

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

Heavy Grace by Robert Cording

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review by William Matthew McCarter

Funerals are somber occasions and one would think that if a poet were to make a book about them, it would be a miserable failure. However, Robert Cording shows the reader a deeper spiritual meaning of the process of grieving in his book, *Heavy Grace*. Through the imagery of nature, Cording draws an intimate picture of how we humans travel through the varying stages of grief as we move toward accepting death as an inevitable part of life. *Heavy Grace* is divided into four chapters. The first chapter describes how those of us who are living should enjoy the natural world around us. The second chapter moves on to the theme of what takes place at the end of life. In the third chapter, Cording shows the reader a broad picture of death and dying, including some very significant meditations on grieving for those who we have lost. In the final chapter, Cording shows the reader how one learns to accept death as a part of life.

Nature is a recurring theme in the book and Cording uses vibrant imagery in the first few poems to ground his work in the natural world. Cording uses birds to illustrate how fulfilling life can be. In the first poem, Cording discusses sky diving: "... tracing the summer's liquid breeze/ While they fall earthward..." (3). Cording speaks of the birds in the trees: "a pair of ringdoves coo/ A doleful love" and he talks about "great egrets/ and wood storks." One of my favorite images from the first part of Cording's book is how he describes birds flying in the distance as "Chinese brush strokes" (10).

In "The Feeder" Cording introduces one of the themes in *Heavy Grace*: reinvention. In this poem, the narrator notices that as the birds come to his son's homemade bird feeder, his son is full of sorrow when they leave. Cording writes: "I saw a world where loss was only a clearing away/ For what comes next." Cording expands on this theme of reinvention in the poem "Instinct" where he calls this reinvention "mindless resurrection." In this poem, the aging narrator considers the repetitive demands of nature as he watches a bird land in a nest of what is, essentially, dead matter. The birds do not know that they are reinventing this matter, they are only responding to the demands of nature and their environment.

In the next few chapters, Cording uses the imagery of birds to develop this theme of reinvention. Throughout the next several poems, Cording discusses death and dying and the grieving process that follows. Cording often reflects on the trees and the birds that flourish in nature as the narrator watches his loved one die. This illustrates how life and death are a part of nature and that while there is tragedy in terms of loved ones who are dying, there is also life going on around those loved ones. One example of how Cording juxtaposes life and death can be found in his poem "Cardinal." In this poem, Cording observes the pain of the red bird as it tries to communicate with its reflection in the window of the room where his loved one is dying. Cording uses this image from nature as a metaphor for his own search for meaning inside the room.

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In the poem, "Hands," Cording expands on his theme of reinvention. He cleverly describes the hands of the undertaker as the tools that recreate what a person once was. In this poem, he compares the work of the undertaker to works of art, noting that the undertaker "spoke the presence/ of the dead..." (22). For Cording, the purpose of this kind of reinvention is to "ratify their [the dead's] presence and help them believe/ The heart's knot of fear might be untied" (20). In the poem, "Good Friday," Cording recalls a moment when a bird is knitting a nest in a tree outside his house. Cording writes that the nest will "likely fall/ As not in the winds to come" and then grieves over those moments in life where things don't work out as expected.

In Cording's poetry, birds reinvent themselves through seasonal migration and through their persistent building of nests for their young. Just as the animals in nature reinvent themselves, Cording speaks of the reinvention of the dead into the art of the undertaker and into the memory of those who loved them. In this sense, Cording's pen functions just as the hands of the undertaking, crafting memories of those who have departed so that they can live in his art. While it is necessary for the poet to reinvent these memories and transform them into art, it is, nonetheless, a terrible burden to bear. It is, in Cording's words, *Heavy Grace*.