

Reviewed by J. Guaner

Ghost Moose is a fine chapbook of eighteen poems that encapsulates the themes of animal rights, human rights, human greed, suffering, relationship, and environment.

One noticeable point is that birds or animals appear in half of the poems: raven in “Three Ravens’ Watch,” moose in “Ghost Moose,” Inca tern and cassowary in “Birds at the Zoo,” piglet in “Litany of the Sow,” anhinga in “Agnus Dei,” snapping turtle in “Locked Ward, III,” bluebird in “Lullaby,” dolphin in “Ballad of the Dolphin,” and horse in “End of Horses.” Margo Taft Stever is an animal rights activist. She expresses a sorrowful feeling in “Litany of the Sow” when greedy farmers “drug [the sow] to birth more piglets / in a cage so small they cannot move.” She expresses this same feeling in “Ballad of the Dolphin” when greedy and cruel fishermen hung a dolphin upside down to make it scream, a trap to bring more dolphins so that fishermen can catch the tuna swimming under them:

Fishermen grabbed you by
your tails, strung you, and turned

you, head down in water, tied
you to lifting hooks,

and dragged you to the docks.

By using the second-person pronoun “you” to talk to the suffering dolphin, the poet brings immediacy to experiencing the pains of other creatures.

A further noticeable point is on human sufferings from insanity and on good or bad relations between parents and children. The poet uses the figurative language to create a visual effect that presents the truth imagistically and emphatically as in “Locked Ward, I”—

At McLean, faces of those
who have outlived their welcome

quiver like struck deer who refuse
to die.

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—and to create an auditory effect that suggests an irony about the presence of the asylum where even light is riotous: “Keys jangle on the attendant’s / belt, Christmas bells in July.”

In another poem, “Calling Mother After She Died,” the traumatic daughter-mother relationship remains even after the death of the mother who is “Always the outsider, on the / edge, no matter where or how, / your refusal to enter in, // on the border of the living.” And there is no bond between them because the hurt left by the mother is deep, as the daughter confesses, “But for / a few faded dahlias by the fence, / I have forgotten what bound // us together, mother to daughter.” In contrast, “Beloved Child” is an epistolary poem filled with tender love from a dying mother who writes: “When these lines / meet your eyes, my child, / the mother of your infant / love will long since / have passed from earth.” The mother’s love and sorrow continue in these lines: “You will read / much of a mother’s love, / but will never estimate / what you have lost.” “Beloved Child” is a kind of found poem reframed from sources of a letter, as Stever says in her note: “Beloved Child” is “composed from a letter written by one of my great-great grandmothers, Emmaline M. Fore, as she lay dying, to her infant daughter.”

Of the eighteen poems, the one that impresses me most is “Three Ravens’ Watch,” an ekphrastic poem after the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel’s most copied painting, *Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Traps*. As a prompt, how did Bruegel’s painting challenge the poet’s creative thinking and expression about the harsh winter of 1565? The title of the poem indicates that it’s about the watch of three perching ravens. The poet uses apostrophe to allow the witty birds to play the first-person role and address skaters directly:

If you were a smooth, shiny circle, we would collect
you for our nests, but your bodies shuffle mindlessly
back and forth. You forget when the ice was thin, when
many of you fell through, engulfed underneath.

This harshest winter attracts you to skate, to forget
your misery, scrawling ice patterns. Ravens,
three of us, stand sentinel, noticing
your slow-witted motions, your ugly sprawls.

These lines reveal the ravens’ psychological activity. They gloat over the potential danger that may occur to skaters, as well as hurl imprecations at them because ravens see other birds (their brothers and sisters) are trapped by humans:

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From our high perch, we witness eerie cries of brothers
and sisters lured inside your net strung across the trees.
We hear them crash to the bottom, caught on the great awl,
entangled in the glistening awfulness, your persistent web.

To ravens, skaters are just a different kind of animals. Ironically, in the harsh environment the law of the jungle applies to anyone, not just the trapped birds. Humans catch birds with net and enjoy skating on the ice, but they can be engulfed under the icy river. When they are dead, they can also be food for the carrion birds who, believed by humans, are witches who “cause livestock epidemics, make cows give / too little milk, create early frosts, and all the unknown / diseases...”

This poem is allegorical, and like Bruegel’s famous painting, reveals a deeper meaning about human and birds’ coexistence, their danger in a harsh environment, and “their obliviousness and their vulnerability to the looming perils,” as said by Sabine van Sprang, curator of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. “Three Ravens’ Watch” is a fine poem that does not simply describe the landscape, skaters, and birds. Instead, it tries to extend beyond the painting by focusing on the ravens.

In short, this chapbook is a joy to read. It challenges the reader in a contemplative way and raises awareness of both wildlife and human life in order for us to have a better understanding of nature and human nature.

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