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Poetry Review: A Wound on Stone

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In The Necessary Angel, his book of essays “intended to disclose definitions of poetry,” Wallace Stevens says that “a poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one’s thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it.” From the description in “Slugs and Opossums” of the garden slug of her book’s title, which “pours/ all its viscous flesh/upon the path it takes:/a wound on stone,” to the speaker of “The Sudden Tug of the Familiar,” who tells us that “The smooth plane of the coverlet/ defines my bed. It is single. /Naked as a needle I slide in, /sleep the sleep of a nun,” Faye George’s poems enact these particulars of thought and feeling with a singular precision and sculptural grace.

Notice both the structural tension of the lines and the incisive particularity of the details in the following stanzas of “What She looked Out Upon,” a meditation on aging and loneliness.

what she looked out upon
through the small grille
of the kitchen window
was the exhausted clothesline
strung across the yard,
its soft and sagging middle
a hammocked emptiness
that crossed her eyes’ rest
as a thin shadow
of the depression
she looked in upon
thinking of what was to come:

These are the poems of a true New Englander; everything inessential has been pared away to reveal the underlying structure of hope and despair that holds the world together. A life of sorts has been coax and prodded from the thin soil of possibilities—but always contingently and always in a landscape where even our personal fates are dependent upon the vagaries of terrain and weather, both metaphorical and actual, as in “The Long Train,” printed in full on the following page.
This dream each has of being
on the long train that takes us
to the country of our fate

may fold in the circuit
of a blown tire
cast into bramble and sumac,

may crumble to furrows
plowed but never planted—
or planted

and the seed dried up,
rains come too soon,
a sudden late

and unforgiving frost—
this dream that rides
in ragweed and wild asters.

The persistence of life formed (or deformed) by an
inhospitable environment is also the subject of “Birds
Do Carry Seeds,” where the narrator assures us that

There are explanations
for the way that living things
will turn against the order
and strive unnaturally
to grow from rock
in cracks and shallow pans
of earth between the ribs,

will put out roots and thrive,
contorted, strained,
yet stubbornly survive.

That dogged determination to survive and make connec-
tions amidst the landscapes of a fallen world constitutes
the major theme of this book, as best exemplified, perhaps,
in “On The Grounds of the Plymouth County Hospital”
where, trespassing “at the home for the chronically ill,
browsing in the shadow of that house without/ hope,”
the two lovers

... pause
kiss

and watch the moss fatten, listen to the wind snuffle
in the barren apple, troubling the crippled
sassafras with its passing
care.

The poems in A Wound on Stone are both beautifully
crafted and emotionally satisfying. Faye George’s poems
neither force transcendence nor negate the possibility of
epiphany. Compressed, concise, compassionate, and
intensely realized, they show us, once again, how memo-
rable poems can be wrought out of the most difficult and
recalcitrant of materials.

— Phil Tabakow is Professor of English