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## **BOOKS: THE MYSTERY OF THINGS THAT REMAIN UNRESOLVED**

In "Works on Paper," Jennifer Barber remains an empathic witness to an exhausted life.

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD FEBRUARY 21, 2017 16:31

"WORKS ON PAPER," Jennifer Barber's third collection of poetry, contains a cycle of poems about her dying father, Louis. They are written, like almost all her poems, in spare, crisp lines that break suddenly, their scaffolding providing the perfect vehicle for her to take the measure of an expiring life.

In the poem, "Last Photograph," Barber marks for us her father's confounding cycle of negation as death draws near – a point in the process that does not often make its way into elegies.

The look on his face  
isn't acceptance, isn't fear;  
neither a need to be among  
his children, gathered,  
nor a desire to be alone.

The mystery of things that end unresolved, yet do not end, taking up residence in memory, and when the moment is ripe, in poetry, is one of the many intriguing aspects of Barber's work.

In "Given Away," her previous volume, her poem "God Doesn't Speak In 'The Psalms'" spiritualizes the same theme, giving the "unresolved" aspect a different variation.

I'm leafing  
through the psalms,  
  
a man laments the illness  
wasting him  
  
and compares himself  
to a lone bird on a roof.  
  
With no prayer.  
  
Eating ashes of bread.  
  
How then does he  
turn in praise

of the sky like a tent  
over the earth ...

Barber's poems on prayer are quiet weavings, in which not a single thread is wasted.

In "Hebrew Prayers Made Easy," she creates an authentic prayer of her own out of the fundamental elements of poetry: repetition, incantation, compression, the infusion of core words that shape-shift inside a tumbler of purified language.

*Exercise 1*

that place, that time, those days  
a name, the name, his name  
a king, to a king, to the king  
from the earth, on the earth, from the king

*Exercise 2*

at this season, on this night  
you did not hear, you heard,  
for the world, of the heavens  
this is a blessing, this is a word

*Exercise 3*

every day, with all your heart  
upon your heart, upon your hand  
I said to them, you said to us  
When you lie down, when you wake

*Exercise 4*

you said, you remembered, you kept  
a heart, in the heart, in my heart  
my house, my name, to me, in me  
your house, your name, to you, in you

Barber is the winner of the Tenth Gate Prize, given to mark the arduous evolutionary path of mid-career poets. The prize was inspired by the career of poet and scholar Jane Hirshfield.

The works of both Barber and Hirshfield are marked by a marveling attention to vanishing moments, illuminated by the irony of how all that exists in time is overrun by time.

This is Hirshfield's "Bad Year" from her volume "After":

Even in this bad year,  
the apples grow heavy and round.

Three friends and I trade stories:  
biopsy, miscarriage, solitude

These lines open Barber's "Reading Taha Muhammad Ali": [Ali was an acclaimed Palestinian Arab poet.]

I wondered about the translation  
and how a qasida works,  
whether a gray dove  
  
always nests in its lines,  
a dove and a gray olive tree  
and longing for the girl  
  
the poet loved when he was young...

Gone from "Works On Paper" are her poems exploring the secrecy and dread of Jewish life in Spain in the time of the Inquisition.

The shadowy lives of conversos that haunt the pages of "Given Away" and "Rigging The Wind," her first full-length volume, are not present here. "Works" is anchored instead by the shadowy fading of a father's life, and his daughter's reflections on that fading. The dying out of a civilization of one. The exploration of a natural tragedy that seems on one level as unnatural as any historic aberration.

Barber is always the empathic witness to the exhausted life. In "Rigging," published in 2003 we find "A Judeo-converso, ca.1470" and the lines:

I've done what I had to do.  
My name has no trace.

Last week I visited the old cemetery

at the edge of town.  
My mother and father are there,

have been a long time.  
Some of the gravestones are broken.

Thirteen years later, in "Works," in the poem, "After A Year," she writes:

Is it an extravagance, this grief?  
Is it clean,  
is it purely itself?  
Would I feel it less if he'd been  
ready after the treatments  
or if he hadn't written in the black-and-white  
speckled notebook I bought him,

‘Nothing else to try...how, when?’

The fine stitching of Barber’s few lines provide a tight wrapping for the personal and political histories she examines in her poetry. She is sufficiently confident of her minimalism, that signature small room of hers, that she applies it equally to the histories of the few and the histories of the many.

Jewish contemplative poetry is an uncommon strain, the result perhaps of a genetic restlessness. In the work of Jane Hirshfield, also a Jewish writer of contemplative poetry, Jewish subject matter is non-existent.

Hirshfield explores reality from the quirky ontological ground of Zen Buddhism.

Eva Grubin is an Orthodox Jewish poet whose lines are quite different from Barber’s in their emphasis on the physicality of religious contemplation: Ache in my unwinged thighs, my belly an unblessed field./Who straightens the bent/over. Your many names are stuck in my throat.

A contemplative poet of another generation with an intermittent tonal resemblance to Barber, despite a stripped-down approach from which lyricism is exiled, is the Objectivist Charles Reznikoff (1894- 1976). Indefatigable walker and chronicler of the New York street, he was also, like Barber, a witness in his poetry to Jewish catastrophes like the Babylonian Exile and the Holocaust. What the literary scholar Milton Hindus wrote about him could apply equally to Jennifer Barber: “If he has any fault, it is that he sometimes speaks too softly to be heard except by those especially attuned to him.” Hindus continues, “He always strives to be completely calm, as befits a poet who uses for his material, as Wordsworth did, “emotion recollected in tranquility.”” In focusing on Jewish history, both poets rely on the powers of observation that burn in each like a quiet, steady flame.

Reznikoff writes in “Jews In Babylonia”:

A walled town with Jews:  
houses with balconies on courtyards  
and a porter’s lodge at each gate;  
a market square with stalls and shutters,  
the synagogue and bath-house.

Barber opens “Judenplatz” with these lines:

The ochre cornices,  
a gallery at one end, a café at the other,  
a statue of a playwright  
in his morning coat.

Barber has the gift possessed by the best poets of assembling words in a way that refine the senses. Her work marks her as one of the literary refugees from the electronic freeway that dictates the pace of twenty-first century life.