
Reviewed by Susan Shaw Sailer, Morgantown, West Virginia, USA

Winner of the *Women in Judaism’s First Annual Writing Competition* in 2010 for her poem, “Suburbs of Zion,” Roberta Feins received another honor when her chapbook *Herald* won the 2016 *Coal Hill Review* Chapbook Prize. Her extraordinary new work *A Morsel of Bread, A Knife*, explores the role of the female in constructing an adequate theology of life.

The poems’ narrative arc follows that of second- and third-generation Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe: the speaker’s Romanian grandmother made *mamalige* with coarse cornmeal; her German great grandmother, matzo balls and chopped liver. The latter speaks Yiddish, and the speaker’s aunt Sylvia is placed in the Jewish Children’s Home along with a younger sibling after the narrative suggests their mother becomes a gambling addict.

The speaker shows the adult world “cloven in two”: the mother’s colors “lilac and rose” versus the father’s “denim and gray.” “She is the rainy season” opposing “[h]is arid months” (*The Medicine Cabinet*, 31). In such a world, “white is male, black, female.” This results in the situation that

> [t]hen you are a pale darkness,
> an ivory web of night (Black Virgin of Rocamadour, [50])

rather than the lovely, messy colors of life itself. The harmful dichotomy implies loss of the sacred.

The poems question what religion is without a goddess, and the eponymous poem offers a potential answer. A teenager in Paris with her American classmates, the speaker finds herself part of a group mildly hassled by Parisian boys. When the American boys form a V to protect the girls huddled inside, the speaker refuses to be protected. On the outside, she yells

> *Laissez-nous passer!*

alive to my power. Winged Victory
riding triumphant on the prow,
cleaving the flowing waters    (What is Religion Without a Goddess, 51).

Asserting herself for the benefit of the group, the young woman becomes empowered. If this condition could last and were not tamped down by social forces, the speaker shows that the young woman is a potential goddess, concerned with the well being of others and with the power to protect.
The triad of maiden/mother/crone also explores the potential for female avatar. The young woman yearns for mutual sexuality, the
[t]ang of your kisses, pelt
of your curly fleece rubbing
my cheeks, salt-lick of your skin.
The mother senses mortality, fears that “our merit will sour as it ages,/ if we don’t tap the cask, drink it// to the dregs.” Acknowledging that she and her mate have “nourished others,” the crone still desires, but against the fullness of long life:

You reach for my rough hand, bring it
to your cracked lips, your stubbled,
grizzled cheek, and I am smitten again,
my hand shaking, not with disease
but with desire                   (Three Troubadour Love Songs, 44-46).

In “Ostinato” the speaker again asks, “What is religion without a goddess?” In this poem, the reader encounters three instances of goddesses bereft of their power: a goddess suffers for three days “hanging from a hook// in search of lore.” Jephthah’s daughter, killed by her father because of a promise he had made to God (Judges 11: 30-40 KJV) dances, come alive again, with “her sisters    on moonlit Mount Carmel” (66). And the third: “Wise Women of Chelm    feeding their children/ on empty buckets    full of moon.”

This third image answers the question, “What is religion without a goddess,” implying that without a goddess, religion is foolishly dangerous, like feeding children on moonlight, on nothing substantial. A goddess hung three days on a hook
seeking an adequate narrative of her place in divinity; a virgin daughter sacrificed because of her father’s bargain with God; women feeding children on moonlight: these images all decry the loss of power and place for goddesses in religion.

What, then, is the place of female divinity in religion? The speaker asserts first what it is not: “I don’t believe in duality: god & devil/ good & evil, body & soul,” and next, what it is:

I believe in Nuance, not Polarity,
not removing half the loaf before you serve it,
seeds, beaded with air in the clear water      (Ostinato, 66).

No polarity, then, between male and female, but a nuanced continuity; the capacity of the female to develop her potential as seed in a nurturing environment. If women choose motherhood, fine; if they don’t, also fine. The speaker declares she no longer believes in “the sacred idea of family” but still “adore[s] relics” such as a handkerchief

redolent with White Shoulders,
found crumpled in her [mother’s] raincoat pocket

(A Sliding Top, A Latch, 64).

Such relics testify not only to the situation that mothers might not have chosen motherhood had the choice been available but that in becoming mothers, they force martyrdom also on their children, “as if I too, were merely a relic/ of her martyrdom” (64). Rather than family becoming the locus where parents martyr themselves to bear and provide for their children, family has the capacity to become the locus of mutual nurturing if polarities of expectation regarding male and female roles can instead mutate to nuanced continuities.