On Nancy Schoenberger

Elizabeth Weber
Maxine Kumin has stated that some people people “act as morticians of all life and hold private burying rituals in their hearts.” They “practice well all their lives to die well.” In this book of poems that won the Montana Arts Council First Book Award in 1979, Nancy Schoenberger manipulates her fantasies to work out a kind of salvation and the book documents that journey. Each poem is a private burying ritual. The final poem, “In the Earth’s New Dark,” is about death as a form of change. Change does not come unless a part of us dies. I feel that essentially this book is about the transitions made in order for change to be possible.

The book begins with a poem, entitled “Move On,” about the death of the poet’s brother. Schoenberger’s quiet, controlled voice presents a photograph or a movie still. “He tries/ but cannot step out/ of the car,/ of the April/ night, as all else/ ages and moves on.” The rest of the movie continues, but this frame has stopped and we with it. Which is what the poem is about: to die is not to move on, if we are to live we must move on.

The first section of the book, “Beasts and Children,” shows us scenes from childhood. The poem, “Near Philly,” deals with loss of innocence and faith. It tells of the dark underside of life where innocence is shadowed by its twin sister depravity. The poem contrasts a pastoral town and a town where smoke “rolled/from the black stacks and towers, glowed orange/as the sun came on.” The poet ends declaring “it was our home.” Both these towns are one town, living inside us; we are made up of contradictions.

“Taxidermist’s Daughter” is perhaps the best poem of the book.

Always long afternoons shadows began
leaking from tame leaves
near the plot of sunflowers, the valuable
statuary, chickens restless
as the best game cocks paired off
and started their dance,
father his work

restoring the draggled animals
that had gathered all morning
in the pine loft above the house
from the wild Atchafalaya—
Arkansas turkeys,
their Indian headdresses
limp and smeared and asking
for new life. The squirrel
that one day would fly again

in the showcase, and again
in my dreams, in dream-walks
through the glass house, fly
next to the lynx
and the rare white fox.

And the tame dogs eyeing their masters,
and the fighting wild rooster,
my sunflower drifting over the gravel
marking the day’s path. I wanted to help:

carry blood in a bucket,
order the glass eyes
from the warehouse of missing parts.
I wanted to help in your dark
private work in the loft.

Nights the gray squirrel rattles the roof,
robs the glass where his stuffed mate swoons
in the final leap. I can still see you
bent over your work, shucking and stitching,
fur stuck to your apron. Choose me,
father. All these years I wanted to say
choose me, as you bent down
to put the last touch to the beautiful wood duck.

When I read a poem I look for something beyond words and setting,
beyond music and rhythm. I look for something elusive that arouses a sympathetic response. "The Taxidermist's Daughter" has it. The love of the speaker for her father is particularly moving.

While the first section of the book is about the poet's childhood or origin, the next section, entitled, "Widow," is about an awareness of a need for change.

So I have given you up. It is September. Soon the world goes underground, deep in her hood.

("Failure")

To change, a person must pass from awareness to understanding to acceptance of the situation. In the next section, "Mussellshell Woman," this process becomes more apparent. "After Camille," the first poem, is about what remains after a deluge: memories and remnants. There is an awareness of loss.

They say catfish comb those rooms where we once slept. Launched, I come to waterways to drink the dark. Those trees just bend, the rain says I win. What remains the river didn't want.

The rain says "I win." All that is known is swept away. In the next poem, "Cedar," there is more rain, but of a different kind.

Now that rain is my neighbor I want to unfold down the slow comfortable path. The bud at the base of my brain begins to open.

It perhaps is not so much that the rain has changed, but that the speaker's attitude toward it has changed. She has accepted it.
Already
we have left each other. The rain
has let up. A few drops disturb the pools
which have begun to darken
as evening sets in and smoke
drifts through the wood.

With the acceptance of loss, the rain disappears and life returns to its calm.
From here the book shifts in focus. It is not so much what the poet has lost, but
what she must do now to survive.

“At Boar’s Head” begins “There's a door that opens both ways.” With this
poem, though aware of the past, the poet moves through it towards a new life.
“A door closes/on her mother's voice.” Past models no longer work.

In “Near Painted Rock,” the poet's need to turn to other sources becomes
more urgent.

You're emptyhanded now.

No lake, no dream, no home.
The sky shuts down.

If we could find out what the
earth wants.

She asks and then demands: “Give me a dream I can use.” She is ready to
admit errors she has made and the risks involved in change: “We amit/ the
theft, admit the land's mysterious. It may/ kill us.” The speaker is ready for
change.

Change does come in the title poem of this section, “Musselshell Woman.”
It tells of the invincible spirit we carry inside. “One wind gives back when we're
broke, when spirit/grows legs and starts walking.” How we can give up or lose
all we have and still go on and change and live. “That woman,/- one with moon
and wind, beyond all human ways/ won back her life.”

With the last poem, “In the Earth's New Dark,” the poet accepts her state of
being, no matter what state that might be.
I mark these changes: how the seed
in her furred home nudges
soil, her green
unscarred and gleaming;
how pale wheat gives up and utters
take us, as though I'd come
to lie in earth's new dark
rejoicing, with any lover.

Through awareness and finally acceptance of her loss, she has come to terms
with her surroundings. The book begins and ends with death. But in death, the
poet has discovered rebirth and the transition is complete.

*Elizabeth Weber*