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Marilyn Krysl

TWO REVIEWS

The Bosnia Elegies by Adrian Oktenberg.

Oktenberg's *Elegies* are written in a style reminiscent of Adrienne Rich, and from whom—along with Eavan Boland, Ruth Stone, Carolyn Forché, Tory Dent, Jan Freeman, Cavafy and Whitman—Oktenberg takes inspiration. It's a style which accommodates both image and spare, journalistic *reportage*, and it has become a style which is now very much a part of the "common language" Rich posited and which we have been forging these last decades, one which will help facilitate "the drive to connect" rather than to exist in division. Thus it's appropriate that *The Bosnia Elegies* address the war in the former Yugoslavia where divisions abound. The poems describe the terrifying roundup of Muslims bussed away for ethnic cleansing, the Croat actress who speaks out against ethnic divisions and is hounded out of the country, the ordinary citizen in Sarajevo attempting to cross the city for water, the aged poet telling reporters that those who have fled to Paris or Prague "have nothing to say to us / who stayed," the chilling portrait of a young sniper who can "shoot anyone he likes" and does this "as easily as if he were watching a film / a thriller in which he is the shooter the hero the man with the gun."

The critic Helen Vendler, in her essay on Adrienne Rich in *Soul Says*, wrote that "the value of Rich's poems, ethically speaking, is that they have continued to press against insoluble questions of suffering, evil, love, justice and patriotism." Oktenberg takes up and continues this legacy, and her project is ambitious. For she is describing genocide, not one remembered but the one currently going on. That alone would be sufficient subject. But Oktenberg also addresses the crucial issue of intimacy which Alicia Ostriker delineates in *Stealing the Language*. "Relationships between friends and lovers become paradigmatic for the conduct of political life," Ostriker writes, for "public and private existence are indivisible." Oktenberg has woven poems which describe remembered encounters with her lover into her work's larger, political

Paris Press, 1997.

landscape. The love poems sketch scenes in which two people care for and respond to each other, and thus provide what Vendler calls “an earthly counterweight” to the violence of genocide. They also provide a counterweight to the West’s and especially the United States’ indifference. And they suggest, by the way in which lovingly nostalgic glimpses of the lover are intimately laced into the elegiac fabric of the larger poem, that indeed the personal is political on several levels. The two are vividly made one when Oktenberg reveals that the lover has been killed in the Sarajevo market by three pieces of shrapnel.

The advantage of a journalistic style is that it can encompass a wide range of subject matter. The disadvantage is that *reportage* can too easily lapse into didactic preaching. Oktenberg keeps the language vibrant, the *reportage* incisively focused, and laces the poems with haunting imagery. The collection’s very first image focuses on new leaves. “Early summer newly formed leaves / like a baby’s fingernails no larger than a matchhead.” Later a young refugee woman who’s been repeatedly raped and terrified into madness is hung from a tree. “It was high summer . . . she had turned to leaves overnight.” Finally Oktenberg invokes the wholeness of nature, emphasizing that human beings are merely a more noticed part of it, as the leaf imagery spreads beyond human genocide to a description of the effects of drought and acid rain.

The drought causes the chestnut leaves to curl
with brown along the edges and acid rain
makes all the apples fall in August
You have to know how and where to look for disaster

In this example, and in a way that is reminiscent of Rich, Oktenberg offers an image, then a comment upon it. As is the case in Rich’s poems, the comment reverberates back, illuminating the purpose of the image, echoing and reinforcing it. It’s a powerful technique, and lines like these establish Oktenberg as an accomplished poet. In addition to a graceful mastering of technique, she also has an unerring sense of nuance in regard to the eerily ironic. Residents of Sarajevo, she notes, used to think of Beirut as some place that had nothing to do with them. Similarly, she reminds us the 1984 Olympics were held in Sarajevo, where the surrounding mountains now harbor artillery and snipers. Through her vision we see this genocide in progress continuing while the “developed” countries make half hearted attempts to

chip away at it. The gaze of the safe is, in Oktenberg's view, the gaze of the indifferent, who resemble voyeurs detached from the mass evil they "observe" for whatever titillation it may offer. "Though we slap open a newspaper / we also spread jam on a piece of toast." With a moralist's devastating accuracy Oktenberg renders the perceptual mindset of those who have removed themselves from any meaningful consideration of this suffering. "These crazy countries / no one can keep them straight / . . . no one has ever heard of these towns / . . . and it's not Kuwait they have no oil / anyway it's too complicated. . . . / You can't even pronounce their names."

Such perceptions are mediated by the voice of the poet, who steps back and comments on her material, drawing the reader into collaboration with her, a collaboration of acknowledgement. "To say / *this* war / is to acknowledge / *that* one // the last one / and the one yet to come // But *which* war / is the last war? / Will there ever be one?"

In Daniela Gioseffi's *Women on War*, Margaret Mead is as sanguine and pragmatic.

Warfare is just an invention known to the majority of human societies by which they permit their young men either to accumulate prestige or avenge their honor or acquire loot or wives or slaves or grab lands or cattle or appease the blood lust of their gods or the restless souls of the recently dead. It is just an invention, older and more widespread than the jury system, but none the less an invention.

Since it's an invention, Mead implies, we can undo it. Is there a brave and communal response Westerners might make, as the Danes did, all donning stars of David in solidarity with the Jews the day after the Nazi edict came down? But the Nazis barreled ahead anyway. Oktenberg, in hindsight, suggests that former President Bush must take some blame for declaring the breakup of Yugoslavia a strictly European problem. But the power of her poem lies in its elegiac invocation and the linked focus on indifference, individual and collective. The many "messages" sent out by desperate, trapped people are not truly heard. "Messages sent all around the world whispered / from ear to ear memorized smuggled out" become in the collection's finale messages which "come in come in come in come in / and disappear." Since the personal is political, to truly hear these messages would be the one re-

sponse that would make a difference, for it would mean that the indifferent had been roused and Ostriker's imperative of intimacy fulfilled.

Of course the messages are heard by a few of us, by people like Oktenberg, who has used her poetic talents to bring these messages to the attention of a larger audience. I hope teachers will discover her book and use it, for its passion is palpable, and it makes a complex situation humanly understandable. There are riveting portraits of Milosevic and Karadzic and Mladic which set their problematic personalities in relief, and Oktenberg manages to make these "crazy countries" recognizably human domains, peopled with students, bakers, artists, grandmothers. Paris Press's design and layout of this book is impressively elegant, befitting the elegiac tone. The press bills itself as producing "daring and beautiful feminist books," and this is one of them.

The Hour Between Dog and Wolf by Laure-Anne Bosselaar

This book takes off like a gust of wind sweeping in, swirling us upward. Bosselaar's compelling opening poem, "The Worlds in This World," suggests a canvas wide with largesse and a poet attentive to the smallest detail, wise and capacious enough to encompass the whole—"the Curse," "the Miracle"—and everything in between. The first line, "Doors were left open in heaven again," invites us to open like those doors, to let in light and also darkness, to expand both our understanding and our living beyond our ordinary, cramped limits. Section I's poems encompass the curse of destructiveness and the miracle of persevering in spite of it. In "The Feather at Breendonck" the *Dieu* in the bluebird's throat is the same *Dieu* that "stained the feather I found in the Breendonck Concentration Camp." Someone in each poem, usually the narrator, has survived, "made it," managed against the odds to say *yes* to life. When others hate, she loves. When others suppress troubling emotions, she spontaneously embraces them, or lets herself be embraced by the good ogre or kind Sister Cecilia of the Healing Pompon.

Most childhoods have their harrowing occasions, but the strength of Bosselaar's poems is that they also articulate a child's rich chiaroscuro of emotion. Such a sensibility, the poems suggest, is one of the things that can

Boa Editions, Ltd., 1977.

keep a crucial bit of innocence alive through the devastating experience of powerlessness.

In Sections II and III the speaker has left childhood for adulthood, Brussels for Europe and America. In “Plastic Beatitude” the exhaustive evocation of pointless gadgets and gaudy trivia in a neighbor’s yard is an occasion for Bosselaar to display her gift for humor, whimsy, irony. The six foot, lit, plastic madonna doubles as an insect zapper—“tiny buzzing heretics / fried by the same power that lured them / to their last temptation.” The motif of sensuality threads through these sections too, and is eloquently evoked in “Mortal Art.”

Let me be fickle as the Mistral, lazy as Proveçal lizards; give me the
nuances of tenderness,

longing’s appetites, the pagan buzz of sex—and may my art
be mortal, nothing more than what it is:
a daily brush with grace. . . .

Though this is her first book, Bosselaar is already accomplished at creating the hesitations, asides and digressions of *epos*. This is true in both the narratives and in more meditative poems such as Section III’s “Inventory,” a lovely work in which the poet articulates her perceptive appreciation of this world’s recurrence in the face of impermanence. It is also the case in two predominately lyric poems in III, “Loving You In Flemish” and “English Flavors.” Here are lines from the former:

. . . heavy as Percheron hooves on fields
lying fallow and humming with rain . . .

I know words lazy as canals
gliding among willows and yews . . .

Given Bosselaar’s preoccupation with the sensuous and sensual, one might expect her to rely more heavily on lyric. But her ability to narrate is a skill that has served her well, for it allows her to address material lyric generally accommodates less easily. And it’s the narrative poems of childhood remem-

brance that resonate and reverberate most, perhaps because they bespeak the unconscious filtered through the safety of memory, perhaps because powerlessness makes childhood's triumphs more exigent than otherwise. I'm drawn back to this section, especially to the tenderness and poignancy of "Leek Street" in which the poet vows, in solidarity with her nine year old love, to "set traps for the Germans. . . ." And to "The Pump," importunate in its insistence on celebrating human sensuality, winning in its detailed description of the narrator's need to escape the strictures of convent decorum, to declare the independence of the body and the soul. *Religion is a defense against a religious experience*, Jung wrote, and "The Pump" is a *tour de force* illustration of his epigrammatic declaration. The poem is scathing in its refusal of the restrictiveness of religion, eloquent in its insistence on having the religious experience of living fully. As the speaker pumps water over herself, washing away prohibitions, she imagines

. . . I'm in the sea, in the sky, I'm a big-
breasted, winged siren. Eyes closed, arms open, I stand
as Neptune, huge, laughing, wet, lifts me onto his
shoulders.

Sea-horses swing from my nipples, eels jive in my hair,
there is sun and music everywhere—

"So many contemporary poets are terrified of deep feeling, of seeming undefended and 'sentimental,'" Edward Hirsh writes in his essay "Beyond Desolation" (*APR* May/June 1997). These poets "write as if it were desirable to refine out the emotional registers of the lyric." The personal ardor with which Bosselaar embraces her material locates her among the impassioned. Her generous and inclusive approach reminds me of the anarchist Emma Goldman. "Pettness separates, breadth unites," Goldman wrote. "Let us be broad and big."