
REVIEWS

A Room in the House of the Past

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Lee Sharkey, *A Darker, Sweeter String*. Off the Grid Press, 2008

AN ANONYMOUS PHRASE—from the autopsy report for an elderly woman, a survivor of the Gulag, who died of dementia: a now forgotten pathologist who performed her autopsy found that “even the heart was beaten out of place.” If the phrase on its own, out of context, has a frightening intensity, it is in part because of what is not recoverable, a fragmented legibility that makes it “polymorphic, broken, haunted . . . with no possibility of restoration,” Carolyn Forché’s description of the poetics in *The Angel of History*. This phrase recurs in Lee Sharkey’s new collection, *A Darker, Sweeter String*, in a poem called “Terrain.” Sharkey identifies her source in an endnote, but what the borrowed phrase also marks is the power of other passages in Sharkey’s poetry for which no source is offered, whose legibility is limited, and that become “polymorphic, broken, haunted” as a result. There is “no end of irreconcilable accounts,” Sharkey writes, and to praise the poetry that results seems as superfluous as celebrating the cruelties of the world. Much more seems at issue.

“The cut surprises and the flesh remembers”: In the late 1930s Walter Benjamin warned against the aesthetic transformation of political cruelty. If *A Darker, Sweeter String* avoids this aesthetics, it does so integrally because its lyric intensities preclude conformities to taste from which Benjamin wrote that “even the dead will not be safe.” It is tempting to read Sharkey’s lyricism as a poetry of mourning, but something sterner and less cathartic seems at work in the writing as well: not an author expressing her grief (or for that matter her anger), but a communal expression whose “sweetness” darkens without consolation because it addresses both readers and author with ethical demands to which we are necessarily inadequate. The music is played for us by those who create this vulnerability, a helplessness that is ethically more terrifying than guilt. In Sharkey’s verse so much depends on who we are. Here is the opening stanza from “Insomnia,” the second poem in the volume:

in the house of the past
which room can we sleep in
whose breast mindlessly bury our face in

It may be a mistake to assume—or to imagine without question—that we as readers or that Sharkey as author are necessarily included in these lines. While I can read the poetry as if the poet were speaking to us, I can also imagine the verse as choral: an unidentified chorus, an anonymous “we” of many voices is looking for a “room” “in the house of the past” in which now

to sleep. If we are to be included—if Sharkey as poet is to be among them—it will only be after joining this chorus and recognizing ourselves among the many who are searching “in the house of the past” for a room to “sleep in” and for a “breast mindlessly [to] bury our face in.” To read Sharkey’s poetry can be to join in this anonymity or, as Mandelshtam once wrote, “to join the roll-call with the living / to whom rising from the dead is due.” Then “the centuries / surround me with fire,” Mandelshtam wrote (these lines are from Mandelshtam’s last known poem).

“Soon enough the dead return and cross the threshold,” the anonymous chorus in *A Dark, Sweeter String* chants:

this is the house where no one owns her body
not a ligament but comes undone

the girls eat fate like candy
the ghost who’s hungry takes advantage

leans in touches
sips from their lips

(“Obviously dead”)

The poetics of *A Darker, Sweeter String* might be characterized by anonymous phrases it has brought to the page where they come to life and demand a response from which they remain irreconcilable, where we are left circling their incommensurate claim to existence.

we’re circling the hole where the ones
who abandoned us lie absent electric
(“The suicides”)

The chorus plays more than role. If at times it bears witness for the dead—

we’re pacing a ring in the ground
to contain what they spilled
(“The suicides”)

—at times challenges evasions:

who who who woke up to say I didn’t
who who who woke up to say I did . . .

who who turned away who turned away
(“Agents”)

if you had known would you have done things differently
you turning and turning in your oblivion
(“Forgotten”)

Sometimes the choral voice becomes singular, speaks in the first person singular for the author-poet who mourns for her child:

I grew a child
And in that sack a cavity

a dark accord. . . .

When pain racked him
when his whole body spasmed
when the kneading of these hands that knew him
for their own no longer gave him respite
when night lengthened
when he could not sleep and thrashed exhausted

he said *Stay with me*

(“Unscripted”)

The needing “that knew him” leads the “me” to lie “pressed . . . against his back”

so he could sleep

once again

by my heartbeat

If this grief were isolated among the poems in *A Darker, Sweeter String*, or if grief were only in the first person, the choral might give way to the private and personal. In “Unscripted,” however, the mother’s voice is always attuned to the communal. It is always more than one. In later poems, the “consciousness traveling the spine” becomes plural again, the “unscripted” dance of phrases across the page a stark prose poetry:

There came the time we were moved to move into the rubble

For myself, it was the only anodyne for madness. But we all had our reasons—worms in the fruit, a fine-grained poison that sifted from the ceiling, a child’s accusation, snakes in the walls that hissed, Your nest is next

(“World without end”)

The verse is addressed to whoever will listen:

Still it whispers to you, breaks you out in sweat when you attempt to sleep. It whispers loud as gold your incoherence

(“The burden of homelands”)

Spaces shift. Palestine, Bosnia, Somalia, L'vov. "Fuck, says the wall, awaiting its mural. . . . The farmer, the wall, the olives. The oil is bursting their skins" ("Separation wall"). And a few pages further, with terrible precision: "Left hand wets a cloth and runs it over the rip in the stitched vagina" ("We both drink the water; neither can describe its taste"). And a few pages further: "Take off your clothes. Or, not a word spoken. Contempt so intense it delivers the burn on the inside" ("My clothes have caught fire at both ends").

If I have been constructing an extended montage of passages from *A Darker, Sweeter String*, that is because this arrangement reflects my sense of Sharkey's writing as documentary montage, as a kind of cinematic work. On the other hand, to the extent that documentary can be expected to contextualize, Sharkey's writing does not document in any normative sense. Nor does it offer the reassurance of narrative continuities. The montage is without establishing shots. Where normative documentary stages against a background, Sharkey's poetry only foregrounds. What happened happens again, a kind of past-present but in fragments and independent of interpretation, without regard for what we understand. Perhaps it is less a question of understanding than of listening—of listening and later joining, perhaps, voicing the choral alchemies of recurrence. Perhaps what is most remarkable in this altogether remarkable writing is that it not only brings back to life but that in doing so ethically, it does so without reassurance. My reading is incommensurate with the demands of the choral address, of a poetry beyond commentary.

It is thought with the sight of the pain bird alighting
and preening each of its feathers gold and particular
that silence will hang like a peach
until one of us reaches to pluck it
and keening begins that will last through exhaustion,
that does not punish or lie
("Post-war deployment")

What happened happens, as Jean Amery wrote, but that it happened is not so easily reconciled. Or, as Wittgenstein said at the beginning of the Second World War: "How hard I find it is to see what lies in front of my eyes."