

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4

Review by Eleanor Goodman

Purgatory Chasm

by Susan Edwards Richmond

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Nature often serves as the central metaphor for a poem. There are a few poets – Wordsworth, Kinnell, and Oliver come to mind – who can be said to use nature as the driving force of nearly all of their work.

In *Purgatory Chasm*, Ms. Richmond enters into this tradition. The book is a collection of poems all set in a state park of granite cliffs near Worcester, Massachusetts. The pieces are probably best read as a single poem divided into three large sections: “Geologic History,” “Voices in the Rocks,” and “The Chasm Loop.” Those pieces that stand on their own as poems succeed admirably.

“The Earth Opened, A Story,” is one such piece. Here is its entirety:

Shouldering his musket, taking
his keen-nosed bluetick hound for luck,

he thought he knew every grove and streambed,
the whole sweep of the Blackstone Valley.

So when he sighted along the deer’s withers,
and the head, with its mighty rack, went up to test the air,

he was dead certain where the sharp report
would chase that buck down the twig-snapping trail,

but when he followed it, he saw the gorge
instead, stretched out before him,

where none had been before. Or so he swore.

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Later, he would say it was the fault of that earthquake
rippling down eight hundred miles from Halifax.

If it could sink a Worcester meadow,
change the course of the Quinapoxet River,

surely that earthquake could dig itself
a piece of purgatory right where he stood.

There is much to enjoy here: the alliterative intensity of “keen-nosed
bluetick hound for luck,” or the internal rhyme of “where none had been
before. Or so he swore.” The lines have an appropriately vaunted quality,
something like a battle hymn. The reader gets a clear sense of the
landscape as well as the psychology and character of this explorer.

Ms. Richmond experiments to good effect with the voices of people who
have died in the chasm. In each section of the three part poem “The
Ghosts That Lead Me,” she takes on the voice of a different ghost: Simon
Such, who presumably committed suicide in one of the chasm’s caves;
Thordis Tapper, a teenager who fell to her death; and Mrs. George
Prentice, who died while picnicking with her husband. The voices are
perhaps not as distinct as they might be, but “Attachment”, the second
section of the poem, in which Thordis speaks about following a man
through the chasm, is lovely. The sections ends:

I pick my way,

sure-footed, weightless,
straight ahead,
toward the back that keeps
receding, the body moving

forward, away.

This is a wonderful imagining of what it is like to be a ghost: always
watching an endlessly receding body, still tempted by the corporeal
without being able to access it.

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Ms. Richmond understands poetically intense language, and when she uses it, the sounds produced are impressive. Here is the first half of the penultimate piece, "What I Leave Behind":

The see-saw of chickadee notes rising and falling,
the scramble of chipmunk tucking acorn in root drawer,
squirrels cascading over bridges of trees;

deadfall, the wreckage of oak
released from the tightrope ledge
to tumble between;

trunk growing straight to the light,
dodging like a crooked pipe
around an outcrop, then straight again,
bearing its cargo of green

The verbal resonances of "chipmunk" / "tucking acorn" and "oak" / "tightrope" take no small degree of skill to create. When Ms. Richmond is at her best, she is quite good indeed.