


Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Book Review: *That Strapless Bra in Heaven* by Sarah Sarai

John Brantingham · Wednesday, June 24th, 2020

Sarah Sarai's new collection *That Strapless Bra in Heaven* is in parts both scatological and  surreal. I mean that statement as high praise. Here, powerful images and ideas are pressed up against and juxtaposed with equally powerful images and ideas, and the reader is left to find meaning through contemplation. I read this collection slowly, giving myself time to understand and then expand upon the ideas that she suggests. It's the kind of the collection that demands that readers take more time than they normally would to internalize the work. Because of this quality, there are any number of concepts that I might explore, but two themes that emerge for me, that kept me thinking and rethinking are how powerful people relate to people who have little or no power, and the nature of religion and the afterlife.

Sarai writes about how privilege affects the world in large ways and small, how it can destroy nations and people when wielded by leaders and how it can damage the humanity of single individuals in a community with wealth gaps. She writes about mythological, current, and historical figures, and one of the poems I found most interesting was "Corpses and Cats." In it she describes the people of Leningrad during its siege and compares them to Stalin in his dacha:

Stalin was a coward-leader
Like Trump and also a fool

Who trusted Hitler and ruled from
his dacha while Mother R. starved.

Who knows quite what to say
about that onion deep-fried

in snow. I don't. Except its people
ate cats and corpses and lived.

Sarai's people are strong while her leaders are weak and self-centered. She opens us up to the dignity of surviving when our rulers seem out of control and selfish, and this is an important lesson for now and truly for all of human history. Equally interesting is her examination of the pettiness of everyday privilege. In "Thank the Cashier," she writes:

I dip my fat red
strawberry toes in the sweat
of the cashier's brow

as if it were fondue.
 You don't? Let's forgo guilt.
 . . .
 The poor may be around
 but they are not always with us.
 They can't afford the rent.

So we are given a vision of the way poor people are treated, and the way that their treatment erodes at the morality and awareness of the rich. Here Christ's statement of the poor always being with us is trivialized with a glib aside about the rent. The narrator has become unconscious of her wealth and place, and of course that is the danger. It has started to make her cruelty casual. It's become a part of who she is.

On my first read, I didn't notice the pervasiveness of her discussion of the religious and her reevaluation of the nature of the sacred, but as I worked back through the book, I found it everywhere. God in this collection is vulnerable and weak and seems to have lost control, which helps to explain the nightmare in which we are living. In "Keeping It Holy," she writes:

That year, Christmas fell on Saturday,
 the Sabbath, when stores close
 so whomever-cannot-be-named
 may sit back and do nothing,
 at which divinity excels, take
 the religious wars of Europe,
 millions of brand and off-brand
 believers slaughtered in the name of (52).

In fact, in this collection, doing nothing seems to be the only thing at which divinity excels. "No One Asks" takes a similar look at a religious figure's possible weakness. Here Christ's sacrifice is compared to our own and his personality is as well:

Did Jesus Christ love himself?
 Jesus who spent all of
 forty days and forty nights
 where pilgrims and the Prophet,
 praise his name, prayed?
 . . .
 We all resist temptation.
 We'd all be happy or
 dead if we didn't (53).

Here, she humanizes Christ in interesting ways. She wonders about his deep interior life, and wonders if this person who presumably thought he was doing good found happiness through that good. Then she takes his forty days in the desert and humanizes it, pointing out that all people must also avoid temptation all the time. Hers is an interesting approach to religion and devotion, allowing the divine to have weakness and vulnerability. These are not untouchable figures of perfection but characters struggling, and in the case of "Keeping It Holy," they get it terribly wrong.

I like Sarai's collection very much, and it stays with me the way a work of art should. This week, I found myself thinking of it often, talking about it with my wife and friends. I will come back to it, I know, picking a poem here and there as I think of my own relation to power and to the divine.

(Feature photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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