

Eden in the Rearview Mirror, by Susan Elbe. Word Press. [P. O. Box 541106, Cincinnati OH, 45254-1106]. \$17.

Reviewed by Sarah Busse in Free Verse (Issue#94, 2008)

The geese, the geese. I want to shout, but don't,
only follow them with my eyes,
their long, uneven clauses
spread across the tallow page of sky,

each bird a slash of ink, a declaration rising
and falling on the air.

from "Snow"

Every once in a while comes a book strong enough to make its reader "want to shout," to leap in recognition, "Yes!" Susan Elbe's first full-length collection, *Eden in the Rearview Mirror*, is such a book for me. It is, to start, my favorite sort of poetry book: it tells a story, in this case beginning with the early death of Elbe's mother (when the author was eight years old) and Elbe's subsequent coming of age and adulthood. Dangerous material, easy to lapse into self-pity or saccharine. To her credit, Elbe never does. She gives us one of her rawest glimpses toward the end of "Snow," the poem quoted above:

I imagine the year my mother died
there was snow,

deep drifts muffling all sound, all words,
my small boot prints punctuating blank white
with their dark questions
as I walked home from school each day.

Throughout this book, Elbe shows a willingness to live with the "dark questions" life presents, an ability to hold off from seeking out too-easy answers. In another poem, which declares in its title, "My Mother Isn't Dead," she takes us on a fantasy equally believable as a child's initial denial or wistful grown up dream: "She's just shopping. On State Street in Chicago..." This whimsical prose poem ends with another unflinching glimpse of her young self:

At home, we've turned on the lamps. Supper's waiting on the stove. My
face, pressed against the window's dark, looks back at me. Wet snow
begins to fall.

Interspersed with and pulling against these poems arranged to tell the chronological tale of a life, are others which center on the image of a river.

You wanted something easier, but the way
you came, forgotten, and this
mirror-shattered river, night fallen into it,

is the only way, snaking toward your future.
Up ahead, deep drifts, thin ice,

revision, with any luck, redemption.

From "Bending the Map"

River of time? River of life? Some real river we could find on a map? Yes, yes, and yes.
All of these make one River which flows "out of Eden," taking us into the lyrical moment
of the always-present. They serve as commentary upon the life and the figure of the
woman living it.

Late sunlight's flame on the river—
a black, lacquered door.
You, on your knees, beside yourself

jimmying the lock.

From "Ghost Hunger"

These poems pull in a direction opposite the others, they set us apart from the narrative. It
is this tug-and-pull between the two forces which moves us through the book.

There are some weaker moments when the pace lessens and seems to grow slack. A
couple of poems seemed to go on a stanza or two beyond their necessary ending. And a
few poems, such as "Miracles Enough," "The Body's Mercator," "The Gate Unlatched,"
and "Order Lepidoptera," felt to this reader like exercises that may have been necessary
for the writer but are not so important to the book.

However, to dwell on those moments would be petty and small of heart. There is too
much here to celebrate. Notably, Elbe's language, which I hope I have already illustrated
is as unadorned, graceful and *useful* as a hand-made Amish chair.

But it isn't always love we want
even when we say it's love we want.
We didn't know then how
to save each other, that small
accommodations of the heart could.

From "This Map of Skin"

Some of the loveliest moments are also the sparest. There are in this book few or no puns;
she does not often engage in flashy plays of wit. Elbe's lineation follows the lead of her
language, and is for the most part understated. Her line breaks fall in expected places, so
they don't draw attention to themselves. When she does use strong enjambment,

Sometimes at night I hear the windy vowels
blow hard and consonant
doors bang in my head.

we feel them as especially strong, for being so rare. Eschewing showiness in her language and lines, Elbe relies often upon effects of metaphor to carry her poems. To illustrate the power she can wield, I will quote her poem “Like Horses,” in full:

Sometimes in winter just before dark
all the answers seem to be
right there, waiting
in the blue light of cold,
still and indifferent
as horses turned out in bare fields.

If I call softly, maybe one will come,
let me grasp the thick mane
and swing up on its back.
If I call, maybe one will let me ride.

But I stand silent, the silver fish
of questions fluttering
on my tongue, my whole life
water and worry. How could I hope
to bridle such resolute muscle and bone?

Steam smokes from their haunches.
They switch their blue tails,
shrug cold from withers to flanks,
and move off slowly,
looking back at me, their luminous eyes
inscrutable as deep water.

In her hands, the vehicle of the metaphor—in this case the horses—becomes so real to us, so deftly and movingly portrayed, that I found myself remembering that they were figurative only on a second read-through.

I don't know Susan Elbe well, have seen her read twice only. The voice of this book is a voice of hard-won knowledge, one who has known love, and want, and has found, if not peace, then that paused and yearning place from which to affirm the world in its gifts and burdens. When she writes, in “Practicing Eternity,” that the heart is

a lighthouse at the edge
of a cold and dangerous sea.

Once again the child
climbs its hundred dark stairs
and with one small, smoky lantern
tries to guide the boats safely in

we believe her. And we recognize ourselves.