WRITING WELL

Poetry by Renee Norman, 1999

Between Wor(l)ds
in book time
between wor(l)ds
books stacked like steps
around the architecture of her rented room
Martha does not sleep
snacks on sentences
all night long

gone is the flat line drawing of her day
the structure of the office
the symmetry of a prim supervisor
the tailored suits
on cool skin

in her nylon slip
she climbs and climbs the words
a stairway to her reformation
amazed at first light of morning
to be identical
she has not moved at all
Martha's father:

the boy-man damaged by war
& the Englishman who emigrated
to Southern Rhodesia
with a Queen Anne chair

he is a heat sensor
who reflects Martha’s change in temperature
or a veil that is drawn
to distance confrontation

he knows the restlessness in her
but did not question her marriage
did not pass judgement either
when she left the child

deep in a drug-induced sleep
he mutters wisdom
awake he offers nightmares

fingers that accuse
stakes of the fallen walls
around his body
his mind's grasp
of the horror he brings home to her
when she reads the first documented accounts
of Hitler's atrocities
it is her father's ribcage she envisions
every bone of Adam
another finger pointing

Assignation

he enters Martha
as he might a room
where the light is blinding his eyes

in the tub he draws circles on her skin
with the soap
laughing he tells her
on his way to meet her
approached and propositioned
"i said i already have a lady"

he pushes small beds together
holds Martha where the space between them
forms a crevice
a hard ridge of earth
she feels beneath her back
overpowering his tender hold
in this scented
sinkhole talking
the pronoun I rings in her ears

it is then she knows the future
her skin round with dried white foam

Dream Moments

Martha felt his absence keenly
when next day
the meeting over
he looked at her
stubborn, unhappy
defiant
a kind of unperceptive dullness
in his eyes
missed moments
that's what she feared most
from these encounters

in her dream his kiss
so fierce
grabbed the unresolved feeling
between them
crushed it in the physical act of embrace
today
her arms empty
like a baby torn from a loving grip
he stood there
only a dream away

Through the Crib Bars

I.
her pink cheeks
leak through the crib bars
asleep at last
as if she hadn't been screaming
that colicky high-pitched wail
only moments ago

shadows of the rails
fall down across her small back
with weightless rods
that imprison her to Martha's care
for an instant
Martha sees the stripes
as lashes from a whip
she shakes the image off
with loathing

afraid to touch the soft skin
for fear she'll wake
and start the cycle again
too soon
she dreams the baby is pliant
molded to her ribs
like putty
more like the babies in the books
with four hour schedules
and gurgles
not this fierce creature
hard to hold
impossible to cuddle

II.
she calls the baby's name
through the leafy openings in the hedge
a kind of lament
whispered in the floral underworld
but the baby doesn't respond
already she has forgotten Martha
forgotten the vessel

her curls are looser now
the head upright
she sits unaided
fist tight around a plastic toy
slick from saliva
Martha misses her
more than she would have thought possible
a pink baby from some magazine
Martha feels pain that someone
accomplished what she didn't

III.
the rules are that she must observe
from a distance
(her mother makes that clear)
when Martha sees the child
placed on her father's sickbed daily
a small body curved into
her father's emaciated thigh
she can smell the camphor of the medicines
hovering
and her mother's servitude

IV.
in the photos a stranger with Martha's eyes
glances back
good-byes made
years ago

For Martha's Ears Only

if she were to take shape
in my room
i would whisper
the only two words that fit

i am not Martha
not a child of war
seeking solace
not Martha
trapped in a loveless marriage
or oppressed by children's petulance

yet if she rose off the pages
swelling in novel possibilities
i would recognize
the limbs hers
a composite heart transplanted
where a person is most worthy
of the color of her skin
the cold ungentle parts of her
that worded me
and whisper:
i understand

Renee Norman