

Lee Woodman's Homescapes

As I began to read Lee Woodman's dazzling new book of poems, the title leaped out at me, as if to deliver an urgent message. The word held other words inside: "me," "escape," "scapes," "hope," and others. I saw safety and danger traveling together, as "home" brings forth new "me-scapes," versions of herself speaking new words: "nullah," "peelu," "dhobi." Woodman's vivid, sensuous language draws on the poet's experiences living in India, France, and New Hampshire. As we read and re-read, we discover how the road to home may become both escape and return. Her skillful handling of form and rhyme (free verse, syllabics, villanelles, hymn meter, among others) creates a template for memorable images, like the "voluminous Hemlock" that "absorbs all life's events: attacked, endured, sun saluted, sorrows sustained." ("Trees have Longer Lives.")

The book's three sections, "India," "America," and "Stereoscope," recapture the many awakenings of adolescence in a faraway place, in company with her family. In "Road Trip to Nilokheri" she travels with her father through "wobbling air," "ripples of cool from the nullah's water" battling "currents of heat that flare down." When she plays with the local children, she fumbles the ball, but they giggle and the village elders "salaam, pressing palms together—Namaste." The poem touches on awkwardness, then eases into a tone of gratitude for small comforts, "A weak trickle from the shower," the taste of "our surviving cucumber—melony, slightly sweet, faintly salty—the last warm coke, delicious." This is no supermarket cucumber, but a vegetable with a complex nature.

In “Jaya the Ayah,” the rhymes—“vinegar, “sinister,” “blood,” “commode,” suggest the Ayah’s venomous behavior toward the sisters and her own boyfriend (“Snap! She broke his bone in two”). When they learn that Jaya has been “fired,” the girls, “terror-struck,” take the meaning literally, “horrified to think / she still lay burning on her pyre.” The poem places troublous imagination at its center.

Woodman blends the perils of the world with its edgy pleasures, as in “Climbing the Rohtang Pass.” On the border of India, the Rohtang Pass, flanked by forests, “rocky rubble,” and “jagged peaks,” means “Pile of Corpses.” A photograph taken by her father shows her in the Pass, in mountain clothes, but lifted aloft into China, where she imagines “those frozen souls below / had chosen to stay there.” In the last two lines, the poet rises up into “an endless view” that “could drown us all--/ a sensation of snow under our bellies for the rest of time.”

Woodman’s ease with internal rhyme shows up in various ways: “Homeroom Ghazal” uses the word “home” as “a relative word”—one of her puns. While Lee and her sisters prepare for sock hops by listening to rock ‘n’ roll on WBZ, their mother, who had “twirled in silver purple taffeta” at glamorous parties in Delhi, watches “As the World Turns” on “our first-time-ever TV.” The details of daily life, like her father’s Old Boston pencil sharpener with “its roundabout of multi-sized holes,” (a playground ride transported to a desk) complicate and enhance the “homeland” the poet shares with “a flock of purple finches” who write their own stories with “Quills tipped in raspberry.” (“Father’s Roll Top.”) What the poet calls her “inherited irreverence” begins a poem (“A Mulch Pile Prayer”) on a wacky note: “*Our Father who art in the mulch pile, Hallowed be thy Brussels sprouts.*” Several poems in this

“America” section of the book have an elegiac, yet wry tone: “Found in a New Hampshire Cottage” ends: “Years later, there is still an urn we plan to bury sometime.” No guilt trip, just a wish as yet unrealized.

In the book’s last section, “Stereoscope,” the poet completes the ritual of burying her parents’ ashes in the Ganges (“Visit to Varanasi Forty-Seven Years Later”). Helped by her guide, Bena, she learns that “miniature clay lamps can be set free in the black water, a holy way to bid farewell to the dead and dying.” Her father’s lamp holds a candle. As he “forms his own vanishing stream in the current,” the three yellow marigolds for her mother “follow swiftly, forming rivulets back and forth across his wake.” The poem’s sinuous long lines recreate the stream and the rivulets that vanish, but like gifts from the depths, they bring back flame and color. Such images are memory’s afterlife.

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