



Forge

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REVIEWS

Review: *Night Watch* by Mark Belair (Finishing Line Press 2013)

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Night Watch, Mark Belair's latest chapbook, must have been difficult to write indeed, as in it, he has rendered his mother's death, burial, and its aftermath in a suite of 19 poems. These poems have certainly been composed in three movements, acts, or galleries, as there is rhythm, drama, form, and intense imagery throughout. At times cinematic, some of the poems read through as if scenes shot from Belair's camera; still, others could be considered as portraiture, a sort of living ekphrasis in which Belair paints detailed images with minimal and well chosen words. Though composed in free verse, the poems often have definite musical phrases, which can be heard by speaking or singing the poems aloud. All of the poems, as always with Belair, are told from his perspective, and in *Night Watch*, he paints, films, and sings, in equal measure, to create an intimate and genuine contemporary American poetry.

Night Watch opens with a prelude in the form of the poem "Mourners." Belair sets us in a fixed perspective, as if in theater seats, and sets his mourners in motion, approaching us from beyond the horizon line. Notable in this poem is its slow tempo, its almost military cadence, somber and

Life grinding us forward in and into “The Nurses,” which contains the long drawn out moment of his mother’s passing; perhaps too impossible for Belair to describe himself, he allows the nurses to tell us—after minutes of listening to her heart, the nurse “...lifted off her stethoscope, / draped it over her neck, softly said, / *It stopped,* / and checked her watch.”

This plain, matter of fact approach in “The Nurses” is not without empathy, but is grounded in the quotidian. Like all of *Night Watch*, one feels that Belair is not singling his family out to garner sympathy, as much as shining a light on them, which is his way of describing the common human experience.

The retention of sense memory is a challenge, and in absence there is its distortion and loss. In “Losing Her Voice,” Belair confronts this phenomenon—

Only months after our mother’s death,
my sister asked if I’d kept a recording

of her voice for she found it—
troublingly—fading within.

But I hadn’t, and realized that I too
found her voice harder to conjure—

“The Container,” a fifty-eight line poem that ends what can be called the second movement of the book, describes in some detail

The plastic burial container
for my mother’s casket

set tight

to the dirt walls

at the bottom
of her open grave,

there to protect her,
as much as possible,

The poem mentions other containers: the open grave, the silver hearse, her living body as a container of the warmth he struggles to remember, and the car that encloses him after the burial service—

I got in the car
and shut the door

to what suddenly
felt like a dark

container
I couldn’t breathe in,

couldn’t flee from,
couldn’t keep from

a strange, obliterating
cold.

With all the containers in this poem, one might miss the fact that Belair is the container: holding memory and grief, his palette of emotions, contained and composed, much like the boy we discovered in one of his earlier poems, “The Lemon Square,” who has learned to keep his emotions “in the

bag.” The bag, it has turned out, is his poetry, and so each poem becomes a container, each book, and so on.

Art contains, is fit to contain, the record of the human abstract/unspeakable, distinctly different from the facts of history; or as Seamus Heaney very clearly stated, “I think the difference in a poem, or a work of literary art, shall we say, story, novel, is that it isn’t for the moment utilitarian communication, it is some kind of housing of a moment, a snapshot of consciousness that can be looked upon by other persons, people.”

And so a poet is not unlike the poems he or she writes, and *Night Watch* serves as art and artifact, a reliquary of sorts, filled with film clips, snapshots, portraits, and music, of the end of one life and the continuance of others. To open this book is to explore image and motion, intimacy, grief, holding and release.

* Seamus Heaney quote transcribed from *Making Sense of a Life*, a video interview with Seamus Heaney by The NewsHouse.

** “The Lemon Square” quoted from *Walk With Me*, Mark Belair (Parallel Press 2012).

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