

Some Winded, Wild Beast

Walking a Tender Line

Lynne Clive (Marilynn Rashid)

a review of

Some Winded, Wild Beast, by Christina Pacosz. Black & Red (Detroit, 1985), 97 pages, \$2.50.

This review is long overdue. Christina Pacosz's voice has been an important one to many of us in Detroit ever since she and Fredy and Lorraine Perlman discovered each other, and Black and Red published this, her third collection of poetry, *Some Winded, Wild Beast*, in 1985. I have had the opportunity of hearing Christina read her poems and prose twice in the past five years, and both times I was struck by the strength and expressiveness of her voice and her vision.

The poems in this collection document with a great depth of feeling the tragedy of individual lives, her family's lives, the tortured life of her birthplace, Detroit. She takes in the world around people and places with empathy and acute perception. The prologue poem, "The Roots of Joy," sets the stage for poems drawn on the past and links us as readers to an early innocence, a communion with the earth and its beasts through memory:

"Memory coils in the hindbrain, a wise snake."

There is much in this volume to relate to, especially for a Detroiter who finds, particularly in the first poem, "Got to Revolution," a common landscape and numerous bridges to one's own past experiences: growing up in Detroit's inner city in the '50s and '60s, hot pre-riot summers, "...bombs biding time, waiting/ to wash up on the final, land-mined/ shores of rage." Belle Isle, the "green jewel/ in a poisoned river..."; and on our streets, the elm trees "...sick with invisible blight and doomed."

She reminds us of the sharp divisions between ethnic groups, the geography of wealth and poverty, "The Pointes and Delray, two views/ of the same river." Christina knows well the history of this city, built up through the exploitation of its people, its workers: "My father is a statistic/ with half a finger, half a lung." She pulls us through the riots, "My home town with tanks/ rumbling down familiar streets..." and the destruction of Pole-town, "A neighborhood of people/ sacrificed for General Motors..." But she goes back further, questions the beginnings of this earth-killing urban construction:

Who was it turned

this fertile plain

into ravaged prairie?

Who was it turned

a wild green land

into the fume and belch

of industrial refuse,
municipal sewage
and corporate refuge?

In another Detroit poem we learn that Christina's grandfather was one of the industrial workers depicted in the Diego Rivera mural in Detroit's Institute of Arts. The poem describes with a pointed simplicity her childhood visit with her father to see the mural, she in "a dress of navy taffeta" and he in his freshly polished "cancellation" shoes.

The smells and feelings of an ethnic Polish past are strong here, detailed in pieces of memory. We also begin to touch her consciousness as a woman poet/artist when she mentions her discovery, years later, of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican artist married to Rivera.

In "Down by the River" Christina recounts a part of her mother's story and condemns a civilization which eradicates individual integrity, denigrating and destroying its life-blood, its women, its mothers:

Hello to the lost, the lonely,
these heretics and modern-day witches,
the oppressed: our mothers, our wife.

Rescuing her mother from a mental institution, she and her family confront themselves:

We are certain
if we turn away from her
we turn away from our selves.

In "Dear Sophia," a poem/letter to her mother, Christina continues the process of rediscovery of the woman-self, reaching into the primal, the pagan:

Now I must raise you up
like a lamp, like the moon
When it's full...

These poems become a ritual of reconciliation with the past, with her mother, with herself, with the earth.

I would move my fingers
against your hardened palms
in a new language, signing
the stories, the history, the legends,
these new woman-words thrusting up
like green in spring.

The poem "Train Time" provides a disturbing thematic center to this collection. It delineates in a simple series of impressions and events the dilemma of the conscious individual attempting to escape the tragic accidents of daily life in a conquered land while remaining trapped in its shadow and forever compromised by its dangerous choices. The poet journeys home on a train, promising "To kill, to threaten nothing" for she has "had enough/of accident." But she is ever aware of past accidents, the foreboding signs of previous violations to the landscape surround her, lead her home, and the irony of her journey and her innocent intention grows:

This track was dynamited
through granite, what remains
of the earth after
the glacier made its hungry
way. I am on a pleasure
trip, hurtling through
bruised rock across the continent
to the western ocean.

The sound of the train, with its "segmented body," speeding then braking, becomes "the rhythmic/panting of some winded,/ wild beast," and the poet soon learns of her unwitting participation in yet another violence:

Eventually word comes spreading
like mythic fire on the prairies
we've yet to cross. Hit an Indian
girl lying on the tracks, drunk,
or sick, asleep, who knows?

The family of the girl, seen on their porch through the train window, is like the tortured earth:

...Their hearts blasted
like the rock we thrust through
on our way to deliver death.

While uniformed men pass by with plastic bags containing "what is left of her young/ and stuporous body," passengers complain about delays, "being late for Winnipeg." In the station, the poet watches "wash and wear tourists" while waiting for another train, this one called "The Empire Builder." The poem travels east with the poet to Chicago, then south "toward the underbelly/ of the great beast of the continent," to New Orleans, Memphis, then along the Mississippi. But she is forever reminded of the train's fatal potential:

The whistle blows a warning
of fleet death,
what we long to forget.

She then internalizes the landscape, yet it is one which “demands trains,” and so the nightmares of the killing trains inevitably continue, trapping her, trapping us all.

There is a strong anti-war theme in many of these poems, a theme cyclically linked with those of previously mentioned poems; the conquest continues, the sacrifice of innocents continues, the tragic accidents of individual circumstance continue. Christina draws parallels, links the dead soldier from the Civil War, World War I, the Vietnam War, and again reaches into the earth in search of healing solace, and understanding:

Take me down to the sea
let salt water fill my wounds
lay me on the shore, naked,
the reek of life surrounding me
and the tide running out.
Why study war?
Life teems
in tidal pools, shouting
to be understood...

In the poem that gives its title to the volume, “Some Winded, Wild Beast” (a phrase also used to describe the killing train in “Train Time”), the poet struggles with “Grief” and “Sorrow,” animals that consume her, “breathing my breath, devouring/my food...” She walks a tender line where Grief and Sorrow both destroy and sustain her. They are of the world, and she must somehow make her peace with them. She calls on the shroud-maker to teach her to knit:

Then when Sorrow and Grief
batter my throat, my hands will know
what to do, and the click-click of needles
will lull the beasts to sleep,
to dream.

But of course, the shrouds for Christina Pacosz are these poems, “bright wings breathing.” The needles are these words that deeply move us, and the threads are the stories, the pieces of living that have intimately touched and changed her. With this poem and the final poem, “Trying to Find Out About Crazy Woman Creek, Wyoming” which exposes the intricacies of yet another white man’s lie, the poet brings us full circle back to a primal innocence that we are compelled to rediscover. We are exiting the cave, the womb, “the hindbrain” of “the wise snake” and along, with the creatures of these poems, we remember. We’re grateful for these poems.

Other Poetry

Christina Pacosz’s more recently published collection of poetry, *This Is Not a Place to Sing*, has a very different tone and character. These poems grew out of the poet’s experiences in Poland on a journey to connect with her father’s family, his and thus her own past. It is available for \$5.00 from West End Press, PO Box 27334, Albuquerque, NM 87125.

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