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Book Review: Louder Than Everything You Love

Judith Roney · Wednesday, February 10th, 2016

Louder than Everything You Love is the new collection by Nicole Rollender, soon to be released from ELJ Publications. The poems within feel to be an almost ethereal “product” of a writer deeply meditative within the world of these poems. It is as if her very breathing were integral to the landscape here: “This is my body / These are my falling bones” ground the reader into a voice assured, confidant of the value presented in the work. Yet, Rollender unsettles and probes. There is clear evidence of a keen intellect at work, questioning that which is known, that which should, perhaps, not be taken for granted. “Here, bones hang from tree branches” presents an image of suspension, as if the author is willing to suspend reality for that of the sacred. I felt a deep, underlying, spirituality running through this haunting collection—and haunting it is.

The lines within take risks, and appeal to the reader as the musings of a genuine seeker. Take, for example, “I listen for your voice in the church inside me” and “God sends thirsts earthward to test the living.” Rollender is not timid to explore the role of the Divine: “The work of light is God’s burden: light workers alight on lit bone” and in doing so she uses language as *good* poets do, by tugging on the ancient world, and that of the sacred, into the daylight of a landscape where hard musings mesh with that of the flesh-bound.



Stunning in prosody technique, as well as a distinctive musicality, Rollender moves seamlessly from the ethereal to that of the natural space with delightfully obsessive references to motifs of birds and feathers: “wingless hummingbird under a compass: nights of salt” remind the reader of connections to the natural world. The work is alive as well as abound with intimations of matrilineal ties: Grandmothers, mothers, and daughters are not just present but kinetic in the lines: “Because the heart’s rhythms can stream electricity I want to catch your current in me” and “Mothers pass down the message: Hold back on desire, don’t let your man see you undress in / lights on, don’t shine, girl, don’t sing, don’t buy / that red dress.”

These are poems to be re-visited over and over for the quiet spell they cast; even the poet’s musings on death are something close to sublime: “How listening for your steps on my throat’s long stairway turns me away from this earth, and that kind of dying never ends” is riveting. There is loss here, unspoken, yet when implied the effect is stunning through the sensuous attention: “Because I didn’t see you dead, I’ll always see you alive,” and “What if you don’t mourn the dead, if you really don’t feel anything like sorrow at all? There is a particular honesty in each poem deliciously addictive in a melancholic modality. The six “psalms” written for the speaker’s daughter are dazzling for their beauty and solemn reality: “When / she first loved me, I inked poems on my arms; because everything / must be tied down.”

There urgency here is felt; the speaker in the work is a seductress of language merging the visceral with something of the eternal: “This must be what love is: a shining blade so exquisitely cut that

after my throat is slit, I still sing.” But what propels the narrative within the poems is a particular sense of urgency, a beseeching voice transcending the body-bound life: “What it knew, before I did, was women are told to diminish: to be lovely, rise your bones so they echo.” These are poems for the 21st-century, echoing the sensuous and the troubling.

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