

On Patricia Fargnoli's "Duties of the Spirit" by Janet McCann

Duties of the Spirit
by Patricia Fargnoli
Tupelo Press, 2005

“The question that he asks in all but words,” says Robert Frost of his *Oven Bird*, “is what to make of a diminished thing.” The poems of Pat Fargnoli’s *Duties of the Spirit* ask this question in the most carefully chosen words, longing, glimmering words that speak to readers of all ages of what it is like to grow old and of the kind of prisons age makes and windows it opens. Pat Fargnoli’s poems ache and yearn; they bring desire to a high pitch of intensity that lasts long after the book is closed. They return at odd moments, by line, by title, by image, after the reader goes back to his or her own life.

The theme is encapsulated in the title poem. Its epigraph is “One of the duties of the spirit is joy, and another is serenity...” taken from a letter from Thornton Wilder written in 1930. And these two duties, plus the third that Fargnoli has added, grief, are the subject of this book; the first two are duties because they are worked for and hard won, but they are gifts too, and the third duty, grief, weighs against but also enhances the other two. The book is divided into three sections, which seem somewhat to follow the three duties, mingled as they are in all.

“Duties of the Spirit” ends

And if the first
duty of the spirit is leaping joy,
and the second,
the slow stroll of serenity,

then grief, the third, comes bending on his walking stick,
holding a trowel to dig where the loves have gone,

and he weighs down your shoulders, ties a rawhide necklace
hung with a stone around your neck, and hangs on and on.
But the first is slippery joy.

The poem is a kind of coda, though it doesn’t end the sequence—the others pick up the motifs and flesh them out with rich imagery and experience.

These translucent poems show the pain of growing older, of the sadness of one loss after another, friends, pets, even physical freedom, physical space. The speaker’s world shrinks, yet even as it shrinks it opens out—the smallest things provide a kind of satisfaction that

seems a grace. And as pain is weighed against joy, even the smallest joys are not separate from pain. The strikingly memorable poem “Pistachios” presents the nuts as emblem of the little worldly pleasures as well as example, and the speaker begins with the physical nut: “Think of them in their smooth brown cases/ or cracked open to white meat shiny as a tooth.” The thought widens from the pleasure of the nut to associated thoughts of love and then of pain, war, and disaster, which cannot be separated from the world’s joys, and then returns to the nut itself, which becomes a reminder of Eden—since in a world of pain some small joys are necessary: the pistachio is “the simple nourishment,/ the hard welcome apple,/ the fallen fruit”.

The presence of nature, the birds that remind us of life’s vitality and also vulnerability, the joy taken in the simplest of pleasures highlight this book. Animals and insects abound, providing their vitality and another underscoring of transience. The particulars are so individualized they stamp themselves on the mind, heightening the reader’s pleasure in the things of the world. There is the sense of the importance of the particulars, the necessity of recording them so that the surface of an individual life can be saved and savored. These are poems that transcend the life they narrate, and that arrive at a compassion that is general.

Style is open and flowing free verse, some meditations, some narratives. The lyrics pile poignant details up into a richly textured picture. The narratives crackle with the energy of full participation in experience. “Locked” is an example—the speaker and her fellow bus travelers come back after their shared outing to a dangerous neighborhood only to find the gate to the parking lot locked; so that they are unable to retrieve their cars. From an upper window, they overhear a woman who “belts out an aria of pain”:

Fuck you, you liar, you fucking asshole.
Above the cries of a child, above the raped-woman
howl of a siren, she belts it.

I know you’re cheating. I can’t take it.
I’m leaving...

The scene and their own unwilling presence as observers galvanize the group until one of them, “the guy in the wrinkled/ blue suit” manages to heave himself over the fence and break the lock. The reader is drawn into this scene too, and feels the shock of what it is like to be temporarily locked out of one’s life, an unhappy presence in others’, witness to a scene that is no part of one’s normal daily experience but somehow makes the tedium of the ordinary more bearable, even while providing a shot of adrenaline. And the poem is funny—the burst of freedom, the bus travelers’ haste to leave, and get back to their own more predictable lives, concludes the narrative:

.....And who cares
by what right he rifles the cars for tools, and skilled
as a cat man, dismantles the lock—or by what right all of us,
lean our shoulders into the heavy gate, shove it back,

leap for our cars, and get the hell out of there.

“Locked” turns out to be an energetic, almost joyous poem.

In the diminution of life that is caused by age, small pleasures loom large, become sacraments almost. But the real power of the book is a social and spiritual dimension. The speaker is wounded, her poems suggest the depth of the injury but do not describe it. There emerges from them only generosity and compassion. Grief makes others’ grief understandable; a community of loss emerges, What one has is what one has left; what one does is, share it.

Fargnoli’s book takes the reader by surprise again and again. There is nothing startling in its premise or wildly experimental in style, but the poems never fail to provide a sense of recognition and renewal. They heighten the senses of the reader through the poet’s loving appreciation of the physical world and her reaching toward the metaphysical. They remind the reader of the kind of spirituality of Mary Oliver and Denise Levertov, although Fargnoli chooses no final form for the holy. Her appreciation of nature, her sadness at the closing-off of the world, the sense of woundedness that pervades these poems are balanced by an acceptance and even a fragile and tenuous happiness. *Duties of the Spirit* provides a sense of what it is to be fully awake to the world, to be growing older, to observe the changes that aging brings. The poems do not evade or gloss over, yet they do provide a kind of joy that comes from the integrity of a life well lived and fully known.

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