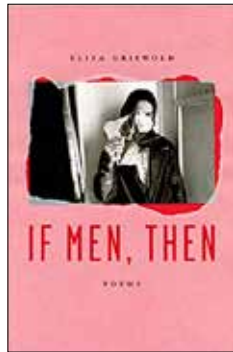


*If Men Then* by Eliza Griswold  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
(February 11, 2020)  
ISBN-13: 978-0374280772



Review By Ed Meek

The intersection of style and content in poetry can be powerful and effective — a way poets can help their readers



find order amid the chaos of our current era, to paraphrase Robert Frost. The trick is to arrive at the right balance of aesthetic and content. In art, the aesthetic must come first. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold” is, after all, prose. The line works because it builds on an opening metaphor. And because the statement’s succinctness reverberates with us (still) in an age of “alternative facts” and “truthiness” — when any general pronouncement is suspect. Eliza Griswold walks this tightrope, sometimes successfully, other times, not. But because her poems often take place in war zones, she’s always provocative — even when she is tendentious.

*If Men Then* is Griswold’s third book of poetry. She is well-known for her nonfiction. Her book *Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction this year. She has also written about Afghanistan, The Kurds, Christianity and Islam, Ethiopia, etc. In short, she is a very interesting, and engaged, person.

Here’s a short poem of hers called “Reflection” that appeared in *The New Yorker*:

*I is a lion  
who snarls  
at the lion  
in the water  
who snarls.*

How’s that for a fresh perspective? In just a few lines it captures an empowered woman’s point of view yet, though she snarls, she snarls at her own image. It’s kind of an anti-narcissus poem. She is no flower. The use of the first person to explore a split identity fits these self-involved times of ours. Just be yourself, we are told, an army of one, take the journey of self-discovery (along with countless other invitations for omphaloskepsis). Is it any surprise that many of us today feel a certain sense of dislocation? Griswold examines this perspective in a number of poems. Here is another short one entitled “Green”:

*I shouldered her hobo sorrow and soldiered on.  
She was warden of an angry garden,  
guarding against what hoped to grow.  
The bitter bud that never opens hardens.*

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“What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?” asked Antonio Machado. Griswold answers the question, again capturing our *Weltanschauung*. We are all a little angry these days, just ask Elizabeth Warren. The poetry here is dense, alliterative, and assonant, with internal and end-stopped rhymes. The aesthetic reinforces the content.

Griswold opens the book with a “Prayer”:

*What can we offer the child  
at the border: a river of shoes,  
her coat stitched with coins,  
her father killed for his teeth,  
her mother, sewing her  
daughter's future into a hem.*

In this poem Griswold takes on the heart-wrenching problem of undocumented children crossing the border. The problems immigrants encounter here in the U.S., and in other nations around in the world, is an increasingly tragic concern. In some ways, poetry, making use of imagery and metaphor, is able to express more of the despair than newspaper reports. Here is the last stanza:

*Nothing is what we can offer.  
The child died years ago.  
Except practice a finer caliber of kindness  
to the stranger rather than wield  
this burden of self, this harriedness.  
The process of humility involves less us.*

Griswold's point of view rings true, but in the last line she has crossed a Rubicon from poetry into statement. She is telling us directly how we should feel and, because of that, the verse becomes less effective.

Another poem “Good-bye Mullah Omar,” takes place in Afghanistan. It begins: “Charlie says when Afghan men get together, / the number of eyes is always odd.” Griswold's unique perspective — because she has lived in a place so few of us will ever go — combines reporting with a poet's eye. And that makes her perspective very compelling. Although, when she ends the poem with the question (“Where are your scars now, wonderboys?”) the devolution into prose pops up again.

“Ruins” manages to balance on the tightrope pretty well.

*A spring day comes through Trastevere.  
A nun in turquoise sneakers  
contemplates the stairs.  
Every hard bulb stirs.  
The egg in our chest cracks  
against our will.  
The dead man on the Congo road  
was missing an ear,  
which had been eaten  
or someone was wearing  
it around his neck.  
The dead man looked like this, no, that.*

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*Here's a flock of tourists  
In matching canvas hats.  
We're healing by mistake.  
Rome is also built on ruins.*

In this poem, Griswold puts her finger on a number of the problems of our time. The disparities between the rich tourists and the poor immigrants, the endemic violence in certain regions, our attempts to take it all in. The end-stopped rhymes and clashing images evoke a sense of disconnection. Once again, the poem ends better in the penultimate line.

The title *If Men, Then* is a response to the Wallace Stevens poem "Metaphors of a Magnifico," which begins: "Twenty men crossing a bridge/ Into a village/ Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges / Into twenty villages." The first poem in Griswold's book, "Prelude to a Massacre," starts "Twenty men crossing a bridge, / into a village, / is not a metaphor/ but prelude to a massacre." Griswold is pointing out that, in Afghanistan, metaphors have little to do with survival in a multi-generational war.

Not all is earnest here, but Griswold's sense of humor is uneven — it comes across most successfully in "Reflection." She includes a sequence of poems about Italy that are not as involving as those set in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, *If Men, Then* is well worth reading by those who believe that poetry has something to tell us about our many internal and external conflicts.