

Vision & Voice

Howard Faerstein's *Dreaming of the Rain in Brooklyn* takes its title from a line in the poem, "Missionary Ridge," which appears early in the collection: "in a roaming time" and "under a Neanderthal moon," he had "begun dreaming of the rain in Brooklyn," the place of his birth. Indeed, many of these poems embody some element of *dream*—recollection, reflection, desire, hope—though further mention of rain comes later in the book. Until then, the skies are dominated by the moon. At times the poet is "followed by the moon" or "sandwiched in the imaginary line between our sun / and earth," the "moon mouthing / *do not forget me.*" He even "speaks" the moon in delightful improvisation in "The Sound in the Middle of 'Moon'":

Two oo's make the sound of taproot,
Owls' hoot, stormtrooper's boot,
Bulletproof.

.....

Building an igloo out of vowels
Not for ballyhoo or boohoo or the old bugaboo
But in gratitude to the soil.

Beneath Faerstein's moon, the earth teems with people and places, nature and wildlife, events both personal and public. There are the deaths of friends and family, the streets and shops of Brooklyn, the peaks and dips of the Berkshires, Taos, Santé Fe. There are political figures like Fidel Castro—who "reclaimed 70,000 acres from U.S. companies / half of it owned by United Fruit" — as well as horses, silkmoths, "finches fox-trotting on husk-covered snow." birds beneath the window / and racing lizards tunneling / crevices of slate."

This is a poetics of expanding sensibility—grounded in concrete imagery, informed by the spirit of jazz. The rhythms are often upbeat: “A beat cop waved us down but Ian floored the Chevy / & the cop commandeered a gypsy cab / giving chase through the breathless ghetto,” followed by lyrical quietude and deep reflection:

Most of our life our eyes are shut.
Most of the time we do not speak.

.....

one day it snows, the next

redwings gurgle first spring trill,
and the solitary sepals
and petals and stamens
dangling, burst.

Dreaming of the Rain in Brooklyn is Faerstein’s first full collection of poetry and a long time coming (he’s in his sixties). The poems—some composed years, even decades ago—include a variety of styles and forms: solid five line stanzas, quatrains or tercets, open form, a prose poem. What’s remarkable is the range of subject and texture, balance of voice and vision. I was initially distracted, for example, by the seemingly arbitrary use of the ampersand (&) and word, *and*— as in, “think / how incredibly long this song . . . lasted/and how thrilling & just.” It then occurred to me that the word *and* carries the poet’s deeply meditative voice while the ampersand shifts the tempo and tone. This kind of syncopation—along with leaps, shifts, subtle connections and mergers—occurs throughout.

The book is divided into three parts after a prologue that sets the themes and rhythms:

I want you to take me to heart.

I want to take you where mountain laurel blooms, monarchs gather, bats dart.

I want to take you on the B65 downtown bus, get off on Gates, turn down Fulton.

.

I don't want to be taken to the cleaners.

I never want to take you for granted.

I want to take you to La Jolla tide pools.

All the places we've never been.

All the bad parts of town .

The first section transports us to the lifestyle and politics of the poet's youth in the 60's, "before the moon landing / & after the Summer of Love", the Cold War, Kent State, and Nixon's resignation. There are the "courtyard / crowded with Catholic girls in Easter outfits," "Mel's Dry Cleaners on Green Street" and "*Ripley's Believe It or Not* on 42nd." We're taken to "Paradise Alley" where he "dropped off homemade meth" and netted \$10 an ounce dealing hashish." Deemed "fit as a fiddle" on "Draft Induction Day," he's eventually granted 4F status: "I explained how I cured myself of syphilis / while living in a California commune / by cutting the tip of my penis into four symmetrical parts."

Many of us who came of age in the 60's knew the thrill of political resistance, the pain of torn identity, and the confusion of divided loyalties. We've also been to those "bad parts of town," not sure how to get out. Faerstein captures the need to re-assess and move on:

I want it all back
because it all was so botched.
But that's longing
and longing isn't love

So begins the search for identity and love beyond the ego (“I can’t help starting with I”) in the second section. He finds continuity by “braiding the confluence” of self, history, family and politics. While his mother’s ashes “spill into the shallows / clumping into the wholeness she lacked,” he begins to see her “as my children will see me / when I am powder mixed with earth.” In a story of his Jewish grandmother escaping Kiev in a boatload of refugees, a screaming infant is about to be strangled by the the others who fear being found and captured. The child is saved by his mother, who has the presence of mind to check inside the diaper, finding an open safety pin digging into his flesh. It’s a good story, but it gets even better when threat becomes a positive thread of continuity.. Once the child’s “sobs heave to a whimpering halt,” he “dreams / about the snow covering lawns in Buffalo / and his children, laughing.”

What’s key, for Faerstein, is to embrace history, heritage, and mortality as parts of “the vastness of my true identity— / beyond the interior fiction, / beyond the duress of illusion.” This means acknowledging the truth about a global sugar industry built on the backs of “human cargo,” slaves “shoved through the doorless heat— / flesh chunks scattered like walnuts about the room.” It means that to honor “our dead friend / we read her chapbook, thirty pages on despair, hope, cancer, / life after her husband walked out.” It means “accepting always / the constant falling of dust.”

By the final section, Faerstein clarifies his mission. To be a poet necessitates leading a life of “imposed punishment in burnt umber, / walking backward,” while transforming loss:

“On the artist’s white canvas / like an amputee’s phantom pain, absence suggests shape.”

The poet is advocate of an endangered planet:

Waxwings don’t *perish* of old age.
They crash into power lines by Monte Vista,
fall in the hedgerows, picked off
by the dog running loose,
smother in the slick that oils the shallows.

He becomes a vehicle of translation, giving song to what’s stifled, life to what’s gone:

Above this unlikely page hovers a fugitive from summer’s finish—
a six legged fly with crossed translucent wings, bluish shell,
narrow reddish head and barreled at the other end—
earthquake of jeweled flight, dazzle of deepest wonder.
Tomorrow will most likely find it dead. All I want is to recreate it
so you hear its buzzy song amid the splash of rain.

I hope it keeps raining—at least in the form of poems like these, replete with transcendent beauty and commitment to life. I hope that Faerstein, like his “Carolina Wren,” keeps “swirling as the city did when his voice, / a ragged raven’s wing, first opened.”

* * *

Pat Falk is the author of four books of poetry and prose and a professor of English at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. Her work has appeared in several publications, including *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, *The Mickle Street Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Spillway*, and *Pedestal Magazine*. Visit her website at www.patfalk.net.