



Phantom Canyon: Essays of Reclamation

Kathryn Winograd

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Heartrending subject matter conveyed in poetic prose excavates pain from the realm of memory.

Dig with a pen, said poet Seamus Heaney. Kathryn Winograd uses a pickaxe to excavate old pains and buried memories as part of a personal reclamation project in this collection of essays. Like the douser she hires in “Finding the Well,” she has an unerring instinct for what lies deep below the surface and is willing to drill down until she hits it.

Often, what gets brought up is trauma. Rape, “an ugly word, impossible to prettify,” figures prominently. “Speaking the Word” forces it out in the open. “Bathing” becomes “a baptism I could not receive” and “a virginal country I had left long ago.” In “Phantom Mares,” she takes her daughters to a horse-breeding barn “as if to show them this, this sex in this way, might stave them from harm,” only to realize belatedly that the “phantom mare” (a contraption the stallion mounts) summons up the “image of what harms you most—the stranger leaning over you in winter leaves.”

Winograd is a poet and three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. She received a Colorado Book Award in poetry. The setting for these essays is Phantom Canyon, where she and her husband built a cabin “among the gravel roads and the wheel ruts.” But it is her past in the Midwest that haunts the present.

She encounters images of herself as a ghostly presence. In “Dark Skies,” she stares into “the back window to watch the life I thought never to have—reversed, backward, the dream of myself reflected against a dark netherworld.” In “Adaptations of an Avian Migration Glossary,” she sees her face “at the heart of it all” as a bluebird launches itself at the window. In “Heresies of the Holy,” she is startled by a deer silhouetted against her own “mirrored body” in the glass doors of their cabin.

Moving between what is known and unknown, the author explores the physical terrain of her surroundings and the metaphysical world of memory. Sometimes she overshoots the mark, like birds migrating to their familiar breeding grounds. Overly poetic writing can obscure rather than elucidate, as in the essay about being stranded at mile marker seventy-two in Ohio, “where the horses of poets still bend shyly and the wrist of a girl I am stepping gingerly through is the tissue color of this summer sky.”

At their best, these essays show a gritty determination to go beneath the secret places of the earth, seeking renewal and healing amid “the lonely cattlebones and the wild iris.”

TRINA CARTER (Summer 2014)

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