

Cultural Daily

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Book Review: Ghost Tattoo by Florence Weinberger

Shirley Love · Wednesday, February 6th, 2019

Florence Weinberger's latest collection of poetry, *Ghost Tattoo*, is a brilliant example of the power of language in the hands of an exceptional poet. With unerring insight into her relationship with her father, she writes in "The Turning," *Your voice is my cadence, your jokes my edge...*

*How else to love this indiscreet life
we've been given, its briefness the joke we attribute to God.*

In the poem's form, with stanzas alternating between the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem and personal memories of him, she links her father to the sacred as she does in these lines:

*At sunset, I lift you to the light. Lighting the yahrzeit candle,
I watch it scroll time on my kitchen wall:
thirty-five years is too long to stoke the persistent embers.*


And she pays homage to his influence in shaping her language.

*You could have been a linguist, the way you mingled Hebrew
with mangled English in your daily speech,
tacked on a little Hungarian, some Czech for good measure,
and I thought all that was a Language,
and it was, a language as singular as you were. Charming.
Volcanic. A language that taught me to speak in tongues.*

In the poem "My Mother's House," the poet visits the place her mother lived as a young girl, a village *past Hungary's eastern edgewhere* the poet comes to find the orphan girl her mother became and learn what it's like to live *that barefoot life among drunken neighbors with mouths full of curses. I can hardly breathe*, the poet writes. *Why this joy when she is long dead?* and the question: *is it because I know something I never knew before and still don't?* What the daughter knows now is that her mother left something of herself in this village, on this spot of earth where she lived as a child, and though her mother has been gone for years, the daughter can feel her here.

There is such richness in the range of these poems. Moments of terror and of pure joy, and sometimes an accidental discovery of love or a simple failure to understand. In the poem "Ghost Tattoo," a granddaughter looks for a perfect way to honor her grandmother and in "Zachary's Rainbow," the poet writes of her grandson's color blindness:

*I want to ask him
do you harbor wild parrots in your sleep?
And the auroras I see dancing in your eyes—aren't they the dawning
of imagination?*

 And though there are dark blessings in these poems, *a shadow-fall felt in an intake of breath, the grip of the tide that sucks you down*, in the poem “Mystics and Mathematicians Crowd the Shore,” whales hide just out of sight. And though she is denied more than a glimpse, *like Moses seeking the face of God*, she won't complain. This is a time to *do a littledance, to point and laugh*.

The poet is determined not to look away too soon, to let the moment open so that she can keep imagining *the deep*. This is the way she looks at paintings. In the poem “Prepare Yourself for a Career in the Arts,” Van Gogh's paintings *root the unsteady stars*, and in the poem “Picasso's Four Bulls,” drawings begun with an ordinary bull, end with a simplicity of lines that tell the artist's truth.

Curving through and around these poems, there are conversations calling us to join in with the eternal questions that poets explore through the mystery of what we call language, which sometimes becomes the mystery of God. In the poem “A Time for Such a Word,” the poet writes: *The Hebrew word davar means both word and thing, as in the words of God made worlds*. We make poems, she writes. We describe. And we believe we are better than other creatures because we speak.

We have words to describe the slaughter of dolphins. *We hear their songs skid into wails* as the killer's boats enter their space, but we lack a definitive word. The poet confesses she cannot bring herself to call this a Holocaust, which names a specific horror, a particular time. Here, in this remote cove, *what shall we call this death?*

In the poem “Sometimes God Lurks Under the Earth,” the poet enters a church in a country where prayer has been forbidden. She listens to men singing until their voices waken the stones in the church wall. Sometime later, when the men are absent or asleep, *the stones continue to glow with their deep bass ardor and their tenor adoration*. Florence Weinberger gives us these breathtaking poems which, long after we have put them down, continue to glow.

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