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Book Review: Don't Touch the Bones by Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, September 23rd, 2020

I am having a difficult time finding words to describe my experience reading Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach's latest collection of poems, *Don't Touch the Bones*, which won the Idaho Prize for Poetry (2019). The collection is deeply touching. It remembers while it forgets. It wails while it sings. It is both wonderfully clear and deeply compressed. It defies words.

And yet, it is made of them. Words are funny like that. Sometimes they render us speechless. Sometimes they call us to action. Consider Dasbach's title, *Don't Touch the Bones*, and remember how you felt as a child when you were told not to touch something. The first poem, "Take a piece of earth," in the first section of Dasbach's book, "In the Earth" states, "Show me a place / not made of bone / & see the generations / we have swallowed" (5). The very thing we cannot touch is everywhere; we must not touch it, and even so, we are compelled to touch it by being told not to.

Dasbach, who was six years old when she immigrated to the United States from Ukraine as a Jewish refugee, sets the book into six sections, beginning with "In the Earth," where the bones reside. In "Out of Stone," the speaker has visited Poland's Treblinka Memorial Park:

the smell of eggs and herring. so much
stone, I considered bringing a small one back
to my great-grandmother's grave. but she'd had
enough already. Enough of Eastern Europe.
Enough of weight. of stone. It must all be
Stone made of stones where she is. boulders really. (9)

Remarkably, the poem contains the enduring horror and weight of the Holocaust, while at the same time positioning stone as a token of remembrance, of durability and elemental love. It makes us feel attached to these things in a way that is real and terrifying; however, it also makes us feel how difficult it must be to keep remembering. Difficult, yet infinitely important.

Dasbach asks us to consider not just if or when to remember, but *how* to remember and whose responsibility it is to remember. The next section, "In the Air," begins, ironically, with a poem called "In Praise of Forgetting," and yet just as we touch the bones after being told not to, the section is set on remembrance. In fact, this is where we find Dasbach most in conversation with the Russian poets who have come before her, like Akhmatova and Mandelstam. Dasbach is buoyed by these voices, and the reader gets a sense of the lineage that has been passed down. Dasbach's

history, but also the history of humanity, which we all share.

A gorgeous sonnet sequence takes us from the air “Into the Fire,” the next section of poems, where Dasbach writes about her own son in a breathtaking poem called “Potatoes Don’t Have Much to Do with Light,” which combines Jewish history and teaching with latke eating, fear, ritual, and raising children:

and in the morning, *ner shel*,
when he is extinguished enough
to stay in his own room, I wake
to find him surrounded in white—
Tylenol, ibuprofen, Band-Aids,
Gauze, the first-aid kit I thought
was out of reach, scattered
across the floor like a harvest
of winter potatoes,
and his swollen belly, aglow
with all our people’s
burning starch. (32)

The poem causes me to remember my own children’s brushes with disaster. Things we thought were out of reach, but were there for the touching all along. These, too, are the bones. Dasbach utilizes the potato to pull the remembering through the poem until suddenly, the potato has everything to do with light. The latke, or potato pancake, fried and eaten during the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, is another way to remember. Each poem in this section burns on the page, asking us to consider not only what has been done, but also how we hold what has been done in our own memories. What responsibility do we have for remembering? Do we remember enough? Do we remember appropriately?

“How to Survive a Heat Wave in Auschwitz” forces the reader to consider the ironies involved in how we preserve and visit places where atrocities have occurred. The poem has six suggestions, including number 3: “Let crowds gather at the gates & listen / to them push their way inside, “Come on, / it’s Auschwitz! Everybody / wants to get in,” ... (38).

The fourth section, “In the Water,” brings the reader further into the ideas of ancestry, lineage, and trauma. The speaker in “Translating Grandfather’s Hunger,” seems to want to be able to construct a cohesive narrative about her family’s history, but finds that her grandfather gives her only pieces of information. In section IV of the poem, the grandfather’s and granddaughter’s conversation continues:

You sound more upbeat today.
I downloaded an app that will record all of our conversations. Should I tell him?
Thank you. I just came back from walking.
It’s so _____ out.
The Russian word I used has no translation. Ravishing and gorgeous
And adjectives are too far from truth. (58)

The poem explores age, language, communication, miscommunication, memory, food, and the body. Dasbach’s rendering of this conversation in poetry asks the reader to consider how histories

are passed down. What things get put in and what things get left out of writing? Are the things that are put in enough?

The section ends, aptly, with a “Driftwood Pantoum,” a form which also recycles the language of the poem’s lines, reusing them. As the lines are repeated, they take on additional meaning, so that the form furthers the exploration of all of these questions about remembering Dasbach has been asking throughout the book: “Stop closing your eyes, this isn’t your story, / searching for what hold her together. / *You can’t let her rest, my mother says. / Stop closing your eyes, this isn’t your story*” (64).

The exploration of ideas and questions most often leads to more ideas and questions. Poetry does its best in exploring rather than in knowing. This is why section V is brilliant in its name, “In the Aether.” Aether is that unknowable, unobservable substance that has taken so many forms and been so many things throughout the ages. This section draws attention to the inexplicableness of everything, while at the same time leaving the reader feeling comfort in the fact that others also survive, and sometimes even thrive, despite this feeling of the unknown.

Take for example the titles of the poems in this section: “Against Ritual,” “Ghost Language,” “Olam Ha-Ba,” which is Hebrew for “The world to come,” “For the lost songs,” “If Nameless Fields Could Sing,” and then, finally, we come to an incredibly powerful erasure poem, “Remembrance,” that works with the text of a 2018 Polish law, and transforms it into a space for remembering and, at the same time, shrewdly makes a statement about Poland’s culpability. Poetry itself is a sort of aether, mysterious in its ability to explain or capture the feeling of things that could not otherwise be explained or captured.

In the final section, “In the Body,” we come back to ourselves, but changed. We are once again touching the bones, and not just touching them, but praising them, revering them, remembering now, despite the insistence that they should be left untouched, that they are a part of us: “together / they are everything your hands can hold / and everything your feet may tread on” (“Phalanx Bone Shehecheyanu” 85).

Dasbach uses the words she is given, the histories she has been passed, the legacy she has been granted, and the forms that have asserted themselves around her, to craft a masterpiece. There are very few books that have caused me to sit, in quiet contemplation, speechless, for a long time after I finished them. This is one of those books.

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