

"The Looking House" by Fred Marchant, (Graywolf Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Molly Lynn Watt

“Where the riverbank is firm/ but crumbling, where the slate/ of long ago shows bones dissolving. /Along these a boy among the living/ thinks there is nothing near, or worth/ believing in...” With these lines from the first poem, “House on Water, House on Air,” we embark on a quest with Fred Marchant through “The Looking House.” In this, his fourth book, Marchant wrestles through a life of turbulent longing for home and searching for something to believe in. In 1968 he hopes to find both during the Vietnam War, when he enlists in the Marines. Soon he becomes uneasy in his uniform and is one of the first conscientious objectors honorably discharged from this war.

Morally shaken, Marchant rented an Irish hayloft furnished with “a shred of linoleum/ a cot with a spring, and a low sink,/ the kind to bathe a baby in. Knives, forks, butane,/ and windows on three walls./ A red door with a latch opened onto cement stairs leading to a toilet in the barn.” In this sanctuary Marchant breathes sea-air and muck, feels sun and rain. He tries to heal his anguished soul with meals of scrambled eggs and rice, vistas of field and bay. He fills spiral-bound notebooks trying to understand, “why I joined and how I came to quit the war.” He works “with single-minded intent, the way a calf/ might plunge its nose into a pail of milk.”

Years later Marchant returns and learns there stands a chapel ruins in a pasture nearby he never saw where a “sixth-century Monk named Aedh, had made his cell in a crawlspace there.” Here is the magic of Marchant. He shows us his quest and the monk’s conjoined across centuries, converging with his crawling deep into his own internal ruins seeking a kind of redemption.

Marchant knocks on doors, stands in doorways, looks through windows, opens latches, follows paths, watches water and listens. Always he is listening for what life is teaching. He wants something to hold onto and remembers when a child “digging in dirt/ with a spoon./” and finding a stone he names the “Philosopher’s Stone,” “It tells my hand it must not lie/about what it touches, and my tongue the same, too.” Marchant digs for truth with the same ferocity he once dug for that stone.

Marchant wants “A Place at the Table.” He contemplates, “It means you can face your accusers./ It means no place to hide./ It means you will not drift off to sleep.” He neither hides, nor drifts, nor sleeps in this collection, telling the truth, as he finds it, no matter how harsh. He reminds himself in “Brasso,” “People will die/because of you, your mistakes...”

He empathizes with an Iranian woman, a fiction writer and editor, repeatedly imprisoned and then exiled, in “Words for Farraj.” “I listen to you confess to confessions coerced,/ you saying torture can be a doorway, and the pain/ in a mock hanging lasts only until the lights go out. /When they wake you what hurts the most is/ that the afterlife should seem so ugly and familiar.”

He relates her experience to his, in “Conscientious Objector Discharge” writing, “Knock on the doorframe and step out. Your feet as they

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

hit the gravel /will make it clatter. You should listen to it—listen hard to the path you are on./It will sound as if you are walking on water.”

But even truth is not enough, Marchant “would teach my heart how to be a heart—/help the doors open wide.” He makes a Christmas visit to his aging sister, in the poem, “Custody of Eyes.” She, institutionalized, sitting forever in a wheel chair, is attended to for every need. He gives her two presents, a sweater and “crucifix that came for free in the mail.” When she holds the crucifix, “She looks at it as if we had saved her soul—/ A kind of joy I’m not sure I have ever felt.” At visit’s end, he writes, “—I touch my sister’s soft gray hair, and kiss her on the brow./ Lunch time now, but I say we’ll be back *soon*./My eyes are lowered, and I feel nothing but shame at the lie in soon./I imagine everyone sees right through me.”

He writes of sitting by his father in a hospital, listening to his father breathing. He’s in a coma, he’s dying. Marchant remembers his father’s balpeen hammer, “a miniature tool the size of a popsicle,/my favorite among all his tools./There was no claw at the back, no round steel for *peen-ing*,/the shaping and smoothing of metal./ That’s how I wanted his minutes/ to pass, no thrash or heave, just a steady tapping away until done.”

He stands in the house where he was born, looking through a window, and happens to see Candy, the dog, squirm out of his collar, and muses, “He is taking off,/ having figured it out, is headed toward/ all that existence promises, even to dogs.”

In “Nobody Too” Marchant “would pause in affirmation, /like the squirrels in the pine—/ my back arching and torso/ rippling into a question/ that flees before the answer.” He must keep writing to find, to see, to know. He writes of his “father’s narrow desk,/a stained pine affair his bills bled/ him over. I see him adding things up,/ the furrowed sum *not right, not right*.”

But it’s not so easy for Marchant in this morally ambiguous world. He works out this lyrical and layered account book for his house of life, with its many windows and doors, openings and closings. This is a brilliant book of moral poems built on the philosopher’s stone requiring truth telling. He shows us ordinary experiences, commonplace objects with straight-forward words set in the contemporary world. We recognize his struggle as our own. Then he infuses love and hope, perhaps it’s ephemeral, but it’s enough.

Before we disembark, Marchant buoys us in his last poem, First Song Again: “Trust the wood you stand on,/ Become an ally of the grain,/Bend in the wind./Trust even the high precarious places,/ The steeples and windy overhang/ That teach you everything./ Trust too the rose tint of late afternoon / Sifting down through a lofted/Blue heron wing./Trust above all the imminent return/Of the small, but persistent/ Impulse to sing.”