

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

**Deadletters**  
**By JP Reese**  
**Cervena Barva Press**  
**Somerville, MA**  
**33 Pages**  
**\$7.00**

*review by Dennis Daly*



I SHUDDERED OFF THE FIRST POEM of profound sadness, set in an abortion clinic, then scanned the second poem of damaged childhood, then glimpsed at the third poem of spousal estrangement, then passed over the fourth poem of lost innocence, then, moving through other equally painful-looking pieces, I found and quickly shunned the poem of famous suicides. Not my cup of tea, I thought, starting to put aside this poetic collection entitled Deadletters by JP Reese. But... in fairness I returned to the opening poem, Ophelia, and read it in its entirety. It was damnably good and floored me with its complex profundity, perfect pitch, and intelligence. So here's my review.

Reese's poem Ophelia intimates deeper background knowledge of Shakespeare's play Hamlet than most of us have. Connecting Ophelia to abortion is not as outlandish as it sounds. In Hamlet, Ophelia says to her brother, Laertes, "There's rue for you, and here's some for me," shortly before her death by drowning. Rue means regret, of course, but also is a poisonous herb with abortive powers. Reese's poem continues this line of thinking and feeling with Ophelia taking her own life. Here are some of Reese's beautifully done, yet gut-wrenching lines,

*Another infant girl or boy unknown.  
The nurse hovers, lowers her gown, says,  
"All that could have been is undone."  
It is a good saying, she thinks, it is true.*

*In the evening as the sun fades to brown,  
Ophelia invites her friends and her friend's friends  
to wash the color from her hands,  
some with whiskey, some with wine.*

*She lingers beside the river, feet bare on rocks,  
anxious to touch the water, to return. God  
is not in his heaven...*

In the poem Father the poet's persona exhibits compassion, understanding, and overall admiration for her father, who, without book-learning or lucky breaks or wealth, makes his way in life despite life. The poet, speaking of her father's photograph, says,

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*Here, washed in sepia, is the younger face of one*

*who never concedes to roots sprung from poverty  
or speaks ill of a mother who tithed to the Jesus of Catholicism  
over the rumblings of her children's empty bellies.*

*Here, too, blow the bitter winters of Madison,  
deep hunger leading you over ice-bound lanes to find work  
— never a pause to warm your hands at the fire,*

*No time to read...*

Unrequited love rises from the poet's essence in the piece entitled Touch. Her love exudes, in turn, eroticism and religiosity. Make no mistake, her lover does not exist in the flesh but that does not seem to dissuade the poet. By will alone she demands his existence. The poem sings its incantation, its passion to the heavens. The poet opens the piece this way,

*If you are,  
then find me,  
drowning,  
underwater,  
sluice wasted time  
away.*

*Find me  
reading shadows  
rocking astride  
empty words  
and neverhours.*

*If you breathe  
then breathe me  
away from night...*

Reese delves into her feelings of mortality in a poem entitled Autumn. The poem's protagonist imagines her dead lover as a boy facing the eternal sunlight of summer. The whole world is "just coming on." There is acceptance here and something resembling hope. The poet opens the poem with an autumn's brisk chilliness,

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*The field lies stubbled.  
Its carapace brittles  
under November's drowsy  
song. My hands chill,  
and I warm them  
beneath my arms.  
I stand on the edge  
of this empty earth.  
The jacket I chose  
doesn't ease the shivering,  
but I stay because  
I have come here  
to understand...*

Resurrections appear out of the fertile earth of Reese's poem *On the Third Day*. Ernest Hemingway who shot himself, John Berryman who jumped off a bridge, Harte Crane who jumped off a boat, Anne Sexton, who suffocated herself with auto exhaust, and Sylvia Plath who suffocated herself with gas are all brought back to life to no avail. They simply continue as their art continues. The bridge between oblivion and art appears to be two-way—at least in our universe. Reese uses black humor to release an overflow of tension. Consider these lines,

*Sexton could reduce her carbon footprint, wait  
for a newer model, one in candy apple red with doll's eyes  
winking from the radio dials while Plath entwines  
with Otto in the back seat. The three could move east,  
race to beat the rising sun, anxious to be the first  
to see the angel roll back the stone.*

The poet finds relief and pleasure in the present as she compartmentalizes, shutting off the scars of the past and the uncertainty of future in her poem *Now*. There is hope here and there is an expanding space. The poet says,

*The thought is heavy;  
it staggers under its own heft.  
Stay with me tonight and dance,  
safe from the ruin  
beyond these bolted doors.*

Reese's poems, in spite of their dark subject matter, do not descend into despair. Strongly rooted and elegantly composed they offer the green shoots of a new world's first life.