as well to the theme of divination from the first section, which remains a constant throughout the collection. The poem begins “The long winter sun chokes / the throat of a pigeon / that stoops in the monastery courtyard.” There are only natural players here, sun and pigeon, with the human world (the monastery) a backdrop. Throughout the poem, birds are associated with tragedy and death, acting out the internal emotional drama of human beings who are nameless, referred to as “she.” The next poem, titled “Turifumy,” is named for a kind of divination based on reading the future in plumes of smoke and begins, “She wanders long lanes of night oak, looks up from the portrait, west / into the lowering lids of buttercup.” Time becomes the landscape here, and the “she” character, who may be the same woman throughout or an entirely new character, is wandering through it, attempting to make meaning of time as it affects the emotions in the same way that divination (of any kind) is intended to do. However, this attempt is a dangerous one, and, though the poem begins with the natural world as a place of freedom, it ends with nature as an agent of corruption, with the lines “Millipedes nested in the chest’s cave among hawk / swollen circles of flame.”
“Enter Over the Hundred Skies” unfolds from the hazy wilderness of “Turifumy” into the tamer natural setting of a garden. The location (and the contrast) is immediately established: “Her eyes, drowning yeses, bells / idled in a cemented garden.” The garden is “cemented,” whereas the previous poem brought the reader down “long lanes.” This “she” is drowning, while the previous “she” was free to wander. This “she” wrestles with another of the collection’s motifs—loneliness—and concludes with “Places gone to us unless we go alone.”

The final section, “Sun Sheaves,” brings the reader and the speaker out of the metaphorical darkness of the previous section, ending the collection with a cluster of poems focused on light, something that was sought throughout the collection and is finally found at the end. This section also does the most work to blur the natural and the man-made, making prairies out of hospital rooms, tracking the flight of birds through the kitchen, and finding stars in the headlights.

This collection divulges a deep understanding of the non-linear nature of human emotion. Maureen Alsop explores that wilderness with delicate and deliberate use of poetic language, expert use of line (especially the long line), and imagery rooted in all five of the senses. This is poetry for readers who have no borders on their souls, who are willing to open their minds, like flowers in the morning, to life and death, beauty and tragedy, sheaves of sun and long lanes of night oak.