FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Essays

Possibility: Essays against Despair
Patricia Vigderman
Sarabande Books
978-1-936747-54-2
(April 1, 2013)

In her elegant, short volume of essays, Patricia Vigderman asks questions about possibility and its opposite. These are complicated essays to read, not in the sense that they are difficult to understand, but because the author makes a demand on her reader: to be extra attentive to the words and images she offers, to the world, and to ourselves—to the possibility that there is much more than we think we see or know, and that it may all be intertwined. Art with travel. Inheritance with beauty with pain. Nature and animal life with history with humor. Proust. David Foster Wallace. Grace Paley. Reading with art museums with film with metaphor. The possibilities seem endless but smartly confined, too.

In the longer pieces, the author travels circuitous journeys from idea through exploration to possible conclusion, and there's a serious but sprightly and insistent push-pull, enticing and at times confusing to the reader but only because Vigderman's mind is so alive on the page, so full of tangentially interesting questions.

Her discursive style is overlaid by a palpable curiosity, a rich knowledge of literature, art, science, nature, and creative expression; the prose is not, for the most part, too dense to penetrate. The author seems to be saying, what about this? And see how this leads to that? And what about this other thing over here?

In “Genealogy (January 29),” she writes with tenderness and also dispatch of a shawl given down through generations, across ethnicities, fortune, and loss; a gift and also a reminder of constricted lives. “Sarah Vittum Drake undoubtedly wore the shawl during the Civil War, and perhaps her daughter and granddaughter during other wars. By that time, there would have been the Spanish-American War and the First World War, the Second World War, and well, I guess we’re into my lifetime now, the Korean War and in due course the war in Vietnam, by which time event flags were being burned and the shawl would have belonged to my mother-in-law. I didn’t ask her if she ever wore it.”

In “Not Exactly Kaddish,” only about a page long, Vigderman considers the insistent and perhaps cruel life after a death, presumably one of her parents: “Since you died the sun keeps coming up, more than nine thousand times, which when you put it that way doesn’t seem so many, the way the years slip by into these numbers, but the boy who was only nine when it happened (and even a little excited by the dramatic family event) has become himself the father of a boy just starting to talk.” Later, she ends the piece, “Every death is yours.”

Is she talking to the departed loved one? To herself? To the reader? All, certainly, a possibility.

Lisa Romeo