

Waking the Bones
By Elizabeth Kirschner
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Review by Alice Weiss

THERE ARE BARE FACTS IN ANY LIFE. A memoir writer can choose to examine them in a multitude of ways. We have some shared expectation that that examination will be linear and that what is revealed to us will be implicitly defined by time. In her Memoir, *Waking the Bones* Elizabeth Kirschner's simply ignores all that, she draws a circle in a blizzard, and meditation by meditation, she comes closer to a way of understanding how her life is strung together and a way through to the living of it.



The bare facts of Kirschner's life: she was abused by both parents, she seems to have had no relationship with her older siblings except they gave her the nickname "Little Bits," (both a sound cognate for Elizabeth, and a metaphor for how scattered she feels). She sings. She marries; she and her husband live near Boston College where he works as a scientist. She has a son, Ryan. Throughout the marriage she suffers a serious seizure disorder, and then a major psychotic breakdown. Later she leaves the husband and moves to a cabin on the coast of Maine where Ryan visits on weekends.

As in any circle, the end is the beginning. We slip through tropes like a ribbon highway: the gestation of the moth from pupa to adult, Elizabeth always looking for the "eclose." Winter is everywhere, and snow is treasured as dreams, and light and woods. There are angels, horrible events, her father cutting her back where her angel wings would have been leaving her bleeding, her grandmother and she each other's guardian angels. Kirschner does not go for simple simile. The following is an example of the way the mind of this speaker winds itself around its images and voices, revealing herself both to herself and us. The paragraph is from the "Prelude" to the book.

She (Mom) planted my hand under the Singer Sewing machine until my fingers bones wept. . . the Singer Sewing Machine went rat a tat tat as the needle bore in and out of me like that of a ferocious acupuncturist. I wrapped my bleeding hand in toilet paper, walked out the door and stepped barefoot in Spring snow melt—Beyond the pain that held me in I smelled the pomegranate air, tasted the brandied sun. I began to sing "Bring in the Clowns" while I, . . . walked out of the child that I was, to ghost her and make a blizzard in my brain in order to remember to forget the childhood I was walking out on. (Page 3.)

The scene is cinematic, horrifying, the language at first strangely comic "rat a tat tat," you hear a child's voice, almost reporting, not experiencing the pain. That comes with the "ferocious acupuncturist." We see the

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horror of that, but also a strangely experienced humor. Acupuncture is clearly not in the world of the child Kirschner reports but “ferocious” is pure child. The combination of child world and wounded adult experience is characteristic. Here we know an acupuncturist is actually a healer who uses needles to ease pain. The mother’s twisting of her maternal role indeed, her power, is echoed and compressed in that ferocious acupuncturist. Further, the child’s coolly wrapping her hand in toilet paper, flat, and realistic, even walking barefoot, but into the Spring snow melt and smelling the “pomegranate air.” Those last two phrases claim to be the child’s but there is a knowing in them that mixes in, that process where she moves herself beyond pain into a lushly sensual image. But she does not want to stop at beyond pain, she wants to go beyond herself, to “ghost” the vulnerable child that she is, at that point, to make the blizzard “to remember to forget the childhood I was walking out on.”

One striking thing about this work is the tremendous agility of Kirschner’s mind: its capacity to make its experience of nature, science, story, snow, ocean, not a metaphor but a replacement for the memories, for the contents of her wounded mind. Nonetheless there is a problem. It is hard to live in the real world of relationships and laundry. Finally in a mental hospital with what sounds like a massive psychotic break, which she calls “Walking with Winter,” she begins to articulate a different motive from just waking the memories she has hidden in that blizzard. To stay with the world she needs a tether.

“My boy turned eleven today, yet I’m fading away, sliding in my brain of winter . . . Dot, dot like Rorschach tests while I tap, tap, trying to find the line, that’s serve as lifeline, keep me tethered to the world.”

It is the brilliance of this poet that she finds the line between slipping out of self into metaphor and back tethered to the self in a kind of living metaphor: the cabin by the sea in Maine. Here she builds a real house and imaginary ship garden. She pays attention both to her dream of soul and her life in her body.

“I sip hot cinnamon tea on this October morning while pondering that color of my soul. While pondering the color of my soul, I fill up with urine and yearning, only to empty myself of that urine and yearning. I see that my soul is blue and it’s going to be half past evening all day. (Page 5)

This too is contained in the Prelude. In the beginning is the end. It is as if she is saying take this journey with me, we will end up in the peace of evening.