
***The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots* by Ned Balbo
(Criterion Books, 2019)**

In 2019, Ned Balbo presented his poem “A Spell for Lamentation and Renewal” at New York Encounter, the weekend conference for all those interested in the conjunctions of the spiritual and the mundane. The poetry reading was packed, the night was dark and wintry, and Paul Mariani, recently recovered from an illness, read and introduced the winners of the NYE poetry prize; Balbo took first. His poem was an incantation; rhymed, metered, simple in approach and diction, a lamentation for “words excised from abridged Oxford dictionaries.” These words included “cygnet,” “otter,” “newt,” “cowslip,” “catkins,” “mistletoe.” The things of the natural world thus devalued were reinscribed by his poem, and despite my thorough grounding in the rhythms, or lack thereof, of contemporary American poetry, I felt the poem go through me like a medieval charm. Even without knowing the circumstances of its creation, I felt the powerful music/magic of his language.

Not every poem written in form holds such power, and in *The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots*, not every poem attempts that level of magic. On the whole, this is a book that resists the

fashionable while it approaches the sublime and painful in elegantly-patterned language. Balbo is remarkably successful time and again in seducing the reader to forget the form while attending to the meaning of a poem. Most often, that echo of rhyme, meter, or repetition that rises from a second reading only serves to enhance the power of the stories told.

Part of the appeal of the book is its careful attention to the natural world. It begins by contemplating real crows and ends with an illustration of a cardinal, and in between there are laughing gulls, an owl, a black squirrel—animals used for their metaphorical potential sometimes or as a motif (the crows return frequently). These nature poems are adept, sometimes descending into a darkness that isn't just the property of nature, but of human nature. On a lighter note, there are poems about the moonwalk (Michael Jackson's, not Neil Armstrong's) and a yoga-goer whose rage manifests in tailgating the speaker.

But the two main attractions of the book, in my opinion, are the personal history of a son adopted within his family by his grandparents and the Biblical poems in the last section of the book, reimagining scenes from the life of Christ.

The autobiographical poems—section III of the book—announce themselves by dedications to “my birth mother” or “my adoptive mother”, or “my sister Evelyn.” The story of a boy's complicated family, in which several siblings have been adopted away, and relationships are shattered by painful decisions and estrangements, this section sketches portraits of numerous family members. Some are given a more sympathetic or empathetic reading. “Stella's Children Look Out from a Photo Faded Gold” sucks us into adoptive mother Betty's story, and Balbo's identification with her, before we notice it's a villanelle. “To My Birth Father's Compass” maintains a cool ambivalence about that father's decisions and legacy. Of these poems, every one compels us to sort through the story, but to my ear, “The Office Girl's Secrets” stands out. It virtually crackles with its sharp and bitter story: Evelyn, another adopted-out daughter, returns after her adoptive mother's death to work for her birth father, who spoils every bit of fun she gets and takes what might have been her inheritance—including any closeness she might have had with her biological brother. It's a heartbreaking story, but Balbo inhabits her voice in a way that's as potent as any Hecht persona, and, of all the twentieth century formalists, Hecht's by far my favorite, so that's saying something. I won't spoil the rest of the poems—you should read them all and settle in for weeks of unsettling reflections on—or possibly, gratitude for—your own family

history (as Tolstoy says, “each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”)

Balbo’s a faithful person, it appears, despite the distances and failures of his upbringing, but the “displaced” person who wrote these poems inhabits the stories of Biblical characters with empathy for their complicated, human feelings, rather than piety or received wisdom about the mysteries at the center of their lives. “His Father’s Words” is particularly sharp: “my son, not His” is Joseph’s subject here, “the son He’d sent / to suffer, as no real Father could.” “With Magdalene, near Daybreak” raises questions about her feelings at being told “*Touch me not,*” which, in a book so much about family distances, resonates deeply. The echo of death’s distance in those words recalls the poems about Balbo’s adopted family; each lesson we learn on earth affects our ability to confide in Heaven, Balbo seems to imply.

And yet the book ends on this note, a reflection that holds a kind of grace:

For what the dark still holds, I give thanks, too.

If literature can deepen our understanding of the families we did not choose, this book achieves more in even a handful of poems than many do with more. I anticipate months of reflection since it’s passed into my life, an effect maybe even more powerful than that incantation from several years ago.

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