ForeWord Reviews

Singular Bodies
Ruth L. Schwartz
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"Love, what we've lived through together / has not killed us yet" are the words of a woman who has lived raw and close to death. The author, a long time AIDS educator, also weathered the trauma of her partner's organ failure and the transplant of her own kidney into the woman she most wanted to share a lifetime with. With this in mind, the whole middle section of the book is dedicated to illness songs, hospital rooms, and the razor-sharp realizations that love and living are not to be taken for granted.

This is not trite or precious writing and the message is not packaged for quick consumption. Winner of the 2000 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, Schwartz has ingested the wisdom and wounds of her life and made poems that are heartfelt without being indulgent or whiny.

Above all else, these are poems about facing mortality, and her observations about human and animal vulnerability in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances are resolute and clear: "I wonder where he'll sleep tonight, / and why we don't take care of each other, / our odd and fragile species, speeding / toward what sometimes seem our final days…" Birds appear throughout the book as the bedraggled totems or communicators of some essential truth that is not found in any other language. There is the turkey vulture awkwardly dragging its scavenged find across the sand; the pigeons that look sick and uncared for: metaphors as heart wrenching as the stories behind them.

Another recurring theme is water, which seems always to be taking over a portion or large area of the landscape. There are floods that bring both death and renewal, and the water beneath the Golden Gate Bridge beckons suicides with its beauty and history of jumpers. Water is never only water. It is the edge of the shore where a sign reads "Reclaimed Waste Unfit for Human Contact," and it is the river into which the building contractor threw the beaten body of a prostitute, thinking that it would put an end to something, not knowing that in water is also the life she struggled back to, still breathing.

Even with her eyes and heart trained on so much darkness, Schwartz writes in her notes at the end of the book that "my belief in joy—my inability to refrain from ecstatic reverie regarding the redemptive capabilities of sexuality and love—is at the core of my poetry." In one of her more poignant lines, while driving in gray daylight away from her sick lover in bed, she

writes: “I want to see how things live.” And so, amidst so much suffering, there is also singing.

Holly Wren Spaulding