

Air and vodka

Kerry-Lee Powell

INHERITANCE

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thriving on “air and vodka” are at once predatory girls on the make and fairy-tale princesses “luring icons and stars / from cliff-tops”, and a bald old man by a murky pond is mesmerized in “The Encounter” by his own death’s-head reflection “smirking at him in green-flecked slacks / from his cave beneath the lilies”. The poet who, after her mother disappeared, was raised on “ship’s biscuit / with shrapnel sparkles”, recalls in “Lifeboat” how her father, once rescued from a shipwreck during which he sang endless hymns so as not to hear the cries of those who did not survive, endured a lifetime of survivor’s guilt which forced him “to drown each night among singing men”. Powell’s language is colloquial, unshowy, her free-verse lines organized in compact quatrains or tercets, but there is a relish for sprees, extremities and oddities: in “Fandango” a camera flash in a dance hall triggers an epileptic fit, turning the photographs of a hen party into a surrealist “hundred flailing red / flashes of his arms and legs”, while a “Big Spender” throws shining coins “into the caskets of buskers / the sequined laps of dancers”, imagining his riches hanging in mid-air “like a Chinese dragon”. The poet recalls a lively flame-haired grandmother who “spat out words like lava” and whose adventurous children scaled mountains and “swam / the English Channel slathered in beef tallow” in vain attempts at escaping “the other one . . . fanning her embers, nursing her grudges”.

Women in these poems are tough, vital and no more gentle than their hard-fisted men; the “Inheritance” of Powell’s title encompasses the unsung mothers who “shone rich folks’ silver, / buffed the ballrooms / like jilted belles”, stoical men defying their own vulnerability like the old survivor “holding the frail vial of his body taut” in a storm off Long Island in “The Last of the Hitlers”, and the challenge and exhilaration of great art – especially her father’s beloved Beethoven. In “Respite” a man whose fists have “scourged the air and more” sits by lamplight, “the hurt elsewhere, / a child asleep upstairs” while clouds “darken like bruises”, for stormy weather and destruction are never far away. The numinous gloom of a city church under demolition becomes “a mound / of shingles and burst sticks”, while in “Hensol”, a moment of miraculous peace experienced while trespassing in an abandoned sanatorium compels the realization that “we had fallen / by chance into a rare state of grace, and learned nothing”.

JAN MONTEFIORE

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Kerry-Lee Powell’s poems are full of lively vignettes in which realism strikes lyrical sparks off harshness. “Russian Brides”