

Vardaman, Wendy. *Obstructed View*. Madison WI: Fireweed Press, 2009. Pp. 80. \$12.00 paper.

Wendy Vardaman is a graduate of Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania who lives and writes in Madison, Wisconsin, where she also works for a children's theatre company, and is a wife and mother. She takes the title for her volume from that of one of its poems in which she describes the problems she encountered when watching a ballet from an obstructed view seat, difficulties that were not matters of mere physical sight alone. For as elsewhere in this impressive book, her real aim in this biographical reminiscence is to chronicle how achievement of meaning and metaphor and insight rubs up against the forestalling claims of the material world and the quotidian, only to win out in the end, albeit in a cool, skeptical, obliquely minimal way:

While the chorus floats away on the nonexistent
water which their stiff skirts
bobbing up and down create, the prima
ballerina,
curved-plume foot at the end
of a limb that seems to bend
in opposition to the human joint, takes on an S-like look.
To take in the perfect scimitar of her back,

I have to twist,
at the waist,
the spine's base, lean out
over the flat
protective guard on which I place
my extraneous
elbows, then crane my head. Half
way through the second act

the back of my right hip
pulses with pain. I'd give anything to lift
off, to circle the stage, to perch on the Mezzanine rail's middle or migrate
with the action side to side, but the ache
that radiates up my scalp also pins me to my seat.
When the smooth-faced

prince vanquishes the magician, it's a miracle
 none of the story's elements will

justify, no matter how they're contorted. I swim laps
 next day to relax
 the kinks—back and forth—black elastic-lacking spandex swirling
 around my loosening
 neck like feathers while I conclude
 that Odette effected
 the swans' release but obscured the truth
 to hide her prince's heavy feet.

Human intimacy for Vardaman suffers from the same blocking pattern, made up of physical limitation, the effects of aging, the base ingratitude of the young, and the frustrations of marriage—the whole range of human experience described by Shakespeare, whose plays are never far from her professional life or artistic consciousness. Imaginative understanding and poetic representation too are hard to come by as she travels (carless) through the Wisconsin seasons, and deals with family life, injury, loss, and her own emotions. God and religious belief are certainly not very relevant to the resolution of these concerns, at least at first. “*Angels*,” though rumored to be “*everywhere*,” are “*very fragile*” to the point of nonexistence (“Collecting the Angels,” ll. 32–33), and belief in them, while reinforced by an array of Vardaman’s life experiences, from childhood memories of Christmas processions to seeing *Angels in America*, seems a dubious hazard at best. Nor are the natural/supernatural comforts of Romanticism available to this poet. Thus, when she finds herself at one point “staggering through this winter’s mess,” with her “head inclined” and her “neck exposed,” she is quick to proclaim that this is only a physiological response to the weather: “...do not—no—never say—/ that I have lowered my head to pray” (“Bowed Heads,” ll. 13–14).

Yet toward the end of this volume of moving poems, in “St. Catherine of Siena’s Day, an Ode on My Anniversary,” the author not only celebrates, a bit grimly, the little and late Spring afforded by the upper Middle West (where “Fifty daffodils, one hundred / hyacinth—buried / last fall produce / only a handful of half-way resurrections: / limp wings on weak / necks emerging from a cracked / tomb” [ll. 1–7]) in language that alludes to the central Christian mystery, she takes on a voice of spiritual counsel—perhaps her own, perhaps that of the saint whose feast (sort of) occasions her poem.

“Content yourself with this,” she sternly writes, make do with the diminished thing of the “few lines, less / than you conceived” which, “scribbled on the back of something else,” like the spring flowers born despite “the wrong / soil and a long / winter,” have survived the daily round of cares and interruptions and the sheer materiality of life to push their way forth to expression (ll. 11–15). Content yourself too, she says, with the other flowers that come your way, with the dandelions and daylilies, who cheerfully sprout up, the former without allusion to the Resurrection and the latter, waiting patiently, “fresh dug, ready to return / to bad soil like saints to heaven” (ll. 29–30). Then, in line with this admonition, the poems that follow, at the very end of *Obstructed View*, bespeak a new resilience on the poet’s part, a deep disposition to take sustenance where she can find it, from the damned English soldier let out of hell one day a year in Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, whose example inspires her, with double meaning, “one last—thank God—time,” to attend to a sick and tiresome child (“A Wet Sunday” l. 39); to the experience of motherhood and loss; to the tidal attraction of the moon on her own body in “Approaching Menopause.” If not a conventional faith, then the serenity of the saints and the determination (hardly limited to Christian spirituality) to blossom where she is planted are the results of the struggle recounted here. While in the end, this does not wholly unobstruct her view, it does mark the author of these poems as engaged in a pilgrim’s progress of her own, one characterized by a sensibility more humble though no less searching than those of Frost or Dickinson. Readers are privileged to accompany her here.

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