

PARADISE LOST
Review by
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EDEN IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR, Susan Elbe. Word Press, PO Box 541106, Cincinnati, OH 45254, 2007, 78 pages, \$17 paper.

In this, her first full-length book of poetry, Susan Elbe bursts on the poetry scene with a mature work by a fully-in-control author who takes us to Eden in all its forms: the Biblical kingdom of innocence, the biographical Eden of lost childhood (the narrator's mother died young), and the metaphoric Eden, the uncharted territory we all travel in adulthood, as we find our place on the map, our path on the earth. The poems in *Eden in the Rearview Mirror* are fully grounded in the particular through the use of vivid imagery, a rich and varied vocabulary. They resonate long after you put the book down.

Mention Eden and we think of the creation story in the Bible, original sin, the opening of our collective eyes. So we can see that it's by design that Elbe's speaker, in the eponymous title poem, tells us *at first the world was yours, but you owned nothing*. Then, something happened—in the original story, it's the knowledge of good and evil, but here, it's the knowledge of death, of something ending:

Now, only ache.
The apple's broken skin.
Small, bitter bite.

We may start in Genesis, but we soon encounter the thematic heart of the collection, the young mother who dies when her child is eight, and which, with the same intensity as the original expulsion, catapults the child into a different country, out of Eden.

They say without the mother's gaze, we fear
we're nothing, disappear into
the terror of not being seen, bewildered,

lost. And so you are, already following another
river, slow snow melting on your cheeks
(“Scaffolding”)

Yet this sorrow is leavened by humor. The title of the prose poem “My Mother Isn't Dead” segues into the whimsical first line: *She's just shopping. On State Street in Chicago, at Marshall Field's*, with the wonderful Andy Warhol quote as an epigraph: *I don't believe people die. They just go uptown. To Bloomingdales.*

Would that it were so. Elbe gives us a finely detailed description of what the mother is wearing:

*her good wool coat, the collar cinched up tight around her throat,
and her ankle-high galoshes with the fake-fur tops.*

Here are some of the things she looks at: *soft gabardine swing coats. French-cuffed blouses with bone buttons. She . . . finds everything she wants, but doesn't buy.* With this delineation in specific visual details, we have a complete portrait of this woman, this era. Coming out of the Depression, with the war just ending, they look and long but do not fulfill their desires—sharp contrast to the easy credit consumerism of our time.

But time is an odd commodity: for some, childhood stretches out for years, while the speaker's time in childhood's haven runs out, too soon. *Once there was a child who stepped inside me / and quickly out again* ("Petition in the Middle"). Her mother's death is always lurking *below the surface, that / perfect pitch of childhood vibrating in the gut* ("Some Music"). Though we all lose our mothers in the end, once the doors to Eden swing shut, there's no going back.

So how do we go on? There are no maps to guide us, and Elbe plays on this, using the language of cartography in poem after poem. She does it with titles like "Bending the Map," "The Body's Mercator," "On the Outskirts," and "This Map of Skin." She does it with phrases: *the longitudes inside you* ("Eden in the Rearview Mirror"), *this river you keep to, a slender line / not found on any map* ("Bending the Map"), *because in my mother's ribcage / a wishbone became compass / and the silver needle pointed here* ("Why I Decided to Be Born"). And she does it with metaphor:

*So I kept writing, . . . until the winter
in me thawed,
. . . a river*

*that became a bridge that became a road
which I took home, into this geography,
as if it were late autumn. . . .*

(“Out of the Splitberry Dark”)

In Elbe's personal atlas, writing is the way to plot her way forward in the world, a way to bridge the land of the dead and the land of the living, a way to marry memory with experience.

One of the ways these poems achieve their power is through their highly original use of imagery: *Vermeer's bruised-pear light* ("Deciding"), *stingy meniscus* ("White-Radish Moon"), *the morphine light of afternoon November* ("Thanksgiving, 1954"). Another is through vocabulary, where she uses words like *sequela*, *kerning*, *lignin*, *clinquant*, and *luciferin* as building blocks to enhance her themes. Still another is via music, with words

like *shrill, silk, kelp, reel, and silver* (“In My Father’s Silver Boat”) that make the lines sing like filament through a spool.

Elbe uses the river as another form of travel metaphor, another way out of Eden, as she quotes Charles Wright in the book’s epigraph: *It’s not the water you’ve got to cross, it’s the river.* Riverine, water, and fishing imagery run through the book like red ink in an atlas. Above the landscape, the full moon—“White-Radish Moon,” *a dime dropped in the river you imagine* (“Ghost Hunger”), a *one-headlight Impala* (“My Angel”), a *sweet-onion moon, its light/ thin as tears* (“Scheherazade”)—shines, a constant reminder of what was lost: *Those nights when the moon let down its milk and you cried “mother.”* (“Everything You Take With You”).

For those who live with great loss, a cataclysmic event means that you have to throw out all the old maps, and rechart the territory. In the last poem of the collection, “Laudamus,” Elbe unites the themes of her book: the wounding early loss, the broken shore of lost Eden, the moon-haunted landscape, but leaves us with consolation:

*There is the white light, flexing
like muscle under rimped water’s skin.
Far off, one white sail.*