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Review: *Girl With Death Mask* by Jennifer Givhan

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, January 3rd, 2018

*I emptied like cherries sweet and dark eggs unsticking
from my uterine wall...
I've been bleeding into jars each empty
night*

("First Response")

Girl With Death Mask (Indiana University Press), a poetry collection by Jennifer Givhan (her third), is the portrait of a woman desperate to be a mother after suffering multiple miscarriages. Her first and second collections, *Landscape With Headless Mama* (2015 Pleiades Editors' Prize) and *Protection Spell* (2016 Miller Williams Poetry Prize Series), were compelling. This new collection, published by the prestigious Indiana University Press, doesn't disappoint.

In these poems, the speaker tries in vain to calm herself, calm her maternal need. "When does it stop / the painful wanting," she asks in the poem "Chassis." In that same poem, the speaker reveals her sadness and despair: "o syringe, o bloodletting." She suffers nightmares that play with her childless status:


A woman floats from a staircase dangling needle & thread

*... & she hands me a child
The child laughs
Then dies in the strings
of my arms...*

("Avra")

The book is filled with tenderness towards "the bundle of cells"—the seed-babies that the speaker miscarries and calls "the neverborns" ("La Llorna Comes for Dinner")—and all living things.

Givhan's speaker has a heart that celebrates and weeps for the underdogs of the world. During her quest for biological motherhood, the speaker becomes a sensitive mother to unmothered beings among us, animal and human alike. With hard-won objectivity, the speaker in "What's Been Given Me Secondhand" remarks, "The motherless / recognize the childless." And we might add, the opposite is also true: the childless recognize the motherless.

 *Girl with Death Mask* introduces us to a number of unmothered children: for example, a rhinoceros baby rejected by its zoo-housed mother (“The Rhinoceros Calf”), “antler-girl,” a girl who grows antlers instead of breasts, the ultimate outsider (“The Change”), the boy across the street with a pink umbrella who plays with dolls (“Pulse”), and the doomed mice trapped in the speaker’s garden (“In the Waiting Room of the Child Psychologist”). The speaker’s maternal side is engaged by her vigorous proxy mothering of these and other unfortunates.

The fiercest poem in the collection is “The Girl (Whose Mother Filled Her Belly With Meth & Let Terrible People Mutilate Her Body Before Killing Her) Runs Away.” In this “killer” poem (because it stabs the reader in the heart), Givhan’s speaker doesn’t waste words trying to figure out the reasons this horrible mother acted the way she did. Her concern is for the child, who reassures the speaker “she will check on you while you sleep & shows you the / light. She promises to run towards it...” The murdered girl also says at the end of the poem, “[R]emember because those hills are volcanoes ... that are sleeping & / sleeping things wake up.” Does this mean that the speaker or the girl thinks someday there will be justice for the girl? I hope so.

What makes Jennifer Givhan’s poetry so compelling is not just her extraordinary ability to make us understand complex issues on a visceral level, but also the rich language of the poems. Givhan has a talent for vivid imagery, which stands out, for example, in her description of food. This is one reason her poems are lush (and luscious and inviting):

*We’ve found a recipe for móle (pronounced mol-ay like ol? except móle
make your mouth like you’re about to suck an egg)
Oaxaca-style tongue burnt dark chocolate for pouring on poultry...*

*While I blacken
on the dry comal
guajillo chiles ancho chiles chipolte*

*She toasts the dinner rolls & tortilla strips
until they are golden*

(“La Llorona Comes Over for Dinner”)

The poems in this collection are magical. They make us smile, they make us nod our heads in agreement, they make us cry—in short, they make us *feel*. There are no “filler” poems in *Girl With Death Mask*, and I don’t think Givhan could write a bad poem if she tried.

Although its subject matter is heavy, *Girl With Death Mask* is so inspiring, it may just be that rare bird, a poetry bestseller. Givhan’s with a great publisher. Her first two books of poetry sold well. She has won so many contests and awards, it is practically impossible to list them. She has a substantial following based on her poetry. She is also multi-talented—she has completed a novel that also has commercial potential, teaches, does private consulting/editing, gives a lot of interviews and readings, and is editor-in-chief of *Tinderbox Journal*. On top of that, she is charismatic, and it comes through in the writing.

All things considered, you must read *Girl With Death Mask*.

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