ForeWord Reviews

Life Watch
Willis Barnstone
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Imagine that a human life might use as its sole metaphor a watch. Said watch becomes a symbol for the relationship of a boy with his fun, philandering father who sells watches and their parts to finance their bohemian life in Paris. The watch becomes a marker of time for a man who outlives those he loves, in terms of both longevity and experience. The poet uses the life watch to wind back to afternoons with Borge and readings with Kerouac, dreams complete with a lost grandfather and "Spinoza in the Dutch Ghetto."

Barnstone, former O'Conner Professor of Greek at Colgate University and Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University, is a founding member of the Institute of Biblical and Literary Studies, as well as a multiple award winner, including a Guggenheim fellowship and the Emily Dickinson Award of the Poetry Society of America.

The most remarkable thing about this book-and there are many remarkable things-might be its ease. Moving between sonnets, tercets, and freer forms, the voice never sounds forced or disingenuous. Though many have written elegies, Barnstone shapes his tributes to family and friends with a voice pure in its articulation of sorrow. His attention to detail extends not only to the ideas of things, but the intimacy of tone that defines relations between loved ones. He writes for his Jewish mother and her customs, and for the victims of September 11th in "Our New York Skyline in the 1930s, Now on Fire in September": "Tonight I got myself to stand on / the street recalling mom's tall skyline that / had no Twin Towers then, nor now. Some prayed. / I slipped out awkwardly alone. All I could do / was let a candle burn out for those gone- / a girl in the plane, flaming where she sat."

Everywhere in the book is this warm, empathetic tone, this sense of a human voice. Barnstone never tries to hide behind linguistic gymnastics. He achieves poetry through careful explanation, defined images, and an acknowledgement of what is both daily and fantastical.

For poetry lovers who want to fall in love again with narrative and image, Barnstone reinvigorates the genre, bringing with him the influence and the names of those who touched him. This book leads to other books. Readers who fall for Barnstone will fall for those who came before: Borges, Lorca, Shakespeare, Virgil, VanGogh, Baudelaire. He extends their tradition, and his own, with grace.

Camille-Yvette Welsch