

The Connectedness of Things

The Undertaker's Daughter by Toi Derricotte (Pittsburgh, 2011)

Shimmer by Judy Kronenfeld (WordTech Editions, 2012)

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Judith Kronenfeld's *Shimmer* is a quite different sort of book, but equally rare—written by a woman with a smart brain, a pleasure-loving body, a compassionate heart that also knows how to be joyful, a sense of humor attuned to the absurd, a clarity about mortality, and the craftsmanship to make these things all work together. A Jewish woman, a mother, beyond middle-aged, liberal-left in politics, Kronenfeld is exactly the sort of person who could never have made it into the kingdom of poetry before this very moment, either as creator or as subject matter.

The freshness of this unfashionable persona is part of this book's pleasure. Another part is the poet's skill. Judith Kronenfeld moves her poems along like the conductor of a very good, very mature orchestra. Master of the almost-lost art of description (why, one wonders, have so many poets turned their backs on something that can give so much enjoyment?), she plays the instrument of metaphor like a violin. She has leaves whirling in the wind under a streetlight by a bus stop like dervishes, then settling back as if sighing "like a ripple of congregants/ into their pews." She describes "bodiless clothes" at a mom and pop dry-cleaner's swishing forward on their conveyor, "all potential all redemption." A bad day is "black as hell's/ receiving dock." Nostalgic for New York, she recalls tenements with "flaming suns leaping/ from window to window." In a sequence of poems about a demented and dying father, she intuits

the rain
of stimuli erased as if by
windshield wipers then again erased,
again, again, again.

The discovery of a metaphor like this, and the ability to get it into lines that simultaneously break your heart and comfort you with their rightness, is something to cherish. This is because metaphor is not simply a literary device. A kind of metaphysical principle undergirds metaphor, insisting on the connectedness of things, including the connectedness of things supposedly belonging to different orders of being, like leaves and congregants, or memory loss and windshield wipers.

The mind able to open itself to metaphor is commonly a mind open to the erotic. In Kronenfeld's case, the erotic transcends sexuality, rippling out to every kind of touch. We see it in the kindness of her many family poems, and in a sequence about a family dog's death and the way grief is comforted by the charm of a new dog "all damp fur and sweet breath." On entering the house he goes straight for the spot where the old dog spent his last days, though that spot has been thoroughly shampooed. We see it in a poem depicting a couple aged 88 and 90 napping and snuggling in bed, as the husband's lower leg "black as seaweed" drifts over the wife's, and the wife swims "toward the crook of his shoulder/ as if into a palm-fronded lagoon." There is eros in the way Kronenfeld is attuned to the visible world. A poem lists variations of the color blue: "pink tongue after blueberry slushee/ zoo mandril bottom/ raucous scrub jay feather/ birth eyes navy..." In a remembered New York evening from childhood, "the street-lamps/ clicked on, and the park began to glimmer/ with a back-lit ochre glow." In "New Bloom"

Cloud-foam lavender, heart-glow
topaz, arrow-pierce of blue—the colors
of attraction, my eyes the bees
which come to dwell
flying and alighting...

Can it be
that now when my body
no longer sends or receives
the frantic Morse code
of desire, the world itself
can signal, the world itself
be received?

The answer to that question is clearly affirmative, and Kronenfeld's receptiveness is nowhere more acute than in the quiet fury of her political poetry. We have grown accustomed to the once-radical novelty of women poets writing about motherhood, but the political implications of the maternal still remain relatively unexplored in American poetry. "Clean," triggered by seeing a van labeled Crime Scene Cleaners, Inc., wants "them" to come and "tenderly cleanse/ the buttocks of the four year old/ who shat in his pants" as missiles flew low over Gaza. Kronenfeld in this poem cites one horror story after another, from the Marwaheen massacre in Lebanon to the marine in "crazed pain" who kills his girlfriend, to the suicides in Guantanamo. She ends by demanding that "the war presidents and prime/ ministers and militia leaders/ for whom war is holy....be each given one small toothbrush,/ and the sentence: scour this blood." Only a mother and housewife could think of that. And it is thrilling for me, even as it makes my eyes blur, to read Kronenfeld, with equal concern for motherhood and poetic form, writing a villanelle entitled "First Salvo," in which "mother" appears ironically in the opening stanza,

My heart leaps in my throat I cannot speak—
they're flaunting with the "mother" of all
bombs;
I have a daughter in the Middle East.

The poet watches the "smoke-greased" war on tv, recalls the milk-white scars on her daughter's knee, the birthmark on her son's right arm, but as she names her "shining daughter"—"Her name is Deborah, her name Hanan"—I begin to understand, and the final two stanzas deepens my understanding into tears:

Crossfire will get Johnny, a Tomahawk, Malik,
though each one goes to battle saying psalms
for his God's judgment on the Middle East.

Her name is Fareeda, her name Denise,
his name is Samuel, his name Bassam,
my heart leaps in my throat Someone must speak.
My children all live in the Middle East.

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