ForeWord Reviews

POETRY

Conjuring My Leafy Muse
Mary Meriam
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Conjuring My Leafy Muse is an intensely moving collection of poetry by a writer whose voice is fresh.

Conjuring My Leafy Muse is, in numerous ways, a marvel of incantation and lyricism, a weaving of the supernatural, horrific, sensual, folkloric, and disarmingly frank. Mary Meriam's poetry has a haunting, genuine quality in which she combines the disturbing and profoundly disappointing aspects of life with a vivid, forthright nonchalance. She confesses her personal truths with unblinking sincerity. As we might infer from the title, she sometimes uses the rhythm of predetermined meter as if she were casting a spell, discovering for us and with us the exquisitely miraculous: a boiling pot of beans, a herd of deer, cottontail in clover.

In some ways, *Conjuring* is reminiscent of the verse of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath in their evocation of poet as pariah and fringe dweller. They reference the mythological, magical fairy tales, all in their frantic exploration of how women are perceived in a patriarchal culture, and these writers are just as likely to persecute as to revere. Meriam acquires a sardonic, rueful, subtly bellicose voice, using bitter irony to buffer the content. Consider these lines from "Wolf": "Mother a wolf is wolfing me / Down. Your baby one sweet pea / Bit by hot teeth. I want another / Mother. A wolf is wolfing me / Down. I thought I had a mother." The withering use of playful diction and the giddy inferences reveal the ambivalence of the narrator's feelings of abandonment and ecstasy.

Conjuring addresses painful issues with fearless authenticity and subdued anger. Anti-Semitism, homophobia, persecution, substance abuse, self-loathing, alienation—Meriam takes them all on with ferocity, longing, melancholy, and a pervasive sense of enchantment. Poems such as "The Prince of Glass," "Night of Snow," and "Crumb by Crumb" make use of Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel as Meriam finds the elements of each story that resonate with her own personal history.

Mary Meriam brings much sophistication and intuition to the use of repetition,

alliteration, rhyme, and predetermined verse forms such as sestinas, sonnets, and iambic pentameter. One of the hazards of rhyme, in particular, is the risk of settling for inaccurate or relatively nebulous description. In Meriam's hands, these instruments are enriching, pleasurable, and musical.

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Christopher Soden