BOOK REVIEW

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In Favor of Lightning by Barbara Molloy-Olund. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. 52 pp.

THE POEMS IN Barbara Molloy-Olund's first collection inhabit an immense perspective where the poetic eye, in confronting beginnings and endings, earth and sky, the familiar and the mysterious, attempts to reconcile those oppositions and is both places at once. The philosophical intentions in these poems have a deep attachment to the familiar object, the clarified moment in real time and space where words begin to mirror each other, the accord between world and poet sometimes exact, at other times cautious. The poems move from a consciousness of gravity ("In Favor of Lightning") to the possibilities of a release from its powers ("Passenger"). In the movement between them, there is a calm energy, a striking intimacy with the land.

In asking questions about these poems, the one I keep returning to is, what does it mean for the poet to be in favor of lightning? I notice how often the speaker describes the world as seen through a window—car windows, apartment windows, even the window of a marine tank:

> I remembered one zoo's famous walrus
> in his marine tank, who would nose up
> to the green glass and knock gently
>
> as if to be let in on
> the secret that stared back at him.
>
> For years I thought the eyes in museum paintings
> could sense my meditation.
> So it was always difficult to stare
>
> for any length of time at a reclining nude
> without feeling an embarrassing kinship.
> I felt to view that ancient moment
> was to fall inside it. History

is not unlike this:

a window, a bird. Eventually
I'm looking in on
my own primitive likeness.
("The Proximity of Sparrows")

This poem begins by listening to and seeing sparrows from a window, "their wings in a panic. . . ." The poet slowly reverses the fact of looking out, to the revelation that she is looking in on the world and on the sparrows; the distance between poet and subject is at once centered and extended. Here, oppositions are transcended and the window becomes both mirror and passage-way, conspirator and mediator: "Eventually/I'm looking in on/my own primitive likeness." The meditation is luminous, almost dangerous, a flash of insight that heals as slowly, and as suddenly, as it strikes. Compressing history to two images—"a window, a bird"— paradoxically enlarges our view of it as the poet links the immediate to the timeless.

In "Knot," the tie to the past enlarges the present when objects lost from the self are collected and handed back as a gift to the subject whose acceptance releases the visionary powers of the poet. The speaker who gathers strands of hair while walking through the house is "like someone who tries to piece/odd dreams together":

In my palm
still soft as though alive, it is a rust-colored clump.
I could almost hand it back to my grandmother
for its texture, the way it still attempts to curl:
dark cobweb, braid, strand, feather.

In seeing the special connection between speaker and subject, the whole world opens:

At night she puts her hand inside
its warmth. When she loosens the braid
I see the tree. When she combs through it
I expect she'll pick up stars, leaves, cinders,
a knot more dense than words.

The tangle of earth and sky ("star, leaves, cinders") is tighter and more powerful than language—here it becomes the heart of the vision. Yet I am struck by how quickly we are brought back to the ground, to the winter which exposes the dreams the speaker has momentarily knit together before the decisive closure of the final lines:

She said, *I'll die when I'm ready.*
And then it was over.
And then it was winter.

The brief instant of illumination, the gift given and received, the world opened and swiftly closed, embodies the primary gesture in these poems. Because the language is contained within a steadiness of

tone and structure, moments of verbal intensity break through the dialectics of objects and ideas, "the difficult border/of starlight and slaughter" ("Beginnings"). In the title poem, "In Favor of Lightning," the speaker moves from silent observation:

> Nothing I've seen is like this
> lightning as it drops to its hands
> over a quiet barn
> releasing its brief self in spasms.

to an active participation with the subject:

> I would rather watch these trees
> flash and spring forward
> with the kind of fleeting, impetuous nerve
> we manage only once or twice
> our whole lives.

Solitude deepens in this poem as the speaker, who is motionless, sees how from a moving car land and sky meet:

> There is no one for miles.
> There never was, and north and south
> are interrupted by that long strand of light
> overtaking the sky by shivering
> through itself.

Finally, the tension between motion and stillness, light and dark, fear and nerve, dissolves under the illuminative force:

> How transparent lightning makes everything!
> The rigid fence, the blind moths
> that crash like seconds
> against the windshield.
> I can see myself

> there, where lightning
> dies of brilliance
> over a sudden pond.

The crescendo of "I can see myself" is the aerial and grounded viewpoints meeting, the conjunction of self and lightning flash, the very eye of the poet. The distance from natural, cosmic forces and from the self ("In Retrospect, the Sky") is collapsed here and the pond both reflects and contains the poetic "I" open to all experience, all consequence—the "nerve/we manage only once or twice/our whole lives."

The epigraph to "Blockstarken" tells us that "on a visit to Germany, a woman read the word 'Blockstarken' in the print of an old poster. She later learned there is no such word in the German language." A meditation on language and speech, self and universe, this is one of the best poems in the collection. Here, the way the speaker is inhabited by words, music, and memory takes language far beyond its linguistic formulas. The dynamism of the ritual process is reinforced

by the incantatory quality of the speaker's voice responding to the fact of "these words, now no more than the substance of feathers,/husks of decrepit objects,/dust you find in the crack of a leaf." The ritual is never completed in the poem for the speaker knows how precariously we exist between speech and song, language and silence, since words have their own destiny within the imaginative order. In meditating on this the poet asks if the lost word is really absent and forms a new kind of window through which she imagines the word recovered:

> I'm washing glasses and I get this word stuck inside my head
> that was buried in Germany like the jaw of the last man
> to say it, and now he could very well be singing
> through the hollow wine glass as I let my finger slide
> cryptically around the rim. Blocks darken. Blocks darken
> but only in my own language. The single word for snow
> collects in the black notch of the single word for tree

The wine glasses become the "window," the means to a vision of the live word. More than a resurrection of words, it is a recognition of the natural order of things whose perspective overwhelms the unnatural order. The spiritual progression in these poems seems to triumph over the confinement of the poet's childhood God, for as she asserts, "such order cannot love us" ("Sister David Will Not Ride in an Automobile").

The kind of order the speaker affirms is one that knows us intimately since it is, above all, the imagination which creates it:

> but I find myself singing this word
> immersed in its delicate nonsense. I find myself
> lining the glasses up while singing
> as if to keep my place in the universe in place.

These final lines of "Blockstarken" are, for me, the poetic center of the collection. The "primitive likeness" ("The Proximity of Sparrows") is confronted here by immersion in a word, by understanding that words themselves and their antecedent, music, communicate with us—"Maybe we are surrounded by a music that remembers us" ("Blockstarken"). The repetition of "I find myself" echoes the revelatory "I can see myself" ("In Favor of Lightning"). To be in favor of lightning then, to occupy "the inside of a word" ("Knot") is to actively encounter imagination and the universe as one. It also seems to me an appreciation of the fragility with which we hold on to our place in the universe. By singing, the poet motions back to an original place, to a world which may be ultimately indifferent to us. By an act of courage, the speaker locates herself in her own hesitations: uncertainty is itself the vital space inhabited.

The deep concern with origins, the attentiveness to life beyond the distractions of the trivial, charge the poems in Barbara Molloy-

Olund's first collection with a visionary power. The life of the mind is never lost to the merely ingenious, or to the image that dazzles but fails to empower. Rooted in the land, the texture of the language fascinates like a landscaped river woven into a fabric— somehow it's moving in all that stillness, and somehow we are a part of it:

> The street flashes
>
> and the sound in the leaves stretches
> like that superstition: lightning
> will not strike the side of a barn
> where swallows are nesting, where it is night
> slowly and with a smell, a deep smell
> of the living.
> ("Rainfall in the Midwest")