

Kurowska, Joanna

The Wall and Beyond: Poems. Little Elm TX: eLectio Publishing, 2013. Pp. xvi + 55.
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Using spare and simple language, potent symbols, and clear phrasing, the poems in Joanna Kurowska's *The Wall and Beyond* seem uncomplicated and open. Meditative and thoughtful, they deploy minimal specialized knowledge of language and location. Kurowska immigrated to the US from Poland in the 1980s and wrote these poems originally in Polish. After switching to English to compose, she translated her Polish poems slowly, over many years. Little of her location—Poland or Chicago—appears here. She mentions skyscrapers, a few train stops, a few names from childhood and home, but these references come infrequently and sparingly, as she focuses instead on deceptively simple images, on nouns and thing-words, with powerful symbolic depth. Certain words recur throughout the poems: *the wall* of the title, *train, tree, glass, god, light, stone, snow, river*. The opening poem "It" draws our attention to her method:

first it is cornflower-blue
it is round, open wide,
straightened up, understanding nothing

then it ceases moving
it thickens into a plaster cast
surrounded by a rough wall

What is "it"? Is it soul? Consciousness? The human? God? Our ability to connect with others? Not all of Kurowska's poems are as riddling as this one, but they do engage our minds, requiring us to think, and they do not neglect deep philosophical and theological questions, despite their unadorned clarity.

Most of the poems are short, a few lines running to twelve or so. Only two or three poems are longer than that. They say what they have to say quickly: the collection can be easily read in one sitting. But thinking about them is something else. The use of the "I" for instance as the book's dominant person. Who is that speaker? Sometimes it seems the poet, but then again it is some voice, perhaps human, perhaps not, that the poet takes on, part of a collective voice, or consciousness, that is perhaps the *wall*, as thing and book,

Under the roof, the wind roars its tune
but the fiddler hears only himself.

Someone has passed by me, I'm not sure,
is it a star twinkling out in space?

I'm in the dark—my mind is buried,
eyes filled with dirt, heart sewn to the sand.

from "The Passage"

"A Moment" defines an "I" also difficult to pin down—perhaps it simply *is a moment*: "I won't manage to see/ the Cathedral in Rheims ... But will I manage to take a step/ toward the door/ and my neighbor?" Who, or what, is this darkened "I," mind buried, distant, and a little cold, perhaps?

That Kurowska is an immigrant and a bilingual poet seems not incidental. She extracts, in this collection, the essence of language at its most elemental: powerful symbols; our search for meaning; what is relevant to that search, as well as to basic relationships of god-human, human-human, human-object, human-animal. The possibility of god as object and god as non-human become more important as we travel further into the book and Kurowska considers large questions clearly but not reductively: the nature of god, judgment, human freedom, faith, salvation, love. A poem that begins "beetles' colorful wings/ leaves' webs/ fingerprints/ autumn colors' profusion" and lists a number of multiplicities found in nature ends with the question: "many colors of skin/ potpourri of human faces/ but only one religion?"

Or later, as we understand that this project is tending toward the nature of salvation—understood not as the cleanliness of her grandmother, nor the rules of religiosity, nor judgment, but almost, it seems, our ability to *imagine* a better god, which also means a god we know through our senses—Kurowska effects this transformation in her verse: an official, religiously uniformed god (at least I take it to be god) "smelling of soap," using "secret words / drawn from the *Summa Theologiae* / and the Roman Missal" becoming "a little wet bird / shivering with fear." The wall, too, "sometimes becomes human," and is imagined in "The Wall's Prayer" as itself, "kneeling and saying 'Our Father.'"

Kurowska's language, despite its clarity, is often playful, if not sonically inventive, as in her memory of jumping on her grandmother's bed in front of a picture of the Virgin Mary, or in a description of the rumors that god "plays soccer / on the Elysian fields," or in this poem, "Dressed Up" which imagines the wall as human:

the wall does not come forward
it smiles in the door, refined

its polished eye glittering,
it puts on a white shirt
and a silk tie

it decorates itself with a cross,
all the saints, a mother of god

“Missionary of Love” is likewise comedic, at the same time that it raises a weighty set of questions. In it Kurowska invokes an annoying evangelical presence which would “yell the names of things unknown/ into your ear” and says in the persona of a missionary who will be something different and better:

I will not be
attaching a beard to God’s face
or putting glasses on yours

I have come to ask
for a little bit of room

Wall in Kurowska’s text is complex and constantly in flux, like ourselves, like god. What is crucial is the empathy we extend to *it*, and by extension, to each other. The wall “does not know at all / if it will be able to justify its existence // So before you grow numb, yourself becoming a wall/ you begin to understand that it too / is full of despair.” It is how I like to imagine god: despairing, uncertain, in need of justification. Kurowska’s beautiful, thoughtful poems implore us to quiet our minds, our selves, to widen our imagining of what god *is*, to transform ourselves in the process. What we are can be so much spiritually and emotionally deeper, richer, more: a mother who “goes into eternity. / If there is no eternity, she creates it.”

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