

Reviewed by Nancy Shiffrin, Santa Monica, California, USA

*Spirituality and Sensuality: the Poetry of Michal Mahgerefteh*

Michal Mahgerefteh’s poetry collection accesses the depth of Jewish experience through an appeal to a transforming experience of the senses: “for her/the shechinah is visible...like descending/pollen in the wilderness...” These, my favorite lines from *What's Left Behind*, demonstrate the subtlety of the collection. Magherefteh writes of her mother’s struggle with cancer, her father's devotion, and her own dedication to both of them. The reader sees the pollen's golden light, inhales the aroma, and, through the senses, intuits the Divine Feminine in the hospital ward with the suffering patient and her family. From the first lines, “the sound of chemo in her blood deafens/and I breathe ashes for twenty-five years” we understand that this is a poetry of the difficult world. The daughter curses the night that forced her out of the womb into the Bitter Light. She would love to discover a world of “no more hurt” Yet, along with her father, she must confront unthinkable pain. In “Portrait of a Man”, we see the courage of Mahgerefteh's writing. Her father, now a “scribbled mix of personalities,” has “endured in years of silent layers” the threats, insults, rage of the patient who does not wish to die, though she seems to have moments of reconciliation. He, himself, is seriously ill, with cancer and diabetes. We see that care giving is emotionally and spiritually necessary, yet far from lofty; in fact, often mean and cruel. The Kaddish “enforces a memory/ onto the living wishing to forget”. It is Magharefteh's straightforwardness in presenting the realities that make this book a gift and a comfort. The father, in the end “draws comfort from the ever changing Mediterranean.” Those of us who have nursed loved ones toward the end of life feel less alone.

Now for the joie de vivre, the life in the telling detail. *Sipping Memories: A Poetic Journal to Morocco*, delights. There is bread topped with pecan butter, walnut, and pistachio, green mint tea. There are bazaars, suks, markets, and sheep sales. There are actual recipes: for green mint tea, couscous, rosewater skin cream. There are pictures of an Ottoman footstool, an antique teapot, a rosewater dispenser. The poet reconnects with family history. For over two thousand years her ancestors lived in
What's Left Behind and Sipping Memories

Walled Mellah, spoke Aramaic, bolted David's Shield on every entrance door...clung together as a community, stumbled over fragmented scrolls, were haunted by the Evil Eye. There are brides and henna artists, the wedding and the hammam or public bath. We understand from Magharefteh's biography that she identifies as an Israeli living in the United States. Yet, to be most fully herself, she must be tactilely connected to the country of her forebears. On the road to Marrakesh, the poet meets a mother, child on her back, collecting scraps of food from around the animals. The poet is warned not to respond to such “pests”. She questions the importance of holy men...saints sufis priests rabbis imams kabbalists. Even the privileged are limited, if not oppressed. Of the Bride Magherefteh writes, “happiness is weighed in wealth of gold and silver/...in return she is expected to be proper bear many sons”. Magharefteh is a visual artist, and this reader feels she has entered a collage of sights, sounds, aromas, tastes that transport her to a country and a world she has never actually experienced. Though written almost as a travelogue, Sipping Memories courageously embraces the tension between the luxury of Western tourism and the realities of the countries we visit.

Magherefteh's imagery is at once tough and beautiful, her themes resonate. We feel her rage at injustice; in What's Left Behind, the injustice of her parents' suffering, and her all too human desire for the pain to end; in Sipping Memories, the injustice of exile and of the women's oppression, even those who are privileged. With its honesty and exaltation, this poetry contributes to Tikkun Olam. The poet is called and says “I am here” to document, to “inscribe the magical ingredients of this rich land” to insure that such people as her parents and ancestors are remembered. As editor of Poetica Magazine, A Journal of Contemporary Jewish Writing, she performs a service to the creative/academic world. As a poet, she serves humanity.