

A NET TO CATCH MY BODY IN ITS WEAVING

By **Katie Farris**

[The Chad Walsh Chapbook Series, Beloit Poetry Journal: Maine, 2021].

There is a sense of immediacy in this excellent pamphlet by Katie Farris, as though we are reading every poem as it occurs in real time. The poems follow the narrator's journey from the moment she is informed of her breast cancer diagnosis:

...Six day before
my thirty-seventh birthday,
a stranger called and said ,
You have cancer. Unfortunately.

Even in this short, stark poem there is humour. Farris has titled it 'Tell it Slant', an ironic reference to the Emily Dickinson poem. The first poem sets up the pamphlet's purpose: 'To train myself to find, in the midst of hell/what isn't hell'. This statement of individual intent becomes universal by the end of the poem: 'Why write love poetry in a burning world?' The pamphlet sets out to answer this question, and in doing so, she places her writing in a context of a historical narrative, larger than personal struggles and our own short time on the 'burning' planet.

The 'love poetry' is refreshing, real, gritty and disarming at times. These are poems about love for the 'body, bald, cancerous'; about real sex on a friend's chair, sex during chemo, the intimacy of marriage where you can ask for assistance in 'unwinding that pale hair/from my hemorrhoid'.

There are some stunning images in these poems that have stayed with me, for example the severed 'heavy braid' that, unlike the fairytale will not be a magic rope up to a tower, but a rope to 'let me down into the earth'.

Farris describes a cat's shed whiskers as 'purewhite parenthesis', a removed breast as a '...Malignant/magnificent palimpsest'. Language is woven into the body, inseparable from it. The body as an object of love, of betrayal, of beauty and strength are all explored here. There is a determination and the poetic skill to stare unblinking at the realities of disease, loss, pain without morbidity and without resorting to cliché.

A proud, animal determination for survival is entwined with the need to create and to love. The narrator in 'The Wheel' will '...grub at the roots of words' to find meanings in the obscure and the strange: '- finding a mouse/in Russia's armpit, or the doll baby/ in the deep black pupil of an Englishman's/eye.'

The surrealism and originality of Farris's voice permeate these poems. Memory is described as 'a prophylactic against loss' and as a gift which we leave behind for others.

The final poem, 'What Would Root', uses repetition to give a sense of the present moment, pure and separate from past and future: 'It was May,/it was May, it was May, and the air was sweet/with pine and Island Mountain Lilac.' The narrator gradually transforms into roots, a metaphor for the essence of the self, the casting off of physical form: '...the roots in my skull shifted and I/lay down beneath my own branches.' There is tenderness and acceptance in this poem. Farris exceeds her aim to 'train myself, in the midst of a burning world,/to offer poems of love to a burning world.' These are poems of love, beauty and poetic skill.

Reviewed by Kitty Donnelly