

Book Review

“Out of My Ancient Chaos”*: Memory in Translation

Hemming Flames

Patricia Colleen Murphy

(Utah State University Press, 2016)

These Acts of Water

Nina Bannett

(ELJ Editions, 2015)

Reviewed by Kate Falvey

Whether mined from the murky depths of a persistent long-ago or retrieved from more immediate impressions, memory is the raw material of poetry. In “Lost in Translation,” James Merrill patterns the intricacies of memory, perception, personal symbols, language, and poetic remaking into one of the most exquisite lyric narratives of our age. His nexus of associations—literal and metaphoric puzzles, a lost-and-found Rilke translation of Valéry’s “Palme,” the limits of awareness and childhood recollections—meld into an exploration of the mysteries of consciousness and meaning itself. The poem’s uncredited epigraph becomes a puzzle piece, fit into place when the poem ends. Merrill later published his own English translation of this German translation of the French original (of course, from “Palme”):

These days which, like yourself,
Seem empty and effaced
Have avid roots that delve
To work deep in the waste.

The poem culminates with this moving reminder that we interpret our lives from the jigsaw bits of memory:

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
 And every bit of us is lost in it
 (Or found – I wander through the ruin of S
 Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
 And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
 Color of context, imperceptibly
 Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
 To shade and fiber, milk and memory.

Merrill's words hover over my readings of two new collections of poetry by BLR authors, both of whom translate the "wastes" and depths of loss and trauma into finely made, substantive poems. Each collection contains a poem first published in the *Bellevue Literary Review*.

Patricia Colleen Murphy's *Hemming Flames* and Nina Bannett's *These Acts of Water* are stirring poetic memoirs that present childhoods ravaged by the elemental forces of maternal psychosis. In each, psychological and social transgressions become family norms, and children are left to orient within the strange, unstable, uncharted grounds of mental illness. Both poets convey the otherworldly sense of dislocation in their treacherously out of kilter worlds as well as the chasmic losses that fissure love and unappeasable primal need.

Hemming Flames, which was chosen by Stephen Dunn to win the 19th annual May Swenson Poetry Award, burns with what Dunn describes in his preface as a "Plathian relentlessness." Murphy's poetry is often raw, rough, grim, and painful to read, though, as Dunn writes, the collection is not a "tell-all" or overtly "therapeutic." There is much here that is thorny or cryptically private, but the language is incandescent, the poems gorgeously fascinating. The poet's unabashed willingness to explore such

harrowing terrain gives us poems that jolt and mesmerize. They almost dare us to look, or to not look away.

The enigmatic title comes from a line in the final poem, “With a Whimper”: “Yesterday I invented fire./ Today I’m hemming flames.” The book is filled with simmering and roaring, erupting from the “Mom/[who] loved matches” (“Kitten”) and her horrific attempt at suicide by fire: “...I bet that day started with/a gas can....Where you watered yourself like a little/daffodil – splash, splash, splash/across your roots” (“Cutlass Ciera”).

Flames lick through the poems and the heat takes many forms. “Edison’s Medicine” opens with: “How many blue volts before/Mom’s in a better mood?” In “Arch on a Rung,” a warm bath steams a threat of scalding: “I can’t tell whose skin she’s/trying to burn.” Painful memories, held in the body, are catalogued in “Memory as Diary”: “and because the body saw a body burst/into flames on the bow of a boat.” And in “Not Having Them,” the speaker’s desire to have children is set against a moody backdrop of “level headed” rain and memories of parental dysfunction: “Our mother, smoldering. What else would she have to give up?”

Though the “hemming” in the title evokes the futility of hemming in a raging conflagration and is, like Dunn writes in the preface, “as if the act of writing these poems was an attempt to hem what can’t easily be hemmed,” hemming is also a domestic image, as in neatly sewing and finishing off a garment. And flames are the material the poet has to work with, poetically edging the memories of familial anarchy into precisely finished lines.

There are hints of fabric wafting through the flames of this “house of faulty methods” (“Losing Our Milk Teeth”), as in this image from “Rank Bitch”: “That winter I became heir to a house the size of a stitch.” Or this one from “Is it the Sea You Hear in Me?”: “I use the hem of my yellow /dress to brush away my tears.” In “On Being Orphaned” she describes a kind of associative agnosia:

I find a shirt in my hand but can't remember
the word for shirt or hand. Or how to put it on?

.....

.... Should I cut it,
then tie it back together? Or burn it and spread the ash?

In “XVIIIth Arrondissement,” which comes early in the book, the normalcy of a sulky fifteen-year-old on a family trip is contorted into a troubling defense against her mother’s bizarre behavior. The melding of terror, rage, bewilderment, and concomitant grief patently evident in this poem set the tone for what’s to come:

I have spent so long apprenticed
to the drunk and insane

that I know terror dressing
up in anger’s hat and coat.

And there is unexpected humor amidst the ghastly lunacy, a vital spark of what Dunn calls “the slightest redemption” winking through the oxygen-eating blasts, as in this line from the caustic “Meet the Author”: “...Mom would stop at McDonald’s for shakes/so she had something to swallow her Lithium with.” Similarly, there are poems that crowd surreal-seeming images of horror around snippets of ordinary life, as in “Good Morning, Mediocrity”: “It’s a beautiful day outside,” nestles sunnily between descriptions of “the masturbator and the hoarder.” In the brutal “Cutlass Ciera,” midway into the poem, this line ratchets up the emotional intensity to near-unbearableness: “I bet that day started with a sunrise”- that day being the one on which the speaker’s mother tried to kill herself with fire.

The settings for these poems span continents, with image-making atmospheres born in places like Korea (“Why I Burned

Down Namdaemun Gate”), Alaska (“Midnight at Orca Cannery”), Russia (“Letter from the Psych Ward, Hospital Kashenko”) and Africa (“Songs in Kiswahili”). In a 2014 interview with *Arcadia* magazine, Murphy explains how her expansive sense of place informs her work: “When I write a poem I am building a small city. And what makes a city? A mountain of green grapes in a market stand. A yellow school crossing sign with an image of an older child chasing a younger child. A centuries-old building half-covered in brown mold. A pack of young Maasai warriors draped in black robes. Travel gives me a much broader set of images” (66).

Murphy reaches across the literary landscape, too, communing with other poets as in the multi-layered “Reading Sexton in Phuket” (first published in the *BLR* and accorded honorable mention for the 2013 Marcia and Jan Vilcek Prize for Poetry), which pays ironic, knowing tribute to “Anne” and her madness: “Did she pray for the rare days/her madness morphed into metaphor?” Echoes of Plath’s “The Night Dances” and one of her haunting final poems, “Edge,” resound in this line from “Is It the Sea You Hear in Me?” bringing in notes of suicidal despair: “so I drop a smile into the tub/near the edge. Irretrievable!”

In “With a Whimper,” reading Eliot, who she deems “a prig,” prompts the realization that childhood memory is an undercurrent, always prickling just beneath a sensitive skin: “...Everything reminds me of them.../ and all I can think of is Mom and Dad in urns.” In the *Arcadia* interview, Murphy describes the omnipresence of memory and its availability as material for poetic translation—the associative spark and surprise of her creative exploration. She specifically refers to “Midnight at Orca Cannery” which melds memories of a grueling kayaking trip with her imagined experience of her mother’s long incarceration in a Russian mental institution: “And I ended up better understanding that my mother’s history will always be a subtext” (68).

“Look! There’s my mother freaking/out in public...,” a line from Murphy’s “The Linger Museum” might well have come from a poem in Nina Bennett’s collection. If the poems in *Hemming*

Flames are “relentless,” those in *These Acts of Water* are restrained. Spare and honest, saturated with a heart-rending empathy and love, Bannett gives us guarded, carefully composed glimpses of a child’s confusion and the aberrant, precarious world she is made to inhabit. This child cultivates a talent for reticence and insularity, a saving ability to resist.

The collection begins with a modest disclosure: “Putting together a coherent show/by myself/will not be easy” (“Curator”). This kind of understatement gentles the tone and suggests the molten quaking beneath the calmed surface. This opening poem is addressed to a mother who is “not/gone” but is perpetually in leaf and whose “sweet voice” is “implicit within these arts” along with the poet’s “heartbreak.” The next poem, “Rachel St. Michael” shades in more background and accounts for the quality of cautious reserve:

I have lived a nineteenth-century life,
early exposure to madness,

sentimental love and premature death,
holy crosses and guardian angels.

Divided into three sections, the collection moves from evocations of childhood, to reflections on parental divorce and death, to the reclamation of life through therapy and art. The little girl in the first section is a stunned partisan of a war she doesn’t understand: “my mother and I are flanked on all sides” (“War Story”). In “War Story #2,” allegiance to her mother forces this four-year-old into a precocious acuteness while she is held in a police station as if in a “refugee camp.” Her mother—a “madwoman” (“Rachel St. Michael”)—has been “distorted into disappearing” and the child withdraws, stoically refusing the ministrations of sympathetic cops: “Refusal is an art form./ I cannot be broken into betrayal./ Soda can be poisoned..../I prepare to sit here, forever.”

Loyalty isn't a safe haven and the world for this child is askew with threat and unpredictability. In "Artist in Residence" patients in the psychiatric ward make yarn animals as therapy. Her mother "waits for me to come to this hook" but the poem reflects the child's resistance and fear: "If I learn to crochet here I will be chained too,/ tied to dulled smokers,/their thoughts vested in thorazine." In "All-Day Kindergarten," the security of a child "napping to the Nutcracker Suite" is riven with an image suggestive of combat: "Within my landscape of sweets,/ dancers twirl in punishing circles, /their toes explode, far away from their homes."

The complex mix of fear and love expressed in "Plath's Recipe," which appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of the *BLR*, pervades these poems:

For you, Plath was always what she left behind
 what I should take away,
 along with my fear of why you had told me about her,
 always spontaneously.

In "What Child is This," one of the most affecting poems in the collection, the mother, in the grip of her mania, unknowingly lacerates and terrifies her vulnerable daughter by asking "Am I your mother?" The response is typically, ironically "nineteenth century": "Such a discourteous question...." This initial muted shock deepens the plaintive ache that follows: "For I have loved you so long, so well."

The poems trace the increasing expansiveness of a tightly coiled and guarded life with images of wilderness and want, drawn from mythology, religion, nature, and warfare. In "Espalier Notes," the speaker says she is "trained to trim/my own growth/be my own trellis." In "Ambush," she and her mother withstand further assaults when her mother becomes mortally ill: "Yes, there is always another brink." She feels "the uneasy drown of pioneer hunger" in "Revival Meeting" and learns to navigate her sometimes suffocating world in "Underwater": "I did not know that I could be saved, in

water.../....that one can wade in the water, but not as a lonely child.” While the child remains “huddled against what [she has] witnessed” (“War Story”), the woman artist finds compensatory beauty amidst the war-torn rubble: “I have inherited her reaching,/ this emphasis on vision...” (“Impromptu Art Show”).

Patricia Colleen Murphy and Nina Bennett bravely “work deep in the waste,” morphing memory into metaphor, translating suffering into memorable lyric poetry of rare power, aware that, as Bennett writes in “Flameproof”: “From loss comes renewal.” ∞

*from Nina Bennett’s “Dream of the Forsythia Tree”

“Patricia Colleen Murphy.” Interview by Roy Giles. *Aradia* 9:1 (Fall 2014): 65-70. Web.