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**STREET SMART, HEART WISE, WORD KEEN**

*Sister Betty Reads the Whole You,*  
Susan Holahan, Gibbs Smith, 1998.  
*In Every Seam,* Allison Joseph,  
University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.  
*Journey Cake,* Tam Lin Neville,  
BkMk Press, 1998.  
*Bite Every Sorrow,* Barbara Ras,  
Louisiana State University Press, 1998.  
*Eye of the Holocaust,* Susan Terris,  
Arctos Press, 1999.

One principle of metaphysics—unity in diversity, diversity in unity—has long been recognized as a principle of poetry. Except for their vocation, the diverse backgrounds of these five poets could keep them from ever meeting: urban-Canadian-African-American-Holocaust-Dutch-Jew-survivor-Chinese-Feminist-Activist-Lawyer-Divorcée-Marriedwithchildren-Buddhist-Polish-Catholic-Californian. But pressing concerns unite them: violence and its consequences, historic and current politics, the welfare of children, animals, the planet, and the value of poetry.

When I was mailed a stack of poetry books by women several months ago, I could not have anticipated reading five books of poetry that astonish me, in the original Vulgar Latin, “to strike with thunder.” This review cannot touch upon all the truly great poems by these five street smart, heart wise, and word keen poets, but I will start with a litany of strengths their poems have in common.

The poems are fully realized. None of the poems seems unnecessarily difficult or obscure; the level of accessibility corresponds to purpose. For example, the directness and clarity of Allison Joseph’s and Susan Terris’ work are commensurate with their endeavor to teach and to remember. Holahan’s quirky vocabulary may seem daunting at first, but her semantic erudition builds poems as astute and playful as James Joyce’s or Heather McHugh’s. The characteristic causal chains and parallel constructions in Ras’s poems reinforce her vision of galactic interdependence. Neville’s shifts from simply told narratives to meditative visions acknowledge her comprehension of Eastern and Western philosophies and poetics. The lives of women dominate the books; although each suffers her own fate, it cannot be isolated from the condition of all living beings. Racism, anti-Semitism, poverty, hunger, war, cor

porate exploitation, legislated cruelty to animals, all result in the same cellular-to-global consequences. In "Margin of Error" Barbara Ras's question, "Has anyone graphed what hunger can do to goodness" leads to a series of human mistakes rooted in "the gross margin/ of greed, desire" that propagates "hungrier thoughts" of killing insects so "there'll be more for us." The "good men" mistakenly think they are the measure of all things, and conclude that pesticides are

nothing that could hurt us  
safe in our largeness, our chemistry a kind of godliness.  
And the good men thought their hungry thoughts,  
and no one asked about the size of cells or the size  
of an embryo....

Created experiences, for example Susan Terris' grisly "Dreaming Theresienstadt," about a woman who severs her leg to feed her son in an ultimate mother-sacrifice, jar the psyche as much as experiences re-created with hair-raising details, a device important to all of their work. When Terris repeats the number of "Shoes of Majdanek" in the Holocaust Museum to be "a foothill of the 300,000 mounted in death camps," it is because "testaments of singularity still grip." When Ras refers to her poems as "Stories that are a little stopgap against the loss/ that leaves you speechless," she does so "Because stories don't blow it or eat the animals/ in the Kuwaiti zoo, because what's life without the details,/ even the saddest ones."

Susan Terris' *In The Eye of The Holocaust* is a "memorial to truth." Peopled with and dedicated to the children, "And for those yet unborn," the book's epigraph, "May you learn the lessons of history and be spared," reveals the impulse behind the work. Decades after the narrator's nightmare as a fully awake "hidden child" in Holland, she and her sister visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., partly because she feels "out of time" and hopes the trip will be healing, and partly to stop "the assassins of memory" through the poems that document that period of history. The implied relationship between historical fact of material objects such as those in the Holocaust Museum and of linguistic objects such as poetry is their common mnemonic quality. In "Incoherence of Time," the Survivor exists in a "continuum [that] makes no sense."

This morning, I was taut and lithe as the child.  
But tonight my torso and feet are misshapen,  
and I am too pain-throbbled to move at all.

The condensed images that toggle between child and adult, and the seven tercets with all but six lines period-stopped, strengthen the sense that "A bright necklace of hours beads into a year." In an attempt to resolve the paradox of self, the narrator accepts those of time and memory:

Everything here is true. Everything false.  
This is the lie of memory. Muscle of memory.  
Arrogance of memory. The echo of memory.

But this "lithe" child and "pain-throbbled" woman duality blinds the poet to the powerful self that transcends suffering through art. In "A Message For The Faith Healer," the supplicant first petitions for others, then for herself:



“Arts and Crafts,” a childhood memory of another rare excess  
in a world of deprivation, prepares the reader for the final vision:

Juicy Magic Markers leaking their ink,  
staining hands red, green, and blue  
for days, tempera paint poured thick

from jars for fingertips to play in,  
to make wet, sticky portraits of glowing trees  
and flying houses, gold and silver glitter

I would pour on anything, including  
my shirt, my shorts, my shoes.

The girl’s recognition that “This is what I want to remember” because “Our aim was to make something pretty/ from something useful,” may be the one that saves her life. These two poems are as close to an “art for art’s sake” poetics that we encounter in this volume, but they represent the ultimate victory over daily hardships. This hard-won pleasure follows dozens of accounts of personal humiliations, immediate and long-term effects of this country’s most insidious evil, racism. Joseph renders her experiences in lucid, everyday language to facilitate, I believe, two purposes: to offer aspiration to those who have suffered similar experiences, and to educate well-meaning white liberals. From the “lily white/ and out of style” dancer who comes to the “Good ghetto girls and boys” who “get art if they’re lucky”; to the Girl Scouts where division manifests between private and public school girls; to the “big cartoony mouths” in the antidrug films; to the cruel Spanish teacher who “wanted/ to break us,” Joseph records the disastrous conditions of education, where lying and violence are part of the core curriculum: “Oh what a vicious game/ they encouraged us to play” escalates to:

we loved to see each other  
suffer, unable to leave someone  
on the sidewalk to nurse  
sore arms, bruised thighs,  
unable to resist one last punch.

Metaphorically, the protagonist’s experiences may be summed up in a line from “It’s Tough To Be A Girl Scout In The City”: “As far as you can tell, this dancing serves no purpose/ other than humiliation.” The poems that deal with the violence the girl learns, uses on others, and turns on herself in despair and depression, are the most courageous and rigorously honest on the subject I have read. Joseph’s angry young protagonist nods her head in homage to Toni Cade Bambara’s similar character, Sylvia, in “The Lesson.”

In the ironic title, “Higher Education,” rather than the inquiring mind of the young narrator being allowed “to find out what I wanted to know”

I find myself teaching, educating  
explaining why my hair is different,  
why I feel no need to sunbathe,

why it’s possible for me to love  
both Aretha Franklin and Kate Bush,  
Janis Joplin and Billie Holiday.

By the time the protagonist receives instructions on what not to write about in “Academic Instructions”—“being black...and please/ no more poems on being a woman.... And don’t, for heaven’s sake/ say a word about being both...No one wants to hear// what you call your history,” it is too late. The Black Woman Poet who began her history “On Sidewalks, on Street Corners, as Girls,” has internalized and found strength in the street language of jump rope, “nonsense rhyme, neighborhood chant...riffing, scating, improvising.” The girls who were “unafraid” to tell each other “*shake it to the one/ that you love best*” gave her the courage to speak her truth.

Tam Lin Neville’s literary ancestors are more direct than Joseph’s, but her poems written about a trip to China serve a similar purpose: to chronicle the deplorable conditions for women and children. Her poetics and vision are deeply entrenched in the ancient Chinese classical tradition: her titles reflect subjects about seasons, nature, Chinese places and poets; her contemplative mind penetrates the mysteries of nature expressed in visionary lyrics such as “Man Standing By Flower,” “Flower At Night,” and “The Garden of Never Going.” Influences of Po Chu’i, an eighth-century lyricist also known for his political poetry, may be recognized in Neville’s ravishingly beautiful surfaces that belie agonizing human misery. Complex historic, geographic, and poetic allusions are tempered by terse calligraphic-stroked images: “a gold-flecked door left ajar/ a ring of flames” in a flower. Yet like the logic of the western sonnet, Neville turns nearly every poem upon a counter-weight.

Neville’s journey begins “In the middle of the night.” A woman lies in bed listening and longing for her lover. An image from a haiku by Buson (The piercing chill I feel/ My dead wife’s comb in our bedroom/ under my heel) echoes in “Necklace and belt lie cold by the bed.” Two lines from Sappho’s “Seizure,” a poem of envy and desire for the unattainable woman the poet watches from a distance closes the first of two strophes, “My tongue is broken and a thin flame/ runs like a thief through my body.” In these two allusions, East and West, “cold” and “flame,” unite and delineate the woman’s relationship with her absent beloved. For comfort, the woman slips into the bed of her sleeping daughter.

In the absence of the object of the woman’s longing, we are forced to turn our attention to the subject, longing itself. We are convinced it penetrates her entire body/ mind, just as in the Sappho poem, for the “thin flame” of her desire fills the landscape in the daughter’s “heat of sleep,” and the “smudge fires [that] flicker in the orchard.” The title, in contrast, is “Water,” a river that is the only thing moving. But the opposition is reconciled when the “thirst” of some deer who drink from the river is “the same as the water.” The longing keeps her from sleep, “though something like sleep/ builds a porch around my body.”

The woman observes that “nothing wakes” her daughter, but it is a figure of speech; other children in Neville’s poems are not so fortunate as she develops the fire/ water paradox through a series of poems about dead children. In “Flame,” a child drowns because of misperception; “she did not know a ripple from a radish./ What she waded into/ was one huge dazzle of garden, river, sun.” In “Leo” the poet is reading about a small girl’s death in China. The details are so vivid—“Her medicine spoon is wet by the bed”—that Leo, still-born more than twenty-five years earlier, is called into relief.

The China poems capture the wretched conditions of women and children just as Terris' poems about the Holocaust Museum and Joseph's poems about American racism do. They witness. "A Plain Story" is an indictment against the abuse of Chinese women by American Corporations. The narrator-poet watches a neighbor's house from her window. Mothers bring their babies at dawn and pick them up at night after working in a factory. Still, the women are so poor they put their babies in a bed "sprinkled with ducklings taking their first/ dazed steps" to keep them from freezing to death. In a series of multi-sensory images, the speaker, who "hovers over them" begins to isolate one five-month-old infant and her mother. She imagines the sleepy and exhausted mother unable to fit the doll's head into "its neck fast enough" creating an ironic comparison between the woman's work and home life. In a gesture of compassion, the poet offers her best gift: "During these hours of waiting/ I write for you this plain story/ that she will never tell you."

Recent statistics show that twenty-five percent of all women live in China, but Chinese women account for fifty percent of female suicides. In my city, New Orleans, one out of three babies goes to bed hungry every night. Keeping in mind the human suffering that these poets have written about, it is easier to understand why some people feel apathetic toward or even vote against laws to protect animals against domestic and legislated cruelty. But Barbara Ras's poems argue that we can gauge the level of violence to which children are subjected by how we treat the other small and innocent life forms on this planet.

*Bite Every Sorrow* is a guidebook for a non-hierarchical world. Catholic confession rites and her Polish Catholic ancestors are discussed in several poems. However, two lines from a Buddhist Pali text could well serve as an epigraph for the book: *Whoever destroys life, whether bird or animal, insect or fish, has no compassion for life.* Animals, most altered into products, populate all but two of the 46 poems. Yet with over twice that many references to animals in every conceivable danger, Ras takes the role of witness, not rhetorician. Early in the collection she says one should "never/ [use] truth as a weapon." The power of the message resides in sheer volume; animals are so entrenched in our language we no longer notice them. Do notice, however, their adjectival position in a list drawn from Ras's poems: mink traps, rabbit muff, buffalo wings, bull's eye, horse chestnuts, dog paddle. Compassion, however, tempers sorrow.

In the opening poem, "You Can't Have It All" because of conditions and limitations: "You can't bring back the dead...; often [love] will be mysterious...; You can have your grandfather sitting on the side of your bed/ at least for awhile.... You can speak a foreign language sometimes." Gratitude and right action will serve better than to "count on grace to pick you out of a crowd." Not if but "when adulthood fails you," there is "the voice you can still summon at will/ like your mother's/ it will always whisper, you can't have it all,/ but there is this." Animals as well suffer limitations, but their intentions are pure, as in "the soulful look/ of the black dog, the look that says, If I could I would bite/ every sorrow until it fled." Abundance, however, tempers limitation.

Ras uses a Spanish feminine form, *abundancia*, to express the profusion of divinity; Deities of abundance are female. Ras creates a word poem, a mantra that defines the nature of *abundancia*: the shadow in "God," the joy in Keats's melan-

choly, the dark notes of Lorca's *duende* mixed with "the fruits of darkness." The speaker, travelling toward home on a train through the rhythmic "dark dark light" of the tunnels, experiences a Whitmanesque joy in the democracy of *abundancia*, beginning in ecstasy with its omnipresence: "*abundancia* underground/ *abundancia* above." Then the vision narrows to the specific details of a mother combing her son's hair, which obeys "the invisible line she makes on his head." In opposition to *abundancia*'s democracy, the male-created "democracy" fails so many, that children in less fortunate situations can neither recognize this principle within themselves nor experience it from others.

*Abundancia* inside children, though how so in the  
black kids  
in the aisle selling candy bars to commuters who  
ignore them?  
Has anyone asked if this is the way children  
are given to dreams?  
And then *abundancia* in the sudden accusation of light  
as we surface out of the tunnel.

Everyone is held accountable when the personified light makes its "accusation."

Like Whitman and Rich, Ras speaks for those who can't: "No one knows about the animals./ No one knows about the speechlessness they keep." Or as if distracted by some detail and then returning to the task, she opens "All This And Heaven" with "I was telling you about the unfortunates." She draws a correlation between writing and ethical behavior: "To Write better, Rilke said, you must be better."

It would be hard to find anyone writing a better occasion poem than "Taza Shambal," celebrating an anniversary with her husband; or a better allegory than "At Home In The Rain Forest"; or a better friendship poem than "Pregnant Poets Swim Lake Tarleton, New Hampshire"; or a better child perspective than "The Sadness of Kids"; or a better love poem than "The Sadness of Insects." In recognition of her talent, *Bite Every Sorrow* has won both the Walt Whitman and the Kate Tufts Award.

Susan Holahan's sixties sensibility flourishes in a post-modern intertextual poetics that absorbs, then transforms, everything. Of the poets considered here, Holahan is by far the most innovative with technique, syntax, and language. Her vocabulary is a bibliophile's bliss. Although the first read through several of these poems can be daunting, a contagious vitality runs through the long, loopy lines like adrenaline. Her talents range from the spatial and visual mind of the architect and mathematician, to the eye of a *pentimento* painter, to the ear of a fusion jazz trumpet player, to the wit of the metaphysical poets, and to the obsessions of the possessed. Holahan uses an impressive range of devices, genres, speech acts, and forms. The most prominent visual technique is the mathematically staggered left margin divided into evenly measured stanzas. The relationship between this structure and the subject matter varies: the indentations signify mirror tricks, stairs, indecisiveness, bi-polar disorder, and obsession; they provide symmetry and visual aesthetics; they create an illusion of breathing and birthing. But it's not safe to overdefine what she is doing. For example, the closing poem, "The Button Box...", honors the .

poet's grandmother who bought "Louis Sherry ice-cream sodas." The poet remembers the perfect image to recreate on the page, "the cellophane wrapped/ boxes in stepped piles by the register." They even "glowed," yet the left margin marches straight down the page as it does in only a handful of poems in this volume

Several poems in *Sister Betty Reads The Whole You*, I have never seen the likes of: "The Mind-Eat-Cake Commitment News," an elegy for the languages of extinct animals, and for ours; "The Picture Book of Behavior: (Chronic) (Endogenous) (Bipolar)," an elegy for poet Jane Kenyon. This poem's closing demonstrates Holahan's characteristic evolution of objects through adverb-adjective compounds. Although the example is a metaphor, the development of the vehicle (toy) to elucidate death, takes on, as in a Homeric simile, a life of its own:

Death is a laboriously antiqued hand-crafted toy of wooden tiles with rounded corners that are joined by canvas straps, where the tiles clack  
against each other smartly down the line when you hold up one end.

Because her ecofeminist heroine lives in a consistent, personal moment with consistently drawn mother and son, and in a historical moment of Viet Nam, Watergate, Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl, there is a tendency to equate her life with the poems; however, in "Maybe She Was Following," a feminist rendition of the Orpheus myth, we are warned that it is "Too easy to say it's the story/ of my life." The poems explore the complex refractions of self/ non-self ("What's not my story") as a figure who registers the personal through political lenses. "A History of Food" catalogues political events that correlate with the narrator's complex relationship with food. Born "before Pearl Harbor," she remembers her mother holding the spoon over her head like an "Airplane coming in over Guam: Open up all hangars!" The "Clean-Plate Club closed" when her "Mother needed her to wear skinny dresses...By college she knew: every meal isn't the war effort." This "knowing" strikes at the center of the book's movement and subject: the journey of consciousness from the unconscious fifties when she "failed to inspect the food chain" to recognition in a global consciousness, "clutching the food chain low," and realizing that "The planet shrank with her stomach." Food, served throughout as a political instrument in familial and world warfare, in a reward and punishment system, in a patriarchal system in which women and children stand in food lines. For the poet, it serves as an emblem for writing as well. "War was what persisted. Words were what she knew. She wrote a/ peanut-butter sandwich that glued mother and child together." In "They Pull Up All The Pavement," the poem can replace the nourishment of human relations:

If all the marriages should end, I want a poem  
more like a soup pot you just put on the stove and you  
don't know what's going into it yet than like the pillars  
of the Parthenon.

The first impulse behind Holahan's poems may be a soup pot poetics, but the ingredients are chosen by a mind that synthesizes disparate objects; the mathematician measures and divides; the lawyer finds the exact right word; the trickster transforms it; the aesthetic serves it with an eye for presentation. Poets are among

the invited guests.

For the most part, the ambitions of these poets correlate with Shelley's vision of the poet as legislator of the world. An awakened politics of responsibility requires each poet to actively participate in a world beyond their immediate experience. Without exception or apology, they make claims that poetry serves as a vehicle for teaching, remembering, playing, healing, speaking for the voiceless, and telling the truth. They all pitch their poetics without fear that the integrity or the mystery of poetry will be compromised.