

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Brightness Fall
Poems
by Ellen Steinbaum
CW Books, Cincinnati OH
83 pages, softbound

review by Zvi A. Sesling

To the long line of women who have written books of “confessional” poetry, we can add Ellen Steinbaum, whose most recent book is *Brightness Falls*. Steinbaum’s poetry is gentle and sympathetic to our senses, certainly as revealing as her predecessors who write about their lives and loves.

There are four sections to this book, the first, “Begin Again” starts with *untethered* and is followed by *begin again*, two fifteen line poems in which we learn she is alone with, in the first a “solace/of pillows” and in the second “with beach grass blade/for compass.”

In the first scenario we can see her alone in her bed, the empty pillow next to her where her late husband would have been, something everyone experiences with the loss of a partner. In the second poem there is another recollection with which we can associate, our confusion at suddenly being alone and like wind blowing through grass and the grass perhaps bending in so many directions, we find ourselves directionless, unsure of where we want to go or should, not metaphorically, but actually.

In one of her longer poems Steinbaum reveals what life was like for her before she met her new husband, though we do not learn how much time has passed after the death of her first husband before the new relationship.

Before I Met Him

*I was fine
gave dinner parties
grew a garden
read the papers
paid my bills
repainted rooms and
bought new dishes
went to ballets
wrote my will
had a new book out
visited family
tried new recipes
tried new wines
made new friends and
wrote new poems
had (small) adventures
I was fine
I was fine
had (small) adventures*

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*wrote new poems
made new friends and
tried new wines
tried new recipes
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repainted rooms and
paid my bills
grew a garden
gave dinner parties
I was fine
I was fine*

Males and females can associate with the emotions of having a departed spouse and the need to move on in life. Perhaps everyone's method is different, but the underlying attempts to restart and reshape are all there.

Unlike some who might search for romance and a new beginning, there are those who do not consciously make the effort.

widow's walk

*she didn't want to
want again
yearn for arms
around her
arms holding her
new kisses
skin warmed
by new hands*

*she didn't want to dance
drop dizzily
from brightness
to deep shadow
want to go instead
on her even way*

*stay small and
folded from the light
never venture
into crowded streets*

*she never wanted
she never
dreamed*

This poem reflects both the prelude to hope and the movement to the next phase of a life, from to companionship to love confirmed by the first stanza of:

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there will be worse (I)

*after the argument
he says there will
be worse and I
think those
are words of love*

There are times when readers wonder if Steinbaum is writing about her deceased husband or her new mate. There are times when readers are left with no doubt it is about the present and the future, and while brightness may fall, a new sun rises for her.

This book is a “must read” for everyone who has survived and recovered from loss. It is for everyone else as well.