BOOK REVIEWS

The Myth of Water

Jeanie Thompson. University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, Alabama. 2016.

Sometimes you read a book so genuine that you have to put it down and let the depths of it absorb into you before you continue. This book of Jeanie Thompson's masterful poetry about Helen Keller's life is one of those.

Thompson took so much care researching Helen Keller's life and places that she convinces us what actual blindness and deafness might feel like. She uses the senses of touch and smell largely to imagine what life might give and not give to someone without sight and hearing. However, her lines hint at Helen's strong yearning to communicate with all her senses.

In the poem "This Day," the piece's narrative captures how Helen, teacher Anne Sullivan Macy and husband John Macy spent several happy years at a farm in Wrentham, Massachusetts. Macy was editing Helen's adult writings, but then he and Anne separated. Peter Fagan was hired as a secretary to help with correspondence. He and Helen fell in love and became engaged.

Helen's mother forced her to publicly renounce the engagement, and Helen was sent to Montgomery, Alabama to visit family. Peter and Helen planned to elope, but he never arrived at the appointed time to take her away.

In the poem's lines, the narrator is Keller speaking to Peter Fagan:

You shook language
in my face and asked me to dance syntax
with you. Dark dancer, I followed your lead,
and if you could have seen what I knew
through our touch, we would've been one!...

Alone on Sister's front porch,
without Teacher, scent of tea olive lingering, your promises
fade into morning's traffic, until you are no more
than a rumble from the street
signaling day.

Though this portion of the collection has romance at its center, it never waivers from a rich and imaginative world. It never shouts of Hollywood or melodrama. Helen's voice is respectfully portrayed by Thompson.

What is most astounding about Helen's life, however, is not the cast-into-the-deep existence itself but that she could speak from it, and in the very next poem, "First Dream of Tennessee," Thompson brings Helen Keller back from that depth and into the world:

I cannot return to who I was. In the garden of my home place
I had groped without self, without *Helen*, only *need*
and *want*. When Teacher dragged this phantom
to the pump and poured w-a-t-e-r into its impatient hand,
my mind cracked, like a birds egg. . . .

How would it be possible
to return there, the syllables whispering in my palm
over and over, *you are Helen, of this Earth*.

From Thompson's extraordinary research, she uses Helen Keller's biography to write of travels to Europe and Asia where she worked as an ambassador for the deaf and blind, and of her friendships with Polly Thomson and, especially, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, the talented educator who taught Helen how to sign, traveled. Sullivan lived with her most of her life, and Helen always affectionately referred to as "Teacher."

As she aged, Helen Keller's commitment to ethical and spiritual life is one of pathos motivated by the atrocities of the twentieth century. Thompson investigates profound suffering that Keller seemed to understand. In "Reproach," Thompson follows Keller as she meets with survivors of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima:

The faces of those I touch
are like the broken rubble under my steps.
I cannot get my bearings.
Takeo stops speaking . . .
In my own silence I know

nothing is said—Polly's fingers
spell in my upturned hand: *no sound*
but a small choking for breath.

Here is a woman, Thompson says, whose conditions did not sway her from her larger life as a writer, ambassador, friend, and lover who sensitively engaged the world with deep curiosity and care.

--*Mary Jane Ryals*

Disinheritance

John Sibley Williams. Apprentice House, Loyola University Maryland: Baltimore, Maryland.
2016.

Disinheritance explores a topic often discussed, yet constantly interpreted differently: grief. The concept has been toyed with by poets for decades, each in search of the perfect description for the ambiguous emotion, that which can shatter us like glass or give us an opportunity for rebirth, a chance to make peace with the ghosts within ourselves and the ghosts of those we've lost.

In this collection, John Sibley Williams attempts to make a tenuous peace with grief, to embrace the finality and relief that comes with death and with the loss thereafter. Loss of family, both young and old, is touched upon in this collection, and the very different types of grief that accompany each.

Grief can be a beautiful and healing thing in many cases, and in Williams' writing, it is beautiful in its own right. His work "Things Start at Their Names" best expresses Williams' relationship with grief:

> Ice locks the river in place and my heart
> is static for the season and traversable…
>
> A fluster of bluegill follows his body
>
> downstream to where it meets the Columbia,
> in time the ocean, which I cannot make freeze.
>
> Next spring I will snare the things that still move in me,
> beat them against stone, and eat until empty.

Williams shows us how the loss of a loved one freezes us, paralyzes us, interrupts the normal flow of the river of our lives and forces us to reflect on the lives of those we've lost.

"I Sit My Grandfather Down by the Mouth of the Columbia River" explores the chance that grief grants us to begin anew and cleanse ourselves of the past:

> I tell him it's an estuary. He cannot wash himself
> from past landscapes. I tell him it's called purging.
> He still decorates the sky with iron birds.
>
> Waves continue to bash against us
> like the maelstrom of wartime machines.
> *You are no longer what you were,* I whisper
> like a lullaby over an emptied cradle,
>
> *and you will always be alongside me,*
> *where you've never been.* His response
> is a kind of silence different from midnight's calm,
>
> different from water losing itself in water, the distance between us
> reduced to unshared terrain.

Williams’ frozen rivers and tired, towering pines provide an unfamiliar landscape that somehow encompasses a feeling that each of us has known in some capacity. Whether it’s the loss of a pet or the loss of our mother, we have all known the frozen wasteland that grief transports us to, and the time that it takes to finally break free of the ice and return to the real world of summer and greenery. Though it takes time, works like *Disinheritance* assure us that we will all, eventually, thaw.

--*Peyton Carper*

Report from a Place of Burning

George Looney. Leapfrog Press: Fredonia, New York. 2018.

To say George Looney creates an amazingly original collection of stories would be an understatement. Six voices present us with startling scenes and grim events. There's not much here to cheer the reader, but, on the other hand, the novel keeps you turning pages to find the answers to all the mysteries the author invents.

In the first monologue we get descriptions of a deserted Heinz plant in the town. A deer wanders through the old building, finding itself trapped there; it finally bursts through a window sending shards of glass flying in all directions. But it's the author's third voice that reveals the mystery that pervades the novel:

> *Just last night, on the late news, there was a report on the latest in a series of mysterious deaths of babies. In the last several months, five babies have been found burned to death in their cribs.... The weird thing about these deaths, though, is that nothing else in the rooms burns. Just the babies.*

Although never completely resolved, the novel's voices give hints to the mystery of these horrific burnings. For me the character of the prophet provides the strangest and most intriguing clues. The prophet quotes passages from St. John's Revelation. These passages compare the local legends to the scriptural accounts and depictions of apocalyptic events.

The local stories of a gorge and a red diver become symbols in the monologues. The image of the diver, a man who painted his body red, shouted passages from the biblical Revelation and then dived into the murky waters of the gorge, seems to provide the signs for solving the mysterious deaths. Adding to this macabre tale, is the odd fact that only the severed hand of the diver was found after he jumped from a bridge into the gorge. The prophet uses the red diver's proclamations to explain the burned babies.

> *...I believe it is the work of angels, carrying out the will of God.... everything seems to suggest that the burning of these babies is not a natural phenomenon. All the so-called facts of these cases, looked at objectively, leads to the conclusion that these fires consuming the babies are supernatural in origin."*

Looney uses all his poetic talents to give the reader dreamy imagery. His fiction becomes surreal with visions the characters describe. One of his narrators communicates with the dead artist, Dali. This character has a print of Dali's *The Burning Giraffe* hanging on his bedroom wall. For this reason, he mentions that the artist drops by to visit. Observing the painting he points out:

> *And the pale ghostly figure I've often thought is walking toward the giraffe, toward the flames on the back of the giraffe, walking towards that fire as though it could offer him more than either of the two women... in the gentle touch of the street lamp's light, the ghostly figure almost seems to be dancing... just what is he dancing for? And who is he dancing with? And what is the music those flames are making on the back of that poor giraffe?*

This character, called "the widower" watches Dali painting a mural on his wall. When the ghost of the artist hears the description of the burned babies, a depiction follows. "There were tears moving down his face to drip from his moustache." So this image, although seemingly sad on one level, is humorous on another. A different account pictures Dali at work. "Some nights he paints himself to exhaustion, which I imagine must be hard for a ghost to do.... I hear him snoring downstairs and sneak down to find him collapsed on the sofa...."

Haunting visions and characters, who interact with dead friends and spouses, recur throughout the book. Reality merges with the surreal in Looney's novel. Are his voices psychic or just mentally deranged? Some are the parents of the infant victims.

The stories in *Report from a Place of Burning* blend and yet diverge. A housewife, who's baby was burned in his crib, paints canvasses of buildings engulfed in flames. The detective assigned to the "burned babies" case interviews a variety of suspects, but never discovers the guilty party. The widower dances with his dead wife in the final chapter.

It's clear the author wants to remind us that we live in a world surrounded by dangers and sometimes desperation. Some type of burning pervades in every chapter of his novel. And yet, even if it looks like things are as bad as they can possibly get, he ends his novel with a note of hope and optimism.

--*Margaret Howard Trammell*

Trouble in Tallahassee

Claire Matturro. KaliOka Press: Semmes, Alabama. 2017.

We’re a curious culture that loves our animals as much as our people sometimes. Writer Claire Matturro took a wild chance that really worked in making the green-eyed black cat Trouble a major point of view character in this mystery novel.

Why does the world love a good mystery novel? According to Ooligan Press, a great novel is one in which the reader gets to play a game, a puzzle, “to step into the detective’s shoes and navigate the text.” We vicariously “find clues, solve riddles, and if all goes well, deliver justice.” However, this doesn’t usually happen via the eyes of a cat.

What we love about Trouble is that he's no fool (Full disclosure, my own cat is black with green eyes.). His point of view character narrates like an almost-stuffy, British librarian, calling Abby "my biped." He also says, "Of course, most people are quite smitten with me." He also claims to "have a high degree of intelligence and exceptional detective skills."

He'll need them. At the start the young lawyer, Abby, offers her home to a law student, Layla, whose house has burned down. And right away, a dude in a hoodie grabs Layla from the back, holding a knife to her throat in front of Abby one night. Luckily, Trouble knows to create a distraction, causing the "hoodied" dude to run away.

Soon, though, Layla disappears, leaving a note with blood splattered on it.

Another law student and study partner with Layla is a former Naval Officer, Victor Rutledge. He's confident the house fire and the knife assault are connected. He offers to help Abby with the disappeared Layla.

Despite herself, Abby notices that Victor is a "hottie," but is certain he's in a relationship with Layla. And since Matturo uses three different points of view, we know things that each character does not.

Meanwhile, Trouble has plenty of commentary about the bipeds. For starters, he thinks their ways are fairly boring when they're not being stupid. He quips about the biped Abby's aquarium. "As for the aquarium, I'm not sure why she so obviously adores it. I watch the fish swim in circles and fail to see the point of it all. The fish are far too small to be bothered with, not a decent meal if one caught and ate the whole lot of them. Dull as dishwater, that fish tank."

But back to the plot: Victor and Abby know that if Layla has been captured, her life could be in deep danger. Layla is a diabetic. She needs her meds if she's to survive. Time is of the essence. The narrative's tension escalates.

All readers of mysteries—ranging from Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys to writers Dan Brown, Stieg Larsson, Gillian Flynn, and J. D. Robb—will enjoy stepping into the detective's shoes (or should we say, *paws?*) and navigating this text.

--Mary Jane Ryals

Sleeping Things

Holly Iglesias. Press 53: Winston-Salem, North Carolina. 2018.

Prose poetry is often a strategy of language poets and surrealists, but Holly Iglesias uses the form to capture snippets of time, moments of memory that haunt the narrators of these pieces. Divided into three section, *Sleeping Things* moves from a childhood haunted by the Church and the Cold War, then explores a rich life spiced with Spanish and notes of Cuba, and finally concludes with subtle elegies. Throughout these sections lingers a sense of loss, a sadness, perhaps, of how many "sleeping things" may never wake-up.

In the early poem "The Road to Cana" (a reference to Jesus) a woman "wends her way through aisles of blenders and percolators" in an appliance store "bulging with plastic hams and gelatin molds." A salesman, in a sleep-like stupor, is awakened by her presence and "straightens up, pops a mint into his mouth," because he wants to explain the lie of a washer's warranty, the claim that *"it'll last a lifetime!"* The machine's racket, the way it "lurches into spin cycle," signals how this noise that may lull us to sleep will eventually conk out, permanently. This piece, like many, questions the rising of what seems asleep, of what might be resurrected or not.

The music of the Spanish language sings throughout the book's second part; however, the sense of loss remains strong. In "La Charada Cubana: A World of Things" what seemingly starts as a playful list poem slowly but surely becomes troubled by images from the Tarot deck and the Bible. The piece begins with "The goat, a bee, six nuns by the sea, / . . . The cat, the sky, *un caracol*, / *Maleta, corbata,* an angry bull." But soon this list becomes sprinkled with words of dreams and nightmares, such as "lightning, St. Catherine's wheel," "the fiery lake," "*ratones*, the Fool," and "a basket of eels." This poem must spiral downward, keeping with the book's theme of inescapable loss, inevitably and necessarily ending with the phrase "Death on a horse."

In the book's final section, the piece "I Can Afford Neither the Rain" acts as another strong marker to the melancholy that permeates the text. The poem itself portrays a literal marker of loss: "where . . . veterans rest . . . stands the stone that bears their names." This elegy finds a narrator who cannot "afford" the continuous heartbreak of the scene's images: "the bench where a mourner lingers"; "the bluff above the Mississippi"; a "window itself blind with grief"; "the strip of light between the slats." All these glimpses, these moments, powerfully remind the narrator and the reader that these men will never return, that they are "gone and gone."

Despite the sense of loss, the poems in *Sleeping Things* also celebrate small moments: "I'm playing the lady in a camel-hair coat and a red pashmina that would have made my mother proud"; "Abuela clanked the spoon back and forth inside a cup of café con leche"; "Each night I pray one Hail Mary for good grades, one / for a vocation, and one for miniature golf." The balance of these sparks of joy with the strands of melancholy make for a rich and satisfying read.

--*Michael Trammell*

All We Know of Pleasure

Enid Shomer, Editor. Carolina Wren Press: Durham, North Carolina. 2018.

In the striking anthology *All We Know of Pleasure: Poetic Erotica by Women*, a reader, despite the book's theme, might initially be distracted by the names listed in the table of contents: Nikki Giovanni, Sharon Olds, Diane Di Prima, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Anne Sexton. These and many other well-known poets grace these pages. However, it's the verve of the lines in each of these poems that will electrify a reader, no matter the name lying beside a poem's title.

Many of the poems play with the language of the erotic the same way lovers play, with a potent and beguiling imagination for both what's observed and experienced. In Ellen Bass' "Gate C22" a passionate scene is captured:

[K]isses like the ocean in the early morning,
the way it gathers and swells, sucking
each rock under, swallowing it
again and again. We were all watching—
passengers waiting for the delayed flight
to San Jose, the stewardesses, the pilots,

the aproned woman icing Cinnabons, the man selling
sunglasses. We couldn't look away. We could
taste the kisses crushed in our mouths.

Robin Becker shows a similar flair in her poem "We Thought of Each Other as Food." The idea of passion takes flight here with a seductive, imaginative feel:

We thought of each other as food, taut skin,
of the apple burnished with stars We thought of each other
as France, Brittany blue and Provencal roads, postcards
from the vast Midi of your mouth We thought of each other
as fact, a fanlight above the boathouse door
and then the door opened and we sailed
in the parallel hulls of feminine
endings, catamaran, raft of logs lashed together

Both of these poems keep the tension firing with their playful line breaks, teasing the reader with the potential surprise spooned into the next line.

Other works in the anthology drive metaphors through their language with a sense of humor and passion. Lorna Dee Cervantes especially has fun with rhythms of "The 4-Barrel Carburetor on a '72 Chevy Camaro":

He could make love like a 4-barrel . . .

Camaro. Man, he could go. Pumping up
the pistons, discharging with a growl.
He wasn't all that to look at, mostly gleaming
chrome and wire. Slick in the upholstery
and revved. He was a 2-bucket seat
palace, a chariot of wiles. He was
coming back. He was a place off the map.

In "The Hummingbird: A Seduction" by Pattiann Rogers the hummingbird metaphor is offered in kisses like pecks, in love in flight:

. . . I watched how you fell, plummeting before me,
And how you rose again and fell, with such mastery
That I believed for a moment *you* were . . .

. . . just the physical revelation of the light's
Most perfect desire;

. . . I would take you and take you and take you
Deep into any kind of nest you ever wanted.

The anthology’s poems tie love and passion together brilliantly, striking readers as much with their music and magic as their erotic energy.

--*Michael Trammell*