ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Hangings: Three Novellas
Nina Shope
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Plumbing the depths of heartbreak and memory, the author explores the forbidden territories of obsession, death, destruction, and separation in this debut collection of three novellas. She dives into deep waters of myth and dream to populate stories filled with nameless characters (a girl and her mother in "Hangings"; a bird/woman in "In Urbem"; and, in "Hagiographies," a girl with black eyes, a girl with a pixie haircut, a boy from out of state, and a dead boy. Shope, who holds an MFA from Syracuse University, has won the Barbara Banks Brodsky Prize and published work in several literary journals.

The familiar scene of reading aloud to one's child grows to mythic proportions in "Hangings," in which breasts and cancer, spiders and hair become the obsessions of the unnamed adolescent girl. The story opens with the mother reading: "As she listens to Ovid's Metamorphoses, she imagines women plush red as the inside of the body with hair like veins and fingernails of bone … In her mind, the realm of myth is enacted within the inner realm of the body." This phrase may be the key that unlocks the worldview of this collection: the author explores the connections between myth and inner life.

While coping with her mother's cancer, the girl is also exploring her own sexuality. A Miro print comes alive later in the story, symbolizing the girl's fear of spiders, which isn't diminished by reading the mythical story of Arachne's transformation into a spider. "Hangings" and "Hagiographies," the first and last novellas, share a contemporary setting in a seemingly everyday world transformed by each narrator's obsessions. In "Hagiographies" (the novella is defined as an idolizing biography), the narrator traces the compulsion to communicate with a friend who has gone to Alaska for the summer. When the friend's promised return and their travels together don't materialize, the separation sends the narrator into a tailspin of compulsive letter writing, letters that are not sent.

The middle selection, "*In Urbem*," is located in a mythical re-visioning of Ancient Rome in all its self-destructing decadence. It might be read with a feminist spin, as the author plays with the image of the buildings literally built on the bones of women. The empire is finally

broken by an unnamed woman/bird, the omen that has been predicted.

This collection, though neither easy nor comfortable, offers poetic language and powerful images drawn from an inner world for a fine-art literary audience and readers willing to look decadence and despair in the eye. Iconographies and archetypes from myth (like Arachne and Roman history) combine with the author's repetitive and imagistic language, making these stories more like prose poems excavated from deep in the shadows of pain.

Bobbye Middendorf