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Review · *Carolyn Wright*

The Dead and the Living. Sharon Olds.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1984. 80
Pages. \$13.95 Cloth. \$6.95 Paper.

This second book by Sharon Olds, the 1983 winner of the Lamont Award, is a powerful follow-up to *Satan Says*, fulfilling all the expectations that first book raised. Grace Paley has said in an interview that “the act of illumination is political . . . the act of bringing justice into the world a little bit”: by bringing into the light lives that have been (to use Paley’s words) “unseen, unknown, in darkness,” Olds has both revealed and redeemed the most painful portions of her private and public lives, and celebrated that which has brought her a palpable, full-bodied joy. By confronting her own “darkness” fairly, Olds has affirmed the humanity of those who engendered that darkness, and shown herself, in these days of sensationalized telling-all for lucrative book contracts, to be a poet of affirmation. To draw a parallel with non-fiction, we could say that Olds’ poetry about family is more in the spirit of Geoffrey Wolff’s *The Duke of Deception* than of Christine Crawford’s *Mommie Dearest*.

As is already apparent, Olds’ focus in these new poems is on themes which continue to preoccupy her—familial relationships, both those in which the speaker is daughter or granddaughter, and those in which she is wife and mother. In spite of many celebratory and humorous poems (especially in the sections of the book devoted to her chosen family—her husband and children), the dominant impression of the collection’s first half is somber-hued, like that of a gallery of Old Master family portraits darkening with age. In what must have been poems difficult to write, Olds gives us, in passages seasoned with anger and leavened with compassion, the cruel, hard-drinking grandfather; the submissive grandmother; the elder sister who shockingly tormented her when they were children, knowing their mother “would never believe [the] story”; the brother who as an adult is still “sending his body to hell,” in a protracted attempt at suicide; the mother who “took it and / took it in silence, all those years, and then / kicked [her husband] out, suddenly, and her / kids loved it”; and the father himself, especially the father, with his double bourbons and

child abuse—tying his daughters to chairs, denying his son dinner, slapping the glasses off their faces. In the magnitude of what she has to forgive, and the courage, honesty, and gentleness with which she treats the details of the familial nexus, Olds brings a little more justice into the world, and also provides us with a sympathetic view of human love persisting in spite of cruelty and emotional trauma. There is much in the complexity of nuance and interrelation of characters, moreover, in these poems, that reminds us of a good collection of short fiction; as such, these poems are accessible and believable in the same way that fiction is. Olds does not stand outside or above the people in her poems; she speaks out but does not condemn; she is part of the same emotive fabric as they are, and this identification lends the work much compassion:

Finally I just gave up and became my father,
his greased, defeated face shining toward
anyone I looked at, his mud-brown eyes
in my face, glistening like wet ground that
things you love have fallen onto
and been lost for good. I stopped trying
not to have his bad breath,
his slumped posture of failure, his sad
sex dangling on his thigh, his stomach
swollen and empty. I gave in
to my true self . . .

(“Fate”)

The preoccupation with the father figure points to the truth of the love-hate relationship, in the nearly equal degree of energy the speaker devotes to those two emotions; and we see the peculiar way in which one transforms to the other, as the speaker gives up the attempt to be *other* than the object of fascination, and “becomes her father”—as we all are mysteriously inseparable from our earliest origins, and are most truly ourselves when we recognize and accept this truth. There are undertones of the Oedipal complex here—in the bowing to whatever is inevitable about the identity of parents and children, the nature we are perhaps fated to possess—but here the realization of such is less immediately terrifying, more immediately a source of redemption and psychic peace.

What makes these poems gripping (I read the galley proof straight through in one sitting) is not only their humanity, the recognizable and plausibly complex rendering of character and representative episode, but their language—direct, down to earth, immersed in the essential implements and processes of daily living:

My daughter has turned against eggs. Age six
to nine, she cooked them herself, getting up
at six to crack the shells, slide the
three yolks into the bowl,
slit them with the whisk, beat them until they hissed
and watch the pan like an incubator as they
firmed, gold. Lately she's gone from
three to two to one and now she
cries she wants to quit eggs.

(“Eggs”)

No inflated diction or mannerisms here, no italicized Latin or French, no learned footnotes full of elaborate historical explanations or taxonomical nomenclature, but the basics: bread, milk, blood, water, hands, hair, eyes, birth, death, love. Of sixty-two poems in the book, nine of them end with the word *life*; could it be merely accidental that six of these endings occur in the final section, the poems about Olds' two children?

Concern for the fundamentals, however, does not mean that the poems are devoid of wit, intellect, or extended figurative play:

When I take my girl to the swimming party
I set her down among the boys. They tower and
bristle, she stands there smooth and sleek,
her math scores unfolding in the air around her.
They will strip to their suits, her body hard and
indivisible as a prime number,
they'll plunge in the deep end, she'll subtract
her height from ten feet, divide it into
hundreds of gallons of water, the numbers
bouncing in her mind like molecules of chlorine
in the bright blue pool.

(“The One Girl At the Boys' Party”)

The controlling algebraic metaphor is appropriate to the daughter's age and primary concerns—early adolescence and its sharpened awareness of sexuality, “to the power of a thousand from her body.” The writer of these poems emerges as someone who knows, from living an “ordinary” or “typical” woman's life—marriage, child-rearing, and reflection upon her own childhood family—what is really important between people. Granted, most poets write their “family” poems, but few of these relate their private mythologies in terms of national or global events, few simultaneously keep their personal lives and the larger life of human community in mind, as Olds does here in a poem to her father:

Did you weep like the Shah when you left? Did you forget
the way you had had me tied to a chair, as
he forgot the ones strapped to the grille
in his name? . . . Did you forget
the blood, blinding lights, pounding on the door, as
he forgot the wire, the goad,
the stone table? Did you weep as you left
as Reza Pahlevi wept when he rose
over the gold plain of Iran, did you
suddenly want to hear our voices, did you
start to rethink the darkness of our hair,
did you wonder if perhaps we had deserved to live,
did you love us, then?

(“The Departure”)

The urgent interrogative tone here echoes the mental agony embodied in the extended figure of physical torture; the daughter, distraught and still angered by her father's cruelty, presses him, even in death, to respond. We sense that an affirmative would redeem childhood's horrors, because the father's love still matters: even in her anger, the speaker has not entirely cut him off, entirely refused to forgive.

Olds is not hesitant about dealing with violence or sexuality; she neither aggrandizes these concerns nor self-consciously flaunts them. Her treatment of physical love is direct, unembarrassed, and affectionate, as in this poem to her husband:

A week after our child was born,
you cornered me in the spare room
and we sank down on the bed.
You kissed me and kissed me, my milk undid its
burning slip-knot through my nipples,
soaking my shirt . . . I began to throb:
my sex had been torn easily as cloth by the
crown of her head, I'd been cut with a knife and
sewn, the stitches pulling at my skin . . .
I lay in fear and blood and milk
while you kissed and kissed me, your lips hot and swollen
as a teen-age boy's, your sex dry and big,
all of you so tender, you hung over me . . .
("New Mother")

Sensuality is heightened here by the impossibility of consummation, the tension between the couple's passion and present constraints; but it is the sensuality Olds affirms of happily married love. She can also be gently humorous, especially with that most evident of male totems, treating it neither with pre-Freudian awe nor post-Freudian resentment. Her humor, rather, bespeaks familiarity that breeds appreciation:

When I was a connoisseuse of slugs
I would part the ivy leaves, and look for the
naked jelly of those gold bodies,
translucent strangers glistening along the
stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies
at my mercy . . . the glimmering umber horns
rising like telescopes, until finally the
sensitive knobs would pop out the ends,
delicate and intimate. Years later,
when I first saw a naked man,
I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
mystery reenacted, the slow
elegant being coming out of hiding and
gleaming in the dark air, eager and so
trusting you could weep.
("The Connoisseuse of Slugs")

The pleasure and indeed, the respect accorded here by this lengthy retroactive comparison is reminiscent of another treatment of a delicate and often-euphemized subject, Maxine Kumin's famous "Excrement Poem."

If I were to fault this book in any way, it would be for one aspect of the same urge toward clarity that makes Olds' work accessible: a tendency in places to overwrite, to overdescribe or explain beyond what would suffice. The language here is generally looser, more narrative than that of *Satan Says*, and several poems could benefit from cutting of excess adjectives and explanatory phrases:

She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it
until we pricked with her for your
annihilation, Father. Now I
pass the bums in doorways, the white
slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their
suits of compressed silt, the stained
flippers of their hands, the underwater
fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the
lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and
took it from them in silence until they had
given it all away and had nothing
left but this.

("The Victims")

The awkwardness of "pricked with her for your / annihilation," the implied mixed metaphor of slugs with flippers, the belabored parallel of the ending weaken the poem's impact, so that it does not do justice to the intensity and importance of the subject; but with some careful cutting, such difficulties could be eliminated.

There are many poems, nonetheless, with the same ironic tautness, the same perceptive rigor, as those in *Satan Says*. One of my favorites is "Rite of Passage," an observation of small boys at a party already practicing their adult masculine roles as aggressors:

As the guests arrive at my son's party
they gather in the living room—

short men, men in first grade
 with smooth jaws and chins.
 Hands in pockets, they stand around
 jostling, jockeying for place, small fights
 breaking out and calming. One says to another
How old are you? Six. I'm seven. So?
 They eye each other, seeing themselves
 tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their
 throats a lot, a room of small bankers,
 they fold their arms and frown. *I could beat you*
up, a seven says to a six,
 the dark cake, round and heavy as a
 turret, behind them on the table. My son . . .
 . . . speaks up as a host
 for the sake of the group.
We could easily kill a two-year-old,
 he says in his clear voice. The other
 men agree, they clear their throats
 like Generals, they relax and get down to
 playing war, celebrating my son's life.

The grimmer undertones of violence and the irony of the son's diplomatic statement are tempered here by loving humor, and we are able to laugh with recognition of these "men in first grade" even as we shudder at the socialization processes that demand competitiveness and bullying, and make their relaxation contingent upon "playing war."

I have been focussing so far principally upon "Poems for the Living," the second half of the collection, in which Olds recollects her difficult past with relative tranquility and generosity, and celebrates her own married life and the lives of her two children. But it is the opening, "Public" section of the book's first half, "Poems for the Dead," which is likely to capture critical attention above all. These are poems, based on news photographs, visual documentations of the grisly effects of civil and international conflict, and the hapless victims thereof—starving Russian and Armenian children, dead civil rights protestors, Chinese and Iranian revolutionaries, and an address, in the manner of Carolyn Forché's poems to those struggling in El Salvador, to activist poet Margaret Randall:

You are speaking of Chile,
of the woman who was arrested
with her husband and their five-year-old son.
You tell how the guards tortured the woman, the man, the child,
in front of each other,
“as they like to do.”
Things that are worse than death.
I can see myself taking my son’s ash-blond hair in my fingers,
tilting back his head before he knows what is happening,
slitting his throat, slitting my own throat
to save us that.

(“Things That Are Worse Than Death”)

Although Olds has not gone abroad to witness or participate personally in the resistance in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, or elsewhere, the reality of that which is worse than death has entered her life as fully as it has the lives of those who have been present. She is just as engaged, her poetic reportage is every bit as impassioned—every line says, “I have been there, in mind and heart.” She has not merely looked at, but truly *seen* the victims in the photographs—photos in the magazines we all flip through, photos in the archives we all have access to—and has responded in a way that many of us have not, although in theory we are all capable of doing so, if Kierkegaard’s notion of actualizing potential is to be believed. Olds knows that we do not need to join the Peace Corps, work as overseas correspondents, or volunteer for partisan armies abroad in order to respond as human beings to man’s own inhumanity, and to speak out and act upon what we have seen and heard. Here is what she saw of Rhodesia in 1978:

Just don’t tell me about the issues.
I can see the pale spider-belly head of the
newborn who lies on the lawn, the web of
veins at the surface of her scalp, her skin
grey and gleaming, the clean line of the
bayonet down the center of her chest.
I see her mother’s face, beaten and
beaten into the shape of a plant,

a cactus with grey spines and broad
dark maroon blooms.
I see her arm stretched out across her baby,
wrist resting, heavily, across the
tiny ribs.

Don't speak to me about
politics. I've got eyes, man.

(“The Issues”)

Unlike those who were there and who might have been swept up by the fever of their side of the cause, their immediate personal stake in the struggle; or who might have become inured to sights as horrible and as common in the war zone as these—if only for the sake of their own survival and sanity—as Philip Caputo has reported of Vietnam combatants in *A Rumor of War*; Olds' perceptions have not been blunted. She has not developed a perceptual defense mechanism against the sight of death; this vulnerability is one advantage, as it were, of not being physically present, of having an aesthetic, but not an emotional distance. Therefore, she is not fooled by political bafflegab or strategic rationales—of either the Right or the Left: her own eyes tell her all there is to know about “the issues,” if the inevitable outcome of ideological differences is the pair of mutilated bodies on the lawn in Rhodesia. This poet is not one of those caught up in the glamour of revolution or revolutionary causes; her compassion for victimized humanity is pure common sense, a mother's feeling for the deprived, the helpless, the trapped, the children—especially the children:

The girl sits on the hard ground,
the dry pan of Russia, in the drought
of 1911, stunned,
eyes closed, mouth open,
raw hot wind blowing
sand in her face. Hunger and puberty are
taking her together. She leans on a sack,
layers of clothes fluttering in the heat,
the new radius of her arm curved.
She cannot be not beautiful, but she is

starving . . . The caption says
she is going to starve to death that winter
with millions of others. Deep in her body
the ovaries let out her first eggs,
golden as drops of grain.

(“Photograph of the Girl”)

What is signal about Olds’ approach is a fidelity to detail that amounts to a modified naturalism: if she tells accurately what she sees (after selecting the most affectively pertinent details, just as the photographer has originally singled out *that* image, *that* angle and shutter speed and focal length, out of all possible subjects and treatments), the “message” implicit in the composition will stand forth on its own, as much as is possible in the inescapable contrivances of art. The speaker’s stance toward her material is evident in the tone—“Just don’t tell me about the issues”; “Things that are worse than death”; “I’ve got eyes, man”;—but her attitude emerges from and is justified by the patent horror or pathos of what she shows us. Attention to detail has its ironic function as well, to point out the beauty or economy of the implements of oppression, the skill of those who devised them, as in this photo of dissidents awaiting execution in Iran:

The first thing you notice
is the skill
used on the ropes, the narrow close-grained
hemp against that black cloth
the bodies are wrapped in. You can see the fine
twist-lines of the twine, dark and
elegant, the intervals exact,
and the delicate loops securing the bagged
bodies to the planks like cradle boards.
The heads are uncovered, just the eyes
bound with rag.

(“Aesthetics of the Shah”)

The loveliness of the composition only underscores the terror of what is soon to befall those bound in such “delicate loops.”

Olds' confidence in the power of detail, and her concomitant refusal to show off verbally, to interpose a display of verbal or prosodic pyrotechnics between subject and reader, make for clarity, a style very much at the service of the subject. In her own way, Olds has heeded Stevens' aphorism in *The Necessary Angel*—poetry as an act of the mind engaged in finding “what will suffice,” to do justice to what she shows us. In a sense, then, her style at its best becomes “invisible,” unobtrusive except for those moments in which the desire for clarity works against itself in an excess of adjectives or descriptive phrases. But these less effective passages do not unduly distract from the power of the poems.

I am stimulated by this book—by its fulfillment of earlier promise, and by the potential it suggests both for Olds' own future work and for American poetry in general. Once again we have an example of our common ability to embrace the world “out there”—we need not remain, mentally or aesthetically, in our suburbs and literary ghettos, writing only about ourselves. What we turn our attention to in our respective “private sectors” can and does have relation to the public realm, and to the lives of others. Truly “political” poetry—that which has to do with the *polis*, the community—can function as an aesthetic semi-permeable membrane, where the personal and the public inform and interfuse each other, where we private citizens can respond as individual human beings to the fate of others across socio-economic and national boundaries. Whatever the controversies raging in the journals about the possibility for and validity of political poetry, Sharon Olds has shown us that she, at least, is able both to focus on her own family and to avail herself of information accessible to all of us to enact in literature a concern for the larger family of humanity.