

Blood Memory
By Gail Newman
Marsh Hawk Press, 2020
\$15.00
ISBN: 978-0-9969911-9-3

Review by Joan Gelfand

“What The Sun Can’t Heal”

The strong and steadfast Los Angeles sun no doubt has restorative powers. Well-being emanates from its bright light, an outdoor lifestyle is perennially uplifting; flowers, fruit and trees thrive in its healing warmth.

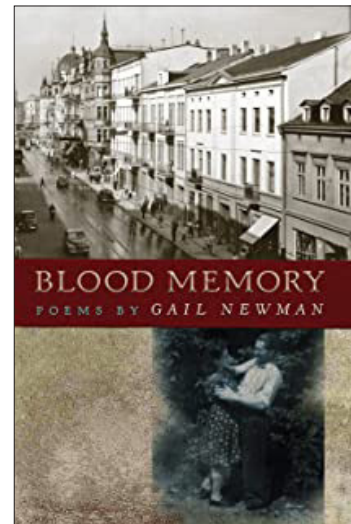
In “Blood Memory” we see, if not for the first time, then with a fresh eye, what the sun’s curative powers can never heal: deep scars of a history so devastating that artists, writers and musicians are still engaged in mining its terrors and complexities. The Nazi Holocaust has produced libraries of books and in 2015 produced yet another Pulitzer prize (“All The Light We Cannot See.”) The mass annihilation of Jews, homosexuals, Christians and Gypsies haunts us still.

I have a theory about why it took fifty years for the tsunami of writings and art to reach us and Newman’s poems prove it yet again. With all due respect to the Elie Wiesel, Irena Klepfisz and other authors tapped into an urgency powerful enough to tell their stories, I think instead of Academy Award winners, “Life is Beautiful,” and “Schindler’s List.” I posit that the Holocaust delivered a collective blow so substantial that it required decades for survivors and artists to begin to heal.

Born in a displaced persons camp in Lodz, Newman and her family emigrated to Los Angeles. They survived the Lodz ghetto and Auschwitz. According to Newman: “After the Lodz Ghetto, both of my parents were sent to Auschwitz. My father was there until the end of the war. My mother was sent to a labor camp where she worked until liberated.”

In an interview with Newman, I learned that “Blood Memory” brewed in her psyche for most of her adult life. A well-published poet, artist and teacher for forty years, she reported that she worked on the book for four years, years which included a trip to Poland. Newman considers “Blood Memory” her ‘magnum opus,’ the work of her life. And if you think you’ve heard it all about this low point in human history, you haven’t.

Marge Piercy, the esteemed Judge of Marsh Hawk Press’ 2019 poetry contest chose “Blood Memory” as winner. From Piercy’s comments: “Writing about the Holocaust can be difficult now, not that it was ever easy. It has become myth or something people use as a metaphor for something they object to; those who know, who went through it are dying off. Those who deny what happened multiply. To make fresh, powerful poems rooted in the Shoah is amazing.”



Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

With its publication, "Blood Memory" joins the pantheon of exceptional writings.

From "Still Life 1945" This poignant poem from Section I narrates the story of Newman's father during the war.

'face down in the snow/ hearing silent woods/slight shiver of ice forming on branches...' "he feigns death/For three days/unmoving in the snow his bones/ so cold they could break."

Not exactly the 'still life' of a Dutch master; no tulips, wine goblets or silver service. War trauma lives on in the cells of Newman's father, a trauma which psychology has proven, passes on to the next generation, to his daughter.

In "Exile" – "Trying to leave, at the border... 'we had no papers, no photographs, no passports./We were stopped/Raped.'" And still "God pushed us forward like someone shoving/at the back of a line."

The leap of the imagination brings these poems into the here and now, into the immigration lines at our own border, to the immigration lines in Syria, Turkey, Germany.

Settled in Los Angeles, the family is anything but settled. The poet receives a dollhouse when her mother is hospitalized for several months due to physical ailments as a result of the war. From "Dollhouse"

"but the house seemed scraped hollow/and in the silence, I felt someone listening/Who I thought might be God or a fairy small as a pin/moth-like, flinging her body against the window glass."

So, yes, PTSD means trauma and trauma means haunted. The scarred mother, the scared daughter, the loss upon loss continues under the Los Angeles sun.

In "Living With the Dead' Newman writes: "The dead follow me around--/elbows on my shoulders/fingers in my hair."

And in "Transport" the recombinant and end rhymes carry the poem all the way:

"It was spring, April, but the air was thick/With an odor of ash and decay/ Smoke rose, blackening the sky./Was it night or day?/They did not know./ Those who trusted God began to pray. Others left Him discarded on the tracks/as the train pulled away."

Still, trauma and despair are not all that Newman delivers in this excellent collection. Imagination carries the poems into the here and now, mirroring the trauma we are all living through today.

From "Taken"

*"Yesterday/melted into tomorrow."
Sounds like our pandemic nightmare, yes?
Finally, "My Mother Remembers" Newman quotes "Ann of Green Gables:"
"my life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes."*

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Other notable poems are “Night Terror,” “Elegy,” “Mt. Sinai.”

Resisting the bleakness of the moment, we Californians are nonetheless suffering through our own nightmare: (climate change, firestorms, evacuations, Covid, and Trump) I dare say that in “Blood Memory” history has a strange way of repeating itself, and evil lives on. The lesson here, is that we can survive. How we survive remains the question.

Joan Gelfand’s new novel “Extreme” is set in a Silicon Valley gaming startup.