The Fevered World: A Poetry Review Essay

Reviewed by Edith Covensky, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

List of Books:


The title of this review is directly inspired by the poet Jehanne Dubrow and her book From the Fever-World. All the other poets mentioned here also suggest in their poetic versions an unsettled world from which there is no escape.

Jehanne Dubrow in a most powerful, surrealistic, and haunting poem (p. 40) reveals an imposing and tangible presence of “Death,” as a threatening omnipotent female figure larger than life. The poem’s speaker is baffled at the opening of the poem and says in the first stanza: “I think she must be Death/the one who knocked today/a stranger with her box/of poisoned sweets/to sweeten me.” The assumption is that such an enticing and enchanting figure possessing “poisoned sweets” must, indeed, be Death personified taking on even animal-like qualities as she is further described with “sharpened fingernails”, ending up hissing her “treats.”

In another poem (p. 56), Jehanne Dubrow’s speaker, in a dream-like state, envisions her “mouth” giving birth to wings, in a possible attempt to escape her nightmare. Yet, those “promising” wings, in the speaker’s delirium, become crippled as they further announce a “dead bird” beneath the speaker’s tongue. The latter experiences the horrific and inevitable pain caused by the “needles” of that dead bird’s beak - “Its pinions gray as fever/Its claws unholy thorns.” Again, like in the “Death” poem, Jehanne Dubrow is
extremely graphic using powerful images in surrealistic realms gripping hard the poetic narrator and the reader alike. 

The speaker in Jane Ellen Glasser’s poem: “The Corridor” (p. 28) from her collection of poems entitled The Long Life, meanders in a Kafkaesque infinite trail. In a dream-like track that the speaker is enticed by a mysterious and haunting light, but is repeatedly disenchanted as she encounters dark phantoms falling across her path. She is unabated attempting to move forward, but while walking through the “candle-lit corridor,” she confesses her disappointment: “Shadows/ fall across my path as I step forward/on a walkway moving backwards.” The seemingly movements forward end up in an inevitable retreat. Furthermore, that candle’s promising “haloes” turn into horrifying “ghosts” guiding the speaker towards colossal emptiness. Yet the pull is irresistible as she attests: “Night after night I aim myself/straight at infinity and wear out/my shoes walking.” The speaker’s journey is unending as her disenchantments.

Rick Black in his featured poetry book Star of David, directly and unequivocally presents mournful images that take us to the Middle East, strongly suggesting tragic experiences in the Holy Land. In his poem “Pita Crumbs Left on Bomb Shelter Floors” (p. 20), the speaker, witnessing the devastations of unending wars, laments the deaths and ruins caused by incessant bombings. Even the stars “must bear witness again” to the constant shelling and destruction. Here the “Star of David” rather than serving as shield is compelled to watch the killings and losses.

Since Rick Black’s poem is most relevant to today’s violent realities in the Middle East and elsewhere, it would be proper to quote the poem in its entirety:

I mourn for the stars that must bear witness again.
I mourn for the morning which does not bring respite.
I mourn for the pita crumbs left on bomb shelter floors.
I mourn for the floors.

I mourn for the skies split by missiles and bombs.
I mourn for the clouds that must float over the ruins.
I mourn for the smoldering ruins.
I mourn for the people cutting the grass.
I mourn for the grass.

Let us sleep tonight.
Let us not hear sirens again.
Let us awake in the morning, unafraid.

The wishful tone at the conclusion of the poem echoes despair and fear rather than refuge and hope. The infinite longings for repose will most likely be shattered again. This “Fevered World,” it seems, may culminate into “smoldering” fire burning slowly and silently as the skies, stars, clouds, grasses, and humankind witness the infinite ravages of war.

Janet Ruth Heller presents a speaker protesting war in her poem: “Anti-Macnamara Demonstration…” (p. 11) from her collection entitled Traffic Stop. Although the poem is dated, May 1979, and a specific location is mentioned, namely, that of the University of Chicago, the substance of this poem may reflect present times and places. The opening stanza suggests, indeed, a continuous cycle of violence protested by the public as “protestors again crowd the tree-lined Quadrangle as speakers denounce the military-industrial complex.” The speaker, in a gesture of total solidarity, further declares: “I’m wearing another black armband.” I printed the words “again” and “another” in italic to stress that these are not single recurrences, but take place repeatedly throughout history in multiple locations leading to our modern/contemporary era.

In a series of somber memories, the speaker recalls the old cries of battle in addition to “Old placards, old arguments, old songs…” taking place in “Chicago. Madison. Washington. Saigon.” These past images, resurrected one by one by the speaker’s unfading recollections, manage to blend well into the present alluding to the fact that not much has changed.

Janet Ruth Heller excels in presenting past happenings vividly and directly using concise verses/phrases like: “No award to MacNamara!” “No more imperialist wars!” “Hell no!”
“We won’t go!” Sadly stated is that what was true then is still true today. This realization makes Heller’s poem worthy of notice.

Maureen Sherbondy’s poem, “The German Doctor” (p. 13) from Praying at Coffee Shops, recalls a necessary escape from another “fevered World” alluding, this time, to the Holocaust, namely, Total Burning. The escape, however, has a price as the speaker ponders: “What did he abandon there? Did it drift, a flotsam of remorse, follow him to the port, to New York. Or, was it left in concentration camps in the ashes and piled bodies of his brothers, nieces, and nephews.” Either way, those feelings of guilt will follow the survivor endlessly, even as Maureen Sherbondy’s speaker cleverly shifts the focus in the last stanza from past to present.

While the speaker presently envisions herself visiting “that faraway country,” imagining the survivor’s “stocky figure-ghost walking freely through the streets of Germany,” she sees herself identifying with the survivor and keeps pondering on the issue of guilt, while attempting to justify his survival. Rhetorical questions, namely, unanswerable considerations (with a final justification) fill her mind: “Will I feel guilt hanging, feel grieving in the air, or will I hear his (the survivor’s) deep voice saying softly, simply I wanted to live, I wanted to live.” The softness and simplicity of his voice suggest deep sorrow, an admission of remorse, helplessness, and a total surrender to that primary instinct of survival.

The dilemmas put forth by Maureen Sherbondy are most common among Holocaust Survivors of the first, second and even third generations. The feelings of guilt, identification, justification, and inescapable recollections may, often, be experienced by members of those three generations. In the case of “The German Doctor”, guilt and justification by a member of the first generation remains the focus. The speaker, however, a generation removed, manages to create a perspective leading her to greatly sympathize with the survivor.

Nancy Shiffrin in her poetry collection The Vast Unknowing is attempting to escape to the “Green Realities” of her fancy looking, for example, at leaves and birds, and listening...
to the rustles of the wind rushing through “a canyon of live oak…” The speaker in Shiffrin’s poetry has, in fact, great respect for these enchanting realities, especially, “after serving sentence in air-conditioned cubicles…”

Shiffrin, in this collection’s opening poem entitled “Song” (p. 3), creates a beautiful picture, in the imagist tradition, of a “small bird/charcoal velvet black/ivory breast/perched/on a branch of bright red berries…” yet, the poem’s speaker while extremely observant and sensitive to the nature around her, is unable to name that bird, nor the berries on the branch. She seems stuck in a reality that prevents her, emotionally, from opening up to the splendid image she just saw. It can be assumed that the speaker is so grounded in the daily routine of her urban life that she requires much effort to escape the suffocating and grim reality of the “big city.” Such strength she seems to lack while, apparently, overwhelmed by the clamor of city life. Direct references are made to Los Angeles but this city may be a mere representation of the concept of stifling urbanity, in general.

It is noteworthy that the speaker in Nancy Shiffrin’s poem desires to combine both visual and audible senses but “the song” formed in the speaker’s inner psyche, after seeing the singular splendid bird on that branch of spectacular red berries, cannot be uttered. For the reader who wishes to experience the total beauty of this concise and powerful poem, here it is:

SONG

Small bird
Charcoal velvet back
Ivory breast
Perched
On a branch of bright red berries
I cannot name the bird
I cannot name the berries
I cannot
Release
The song
Lodged in my throat
It is most interesting that neither this carefully described bird, nor the speaker can utter the “song” they may have wished to sing. The effort seems endless as the poem is left open. Furthermore, the speaker’s repetition of “I cannot” (three times consecutively in this brief poem) conveys a total inability of identifying that bird and berries, and a desperate wish to give voice to that inner song that yearns to be sung.

Reminiscent of the opening poem, in this review, by Jehanne Dubrow, presenting an obsessive personae of ‘Death,” Nancy Shiffrin, in her powerful poem, “Journey to the Core” (p. 40) from Game with Variations, ushers a most threatening antagonist in the image of a dreadful “Serpent” coiling through our lives causing much anxiety and fear. The speaker affirms that “men cringe…” /women drop dead children convulsed fearing…” as sounds of supplication are heard, and sacrifices are being offered, yet, “nothing readies them to meet The Serpent’s eyes…”

The mythic amplification of the Serpent as the ultimate symbol of evil mirrored in his menacing eyes is, indeed, of great proportions, and overpowering. Interestingly, however, efforts fail to stop men’s journey “to the core where The Serpent coils. This endless coiling is a haunting image of entrapment with no chance of escape. Additionally, the contrasting image (vis-à-vis the Serpent) of the “lamb long hidden in a cloud remaining complacent” emphasizes the dominance of that Snake in the universe, marking its foundations, and even sipping into the core of our existence.

The last poet to be discussed in this review is Azila (Talit Reisenberger), who wrote the poem featured here in Hebrew. For the purpose of this review, I will translate her poem, “Nashiyut” (“Femininity”) as follows:

Femininity

The woman within me
Clings to me
Like a wet
Tricot blouse.
This very short poem is actually a strong statement uttered by a speaker who undeniably claims or reclaims her femininity in a, perhaps, “fevered world” in which she seems to feel threatened. The speaker is strongly fastened to her being a woman. While this imagist poem draws its strength from its minimalist utterance and simple structure, the sub-text of the poem, may suggest a woman feeling alienated, singled out, vulnerable seeking attention in a most direct and sensual manner.

Moreover, this woman-speaker may wish that we saw her as she sees herself, namely, a total feminine creation. For this purpose, she infuses the image of the wet blouse not only to suggest cohesiveness, but also to paint a most sexually evocative picture drawing our attention from the concept of femininity to the female body itself.

The entire poem is a strong statement of a woman clinging, at all cost, to her identity whether she wants it or not. It is not only the speaker (as the voice of the poem) who attempts to retain her womanhood cohesively, but also the woman deep within her who does so in a most affirming and strong fashion.