

Dear Big Gods
Mona Arshi
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'Lyric poetry' has typically been defined in opposition to 'dramatic' and 'narrative' verse. From the Greek root, lyric poetry is meant to be melodic, personal, expressing mood and emotion, often using traditional forms. Unfortunately, by this broad definition nearly all modern poetry is 'lyrical', but the least constrained poems today are scarcely melodic, rather solipsistic, and long. (One of my best teachers said of a well-written lyric poem, 'Get in quickly, get out quickly.')

Mona Arshi's poems are purely lyrical in the best sense. Each poem carries its own weight and musical pleasure much like a Bach partita. By that analogy, each is densely, compactly written, with overtones. The entire collection is like a suite, best appreciated on several readings. Consider the 'bookend' poems: The opening poem, 'Little Prayer', is a humble supplication (note the hesitant lineation):

It's me
again.
This time I'm a wren.

The title poem, 'Dear Big Gods, which closes the book, slants right to left like a hemi-pyramid:

all you have to do
is show yourself
in case you hear us
we are so small
and fenceless in the shade
throw us a hook
when you can...

Here is the supplicant walking backwards out of the temple in reverence. Note the wonderful use of line organisation and line-breaks which enact the prayer by the poem's own shape. As Robert Frost put it, 'Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.'

But the book is not simply a collection of lovely lyrics. There is a story embedded, with hints spread through various poems: the poet converses with a brother who has died, the way one shares news with a beloved in the grave:

I hope it's fine to contact you, to tell you that I still watch the gaps in the carriages/ and listen out for 'the service has been disrupted' announcement, for some other poor sister's/ new news... I see your face from time to time, especially on trains... ('Five-Year Update').

The poet employs magical thinking to save would-be suicides. In “The Switch”, in a block of prose (here truncated):

I found the Switch at precisely 6:05 pm. The
Switch of all Switches; the primal Switch...
I thought of all the
good I could do with this Switch. I travelled
to the Jumper’s Cliff, and waited for the sight of
live bodies, and switched them all off before
they did it.

Did I say ‘prose’? Look at the line break, ‘before/ they did it.’

The brother reappears to instruct her about the fluid border between life and death. In ‘A Pear from the Afterlife’:

Our faces in the window float
like balloons in the glass.
In his deathless,

he never looked more alive.
*Sis, you gotta let go
of this idea of definitive knowledge.*

*Don’t look on it as a journey more
like a resettling or dusting off or
re-tuning of the radio.*

*There are elm trees here and these geckos
slip surreptitiously under the door
from my side to yours.*

‘Too bad you have to go back,’ I say,
and he sighs like an old-man
impatiently re-teaching a child.

‘Before you go,’ I say,
‘Will you bring me a pear from
the afterlife or a ripe papaya or

even an accidental patch of clover,
something that can live
on my tiny balcony?’

At the risk of stereotyping, many of the poems have an Eastern sensibility; or perhaps ancient Greek; or Gaelic; or really from anywhere we acknowledge and allow spirits from other worlds to

inhabit our own. Other poems adumbrate on the phenomenon, such as the poem titled by a news report from 2018, 'In Mexico the women are marrying trees.' Or, acknowledging the malevolent spirits, 'The Wasps', like the Furies, who attack a child en masse. Or the intelligences who live in other spaces of Earth, 'Now I know the Truth about Octopuses (and the lies we tell our children)'. Or, 'The Lilies', in the poet's 'first tiny garden' where she cannot protect them from canker, but respects them even in their state of suspension: 'I suppose I could have/ pulled up their sick stems/ or poisoned them from the bottle./ But I let them live on/ beauty-drained in their altar beds.' 'Altar' is the perfect word, suggesting sacrifice, gifts to gods.

I am in awe of this work.

Norbert Hirschhorn

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