

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

Steerage

by Bert Stern

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Review by Miriam Levine

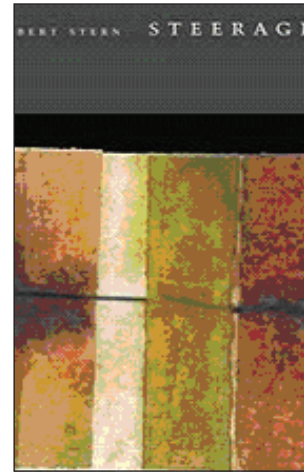
BURNING STARS, JADE SILK, CAMARROS

We've heard a lot about American individualism; and, in American literature, about writers like Melville, who have what one critic has called, the voice of "the imperial self," majestic, heroic, grand. In "Walden," Thoreau, though a less imperial writer than Melville, still creates a narrator who lives heroically alone in his tiny cabin in the woods and sees few people. He's a man without family. In actual life, Thoreau walked daily to Concord village to see his mother. In contrast Bert Stern writes about his deep connection to the living and dead. He sheds his ego and takes on the voices of his ancestors who immigrated to America from Eastern Europe. Through him, we hear his dead mother's account of the voyage. The family is out to sea; order falls apart; the family loses its center. Sailing in limbo, his mother says, "Nobody talked. We could not look at the sea or the dead sky/ above us. We hung between these. We would be here always."

In "Lotty is Born" Stern bears the weight of generations: "All suffered to bring me here to this room/ where I write, bigger than the house/ my mother was born in." Beautifully, in fluid lines, he registers a dissolving self: "I am somebody's dream . . . let them tell me if they can/ if I am recompense for what they endured."

A descendent of those who in steerage endured the stink of "of seawater and piss, animals and human sweat," Stern brings his ancestors into the light. His mother says, "my spirit was waiting for me, dancing on the shore." The spirit is feminine, like the Shekinah: the principle of immanence, the divine showing itself. I've heard the Shekinah described metaphorically as a single green leaf that keeps falling to earth but is never seen to land. Stern refers to the Shekinah in "Hannah Remembers," notable for its sense of shining, never-ending time: "Evenings that went on forever/ still unfolding." In "Driving Home from Elizabethtown" the poet is gathered into transcendent light:

. . . I am ready to fall
with the turnings of poplar
and oak. Through the windshield
even the thin rain that takes on
gold light from the sun in its falling



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is fuel for the burning.

Stern's "Wait," the long poem, which comprises part five of "Steerage," is a triumph, sweet and mysterious. The Shekinah takes the form of a dying girl who lives inside the man Stern calls "Jacob." "He called out to her as one might/ throw a flower at a star." The girl keeps falling, imperiled, but she comes back to life: "she's close as your skin, still humming her tune." Stern gives the girl a voice: "She said this. The girl said this

now was always as it is now." Nothing is lost. Time is eternal. The poem ends by connecting a tender earthly image—"the turnip's sweet spheroid,/ its little tail"—with an image of fire and living water: burning stars and icicles dripping as if they were "breathing."

Besides water-fire-falling-burning poems in which Stern invokes a self's dissolving in radiant never-ending time, there are poems about closely observed everyday life. (I prefer the spirit-Shekinah and daily-life poems to the fable poems, "What the Teller Knows" and "Early autumn in the Mountains," which seem unreal to me.) Stern writes about his neighbor, Kenny, a Vietnam war veteran; he watches him capably "sizing boards with a handsaw,/ setting them snug." But at night, in his dreams, he keeps shooting at a girl who is "hardly a shadow." He describes Kenny's son, "washing his car,/ a black Camarro/ with V8 engine," and the everyday of American life with its skateboards and televisions playing all night in store windows.

"Tea," which I'll quote in its entirety, demonstrates the lyrical beauty of Stern's poems. Here, the feminine appears as a muse. "Tea" is also a love poem that recognizes the separateness of the beloved:

That clear song—
was it you while I slept,
slipping down in your jade
silk to feed the stove
with pine and drink your tea
alone, at down, as you like to do?

Stern could be describing his own clear song: tender, lyrical, beautifully phrased.

*Miriam Levine's most recent book is *The Dark Opens*, winner of the 2007 Autumn House Poetry Prize. She is the author of *In Paterson*, a novel, *Devotion: A Memoir*, three poetry collections, and *A Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*. Her work has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review*, and *Ploughshares*, among many other places. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts writing fellowship and grants from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, she was a fellow at Yaddo, Hawthornden Castle, Le Château de Lavigny, Villa Montalvo, Fundación Valparaíso, and the Millay Colony for the Arts.