

REVIEW: LaFlèche, Ellen. *Walking into Lightning*. Hilo, Hawai'i: Saddle Road Press, 2019. 67 p., paper. ISBN: 9781732952126.

In Ellen LaFlèche's first full-length book of poems, *Walking into Lightning*, the poet carefully constructs a consistently unified verbal expression that invites the reader to experience the depth of a significant loss. LaFlèche tracks her own experience of partnering with her husband, John Clobridge, as he confronts the implications of his ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) diagnosis, supporting him as he approaches death, and finally wrestling with her own ensuing grief. LaFlèche allows us, remarkably, to observe the intimacy experienced between these two spouses, to witness what they shared without breaching what should remain private. The imaginative inventiveness that LaFlèche unflaggingly brings to each individual step in the journey is one of the major reasons this book is so strong. Her surprising and engaging textures help her to avoid sentimentality, which is quite an achievement considering the tragic circumstances she so artfully describes.

Given the subject matter, it is fitting that LaFlèche's dominant rhetorical device is anaphora: the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or lines. Many of us have encountered this technique in the verse of Western religions, where it traditionally figured as a means of invoking or grasping for the sacred. LaFlèche titles several of her poems as prayers, blessings, lamentations, and credos. Sometimes the repetitions she employs are irregular and varied; at other times, they are rhythmic and insistent:

Because the moon is grimacing like a mouth in rigor, because
a hunchbacked man is pruning his rose garden, because
once a lover slickened that hump with patchouli oil, because
the kissable beauty of an angelfish mouth.
("Prayer for Weeping")

The risk of repetition—its possibility for dullness—is a serious one, but LaFlèche adeptly sidesteps this danger by enlivening a predictable formal framework, packing it with unexpected contents. The excerpt above provides a typical example: how many of us have ever seen a mouth in rigor mortis, never mind compared that image to the moon? That line forces us to stop and imagine how profoundly grief can transform one's experience of the world, so that even the moon is never seen as it was prior to attending to a loved one at his or her deathbed.

The four lines quoted above also demonstrate one of the primary ways in which LaFlèche creates a unified experience—a subtly self-referencing echo chamber—out of the entire set of poems that make up this book. Her evocation of the physical relationship her husband and she shared—both as lovers, and as ill person and caretaker—expands beyond the

poems that specifically address that relationship, so that a description of the lover of a humpbacked man spreading oil on his back, or of an angelfish's "kissable mouth," echoes and expands the book's core relationship. Words used to describe the couple's lovemaking ("nape" and "wrist") reoccur throughout the book, fashioning a net of imagistic and sonic consistency that reminds the reader of the relationship that was lost.

The roughly chronological sequencing of the poems in this book—mapping John Clobridge's diagnosis, increasingly severe illness, death, and what follows for his grieving spouse—enhances its impact. This narrative structure allows us to witness first the excruciating honesty between husband and wife as they prepare for what's coming:

I hear you rasp:
Don't tranquilize me when I start to thrash.
(*"I Refuse to Read the Death with Dignity Brochure"*)

That honesty reverberates with the capacity for truth-telling that we later encounter when the surviving wife examines beliefs that no longer remain unchallenged:

I believe hearts never break,
but when they do
they crack into shards like a biblical vessel in the shape of a woman.
...

I believe spirits cannot be broken,
but when they break
the sun is a blind spot on the sky's tender retina.
That sudden nightfall.
(*"Credo for Things that Crack and Break"*)

And it is only *after* having been allowed to experience as readers the depth of the love between the poet and her deceased husband that we can begin to appreciate what it means for her to entertain in "Blindfold" the possibility of finding, as a white-haired woman, a similarly aged "new beloved":

Let my lover's white hair taste like milk and thunder in my mouth.
Let our limbs move in the slow spirals of synchronized swimmers
and my long white hair
fall like a blindfold over my new lover's eyes.

Dying might be like that.

While she continues to live, nothing (and certainly nothing involving romance) can happen to her that doesn't refer in some way to the husband she has lost.

Walking into Lightning is not a book that can be easily forgotten. In poems like "Prayer for Despair," LaFlèche's metaphoric evocation of the horrors of ALS becomes vividly etched in

our minds: “Because the sun is slicing the horizon’s spine like a circular saw[.]” The lasting impression of such poems is intensified when they refer not just to the ferocious destruction of one individual’s nervous system but to the broader illness of our environment: “because / double-headed trout are swimming through irradiated water[.]” By deftly plumbing the complex depths—including despair—of what it means to witness a beloved life-partner fail and eventually pass away, what Ellen LaFlèche achieves in this memorable book places her among the most accomplished Franco-American poets.

-Steven Riel