



Living with Creative Fire

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THE VOLCANO SEQUENCE

Alicia Suskin Ostriker

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I'm reading Alicia Ostriker's *the volcano sequence* during take-off, 10,000 feet over Denver. It's June 20th, and 30 miles from the airport the ground itself is on fire; on either side of the plane, all we can see is smoke. The rivers of fire and ash on the cover of Ostriker's book recall photographs in yesterday's *Rocky Mountain News*. The Hayward fire was allegedly started by Terry Barton, a Forest Service technician, who claimed to have been burning a letter from her ex-husband.

The difference between creative fire and the "acting out" of rage has never been more striking: unlike the fire-starter, the poet shapes her turmoil, creating the verbal music of solace and providing an opening for god-speech and redemption. Ostriker's poetry conveys grief, anger, and love in spare stanzas, transforming personal moods into cosmic music. No one gets hurt in the struggle. The fuel is a life bathed in imagination and song, scholarship, and feminist theory. Elevated by readings of the Old Testament, Yiddish texts, and the Kabbalah, contemporary poetry has never drawn closer to prayer.

God may have been pulverized by the

Industrial Revolution and then again by world wars, but, over the centuries, poets, alchemists, and dreamers have continued to embody "god hunger" in their images. Like the carpenter-mystic Jakob Boehme and the visionary engineer Emmanuel Swedenborg, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers who experienced visions of the spiritual "signatures" of all things, Alicia Ostriker has rediscovered our fragmented urban world as a sacred text. Like other visionary poets, Ostriker endures a voyage through personal hell and survives this spiritual trial to find illumination. The narrator alludes to early years of neediness and fear that "all turned/ to anger and for years/ the lava poured and poured." Examining this "magnificent rage" in retrospect, the poet admires its "hot beauty": "so what if afterward// everything is dead." At first our poet's voice is laden with bitterness. She rails against the creator—in this case an awful mother: "unasked for disappointing hateful life/ it is the mother's fault."

It doesn't look to the reader as if anything is "dead" in this volume—strong feeling has burned away decorative language. What's left in Ostriker's mature poetry comes close to "pure poetry." This does not mean that Ostriker's poetry is apolitical—on the contrary, the older poet seems free to be more political than ever, particularly in her concern for the environment.

For the alchemist, even the ash is pre-

cious. For the poet, the early “deaths” make the ground more fertile. The poem “earth: the shekhinah as amnesiac,” positioned in the center of the volume, leads into a birthing sequence. The “unborn” are depicted with humor as being selfish, like nations vying for the world:

crown

they are only after power
the unborn heads they are like
battering rams inside it is
global war the unborn
pitted against everyone
until they crown

themselves
their holy
little faces.

Fragments of Blake-like song are sown throughout the book. In poetry, the alchemist’s “gold” is found in what the poet makes of suffering.

For whatever comes, Ostriker depicts herself as a medium: “I see myself// as an aperture, words pass through....” The extra space between lines is purposeful. The quest for openness and fidelity to whatever is “given” creates authenticity. Ostriker may not be unique among modern poets in her spiritual hunger. What’s unique here is that these poems seem to receive an answer from outside the poet. The poet’s invocation is not merely a duet for one voice. Sometimes we can’t tell who might be speaking, whether the persona is that of the human narrator or of the godly one. Italics tend to indicate “received” lines:

*I liked your performance at Ninevah
just as I liked your song by the
waters of
Babylon*

*your legal brief at Uz
I want you to praise me hotly but more
than that
I want you to save the world
by any means necessary
your word against
mine.*

In her dialogue with the divine, Ostriker addresses herself to different aspects of its Being: “you exquisite/ joke you paradigm paradox/ you absent presence you good evil shredding the eye.” This intimate spiritual portrait may remind the reader of Louise Glück’s *Wild Iris* (1992). Yet Ostriker’s work exudes more personal warmth than Glück’s. Ostriker quotes Yehuda Amichai and Jorie Graham, among other contemporary poets. The poet’s affinity with Amichai is clear—his *Open Closed Open* (1990) love poems are also steeped in the Old Testament, in Jewish tradition, and in contradictions. Happily, Ostriker’s work is more accessible and less self-conscious than Jorie Graham’s.

Here “open secrets” abound. One key is the poet’s invocation of the Shekhinah, the Hebrew Bride of God. Our poet yearns for and summons the exiled goddess. Another key to the text is the poet’s problematic relationship to her mother, whose aging and dying she records. Working through the relationship with her mother, the poet crafts grief-songs that also cradle images of birth. Though the narrator seems repulsed by her mother’s “scum-coated blessings,” she approaches and insists that it is not too late for the two to make peace. She does not flinch at the nitty-gritty of caring for her aged parent. Her declaration of love for her mother and an inner reconciliation with her helps the poet to recover joy, even to find grace. In the last section of the book, “the space of this dialogue,” the poet enters a clearing, a state of being where she draws close to the divine: “nothing between us/ only breath.”

Creating a sense of spiritual flight, space abounds on the page. The poet is delighted that

revelations enter the field via modern technology: “now I perceive you approach me from the future/ humming like a superjet at ease/ on the cyberskyway.” Poems in this last section are seemingly effortless songs that praise the sensual world, accepting both its delights and indignities.

Though the narrator tells us in “psalm” that “I am not lyric any more,” the pervasive music of the book sings otherwise. Some of these lines are Whitmanesque incantations; some have been composed into short-lined lyrics without punctuation to make them quick and vertical; some are built in couplets. Many are cantos, with the exception of a few prose-poem passages. Where there is fragmentation, meanings have not been shattered.

There are some bald patches, lines that lack texture. At the end of the birth sequence in “time,” the language devolves: “I blow in the baby’s face// ...she laughs blows back/ in my eyes.” More often, daring images surprise and delight us: “how strange we are coiled here in utero/ like pears in syrup...” By melding domestic and archetypal images, Ostriker wed intimate feeling with universal themes. Embodying visionary and prophetic images in idiomatic language, the poet gives her book both breadth and humility.

Alicia Ostriker’s poetry re-members the goddess’s body in contemporary fragments. Got Milton? Less orthodox, less ponderous, more aerated, but no less serious in her subject matter, Ostriker’s *the volcano sequence* is a spiritual and aesthetic triumph. Closing the book as we cruise blue sky, I’m struck again by the explosive cover art that heralds “open secrets.” Darkness is the groundwork for threads of fire. Exodus, loss, then Genesis within.

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