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on Laura Jensen

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Lurking underneath "On the Wing" are images of a soldier crossing a river and helicopters overhead. It becomes evident in this poem, as well as many of the other poems in the book, that understanding beauty depends on knowing the violence that penetrates everything. The woman in "The Lost Private" is beautiful because of and not in spite of her scars. In "Hotel Florence," the woman's stepping "out of the lit bathroom/Like a small boy in her white pajamas, her rings/ And necklaces cupped in her hands before her" would lose its wonder if the reader didn't know the desperate situations of the two people whose love, however brief, denies desperation. The rare scene that opens "Song of Napalm" is far from innocent; "The grass was never more blue in that light, more/ scarlet."

Violence is assumed in The Monkey Wars, whether it is global or domestic or merely the non-interference of the speaker in "Surrounding Blues on the Way Down." But Weigl's well-crafted juxtaposition of beauty with violence and the conditional hope which his poetry maintains in such conditions are extraordinary. The beauty and love that mysteriously engender a desire to have control over it (so perfectly rendered in "Snowy Egret"), are gifts to each of Weigl's poems. And Weigl's poems are gifts to his readers.

-Judith Hiott

Laura Jensen, Shelter; Dragongate, Inc.; Port Townsend, WA., 1985, $14.00, cloth

I have been a fan of Laura Jensen's since her first full length collection, Bad Boats, appeared from Ecco in the American Poetry Series, 1977. Shelter is Jensen's third full length collection. She has also published numerous chapbooks and limited editions.

Of Shelter, Carolyn Kizer says, (NYTBR, Nov. 3, 1985),

There are at least 15 poems in "Shelter," Laura Jensen's third collection, a book of magical spells, that I long to quote in full. The power of originality here is virtually unique in poets of her generation.

In Shelter, Jensen presents the startling, brutal edge of the mundane — all of our ordinary lives. She concedes that to each of us, events have import, isolated
though paradoxically universal. She points to what is lacking, what is needed, that which may never be defined. Yet she doesn’t fall prey to condescension, that here-is-the-answer-you’ve-overlooked attitude of some contemporary poets. And this invites the reader in. We are not being judged but observed. Any judgements become ours to make. And Jensen knows we will make them.

Her form is the rhythm of life, succinct and biting. She approaches familiar platitudes, those lines we all know and repeat, but she avoids their definition. She circles our basic needs: food, shelter and water. She stabs at false security. She returns us to the animal world.

Jensen plays on our subconscious, letting her words seep upwards to consciousness from within. This makes them powerful, memorable; we wish her words as our own. But it is really her music, the breath of her words that we want to claim. Her words are a cumulative crescendo, like the bread that rises and is baked before we can acknowledge or comprehend the process.

And she creates a curious frame for her book, beginning with “The Storm,” and ending with “Shelter.” Both are experienced within the ironic sanctity of a personal niche. On the one hand, lives are always dictated by an outsider, the landlord. On the other, it is one’s own kitchen that gives warmth. Both are subject to the rules.

Shelter is a cohesive cycle of poems. And it is supported by the design of the book itself. Dragongate, Jensen’s publisher, should be commended for their confirmation of the artistic nature of Laura Jensen’s work through graphics. Reprinted here, with permission, are the opening and closing poems of Shelter, with the hope you will read all between.

THE STORM

In the room with the bed
there has not been a dream
where your heart is screaming
let me wake, let me wake.
At the windows trees.
At the windows are swallows.
On the table are books.
On the table are candles.
Each little room is clean,
and at the door are pansies.
And a rosebush down the stairs.

The landlord gave me jasmine
in the earth from the ladder
when he rebuilt the stair.
I water the jasmine.
The landlord climbs the stair.
Now he asks me to carry
the plants indoors. I lift them
to newsprint on the kitchen table
over the clean kitchen floor.

Clouds darken the weather.
The wind chimes shake and flail.
In slicker and sou'wester
on breaking crests the landlord
storms the paint from the walls
with a pressurized jet,
and turns the world over.
A snowstorm surrounds
the house in a glass ball,
my face at the window.
I think winter is here.

SHELTER

I had bread rising in a warm oven.
I dusted what was left of the flour
off of and into my jeans
and went downstairs and opened the door
for mail. I found
a woodpecker dead on the threshold.
A hawthorn berry beside it.

I left it on the kitchen table.

I thought of it looking
for shelter, coming only into the porch
to a nest at the corner the door made
where it met the jamb, the whole of it
carved with leaves and varnished
in the summer when the landlord repainted.
Or flying into the shapes of blowing trees
in the door window.

And I thought of three tame trees where I walk
that had brushed my head and filled it with dreams
that fell in the summer
to be cut for firewood.

I found a broken shovel
that sits at the side of the house
and buried it bare in a break in the clouds.
Beside the house, under the hawthorn.
The hawthorn berry beside it.
As I walked back to the stairs
the box fell open, and chips
shaped like esses and ees
flurried out on the wind like flakes of snow.

And I took the bread out of the oven,
baked now. An oatmeal loaf.

(from Shelter by Laura Jensen)

-Bronwyn G. Pughe