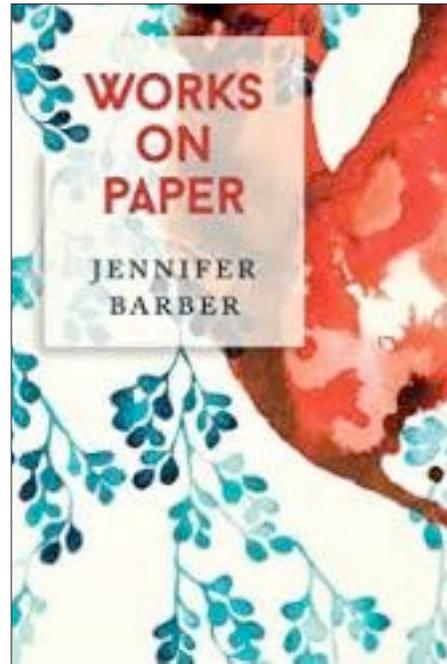


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Works on Paper
by Jennifer Barber
published by Word Works
Winner of the 2015 Tenth Gate Prize

Review by Alice Weiss

Spare and lovely, the poems in Jennifer Barber's *Works on Paper* resonate with answerings. Not just call and response, mind you, although that is there too, her poems seek out the moment when there are mysterious answerings even though the call is inaudible. In "Source" the opening poem, the leaves, hearing the rain before it sounds, lean "toward the place where the rain is about to begin. . .widening the surface of their urgency, their need/to register each shifting of air." In "Almanac," a graceful and gracious compression of one of Virgil's *Georgics*, where beehives are ruled by a king, she wonders "Who first discovered/ it was a queen." Always she is in conversation.



In "Assembling a Psalm," phrases propose a psalm, without being one, and at the same time, being one: the sun, the cedars, grass like flesh, and where is she? She doesn't know and not knowing still, and we find an answering:

*there is always a turn
a way to open the lips*

At one point in the collection she asks, "Is bereft some kind of command," making the language have a conversation with itself. And indeed, the conversation she would most like to have, that with a father who has died of cancer, she cannot. So she preserves what must be the utterly inadequate question of dying, in *On Morphine*, his last words

*Are these my eyes
under my hand.
And in the poem "After a year,"
What if he had dreamed
death as light on a windowsill,
shorebirds running at a wave?*

She does not so much struggle with her grief as let it make images of itself. It doesn't feel effortless so much as full of grace.

*he was growing wings,
and would leave us when the wings grew in.*

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The valet that holds his clothes, "with its limited/knowledge of the body of a man."

In "Benign" after the death begins to recede, conversation begins again with the world and other voices. She reads *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, and of his last three days, but putting the book aside, hears that

*The wind
roughs up the highest branches of the oak.
The ear opens like an eye*

*—Unable to fit in the sack
or work free of it, he howls and howls.*

There are conversations, as here, with Tolstoy, Goya (a delicious poem about an etching of four bulls where I suspect her father peers out at us), Chekov, the Bible and Near Eastern Creation myths. This last contains my favorite of all the lines in the collection,

*After the great battle
when the leader of the gods
split with his arrow
the Mother of All.
he stretched half of her out as heaven,
he fattened the rest of her as land.*

The other singular quality of an underlying call and response pulse is music. Barber's lines are like measures, often couplets, always short, but her language is flowing so the tension between the stops and the flows is like, well, I flounder for a metaphor of my own, but it's simple. It's like song. These are the notes that struck my ear reading this time through.

*The moon
naked as a slate
impossible to write on or ignore.*

*A gazelle is wearing
antelope pants.*

*By pear I mean pear,
not a riddled heart.
At least I think I do.
The flesh of it laid bare*