Utah Valley University

From the SelectedWorks of Scott Abbott

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"The Eyes of a Flounder" Poems by Laura Hamblin

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/36/
The poem from which Laura Hamblin’s book title is drawn asks an intriguing set of mundane and existential questions:

what is love like
love is like the eyes of a flounder
grown on one side of his head . . .

what do you miss
I miss good lies, keeping
time by another’s breath, guilt

Fifteen stanzas raise fifteen questions in the context of “Celibacy at Forty-two (III),” and thirty lines return anything but meekly celibate answers, including the following proof that repetition can completely unman you:

what did you forget
I forgot to have a daughter
I forgot to have a daughter
Hamblin has a persona she calls “the next weird sister,” a Macbethian witch toiling and bubbling and creating trouble for the untroubled who trouble her and her kind. In a poem titled “The Next Weird Sister Builds a Dog Run,” the Utah-Valley-raised poet writes of the weird sister’s response to neighbors who “call her / to this sacrilege” of fencing in her dogs. She “submits / to this new religion,”

Still, through locked gates,

she pets dull fur,
    whispers pet names,
    serves each mouth red milk.

Neighbors console themselves
    in steel and wire dreams. As if a run
    will hold dogged thoughts.

She knows better and moves
    out a straw mat, if not
    to sleep, then

to lie with obsession,
    comforting some poor dog
    a hundred choices ago.

Like all poetry that is more than doggerel, this poem shifts ground, transforms nouns to adjectives, breeds metaphor: chain-link is cruel to more than dogs.

For me, the genius of Hamblin’s poetry is a scabby desire, a robust self-irony that admits mortal lack and resolutely fills that lack only with the stuff of mortality, that leads readers to new knowledge of ecstasy and birds and hatred and stars and love and dancing and ripening tomatoes and the body and yet understands, finally, that when wisdom comes,

I will comb her gray hair,
hold her thin head to my chest.

She will ask my forgiveness,
singing the song she teaches,
in a language I never heard,
in a language I never knew.

I wish I could print whole poems here, but I'll have to invite readers to the book with savory titles: “My Hate,” “The Bad Mother,” “The Next Weird Sister Contemplates Silicone Implants,” “Cabeza de Vaca in Wal-Mart,” and “Eating Lies.”

Hamblin’s poems cut your heart out. They parch your mouth with lines of alkali. Her poems rip off the veil that is your only grace, slice off your eyelids, reveal what few of us will admit and all of us know. These poems are unbearable. They are immeasurably life affirming. They make you remember you are vulnerable, and only briefly so: “this abbreviated gift of flesh,” “the thinness of our / transient presence.”

Hamblin’s metered shards of mortality make me want to think more clearly, to feel more deeply. They conjure up melancholy, brew up an extra-special-bitter catalogue of years past. And, as is so often the case when I read poems of exquisite, painful beauty, they make me want to write, to converse, to share ideas and feelings.

As if on cue, Sam sends an email: “Scott – It is hard for me to imagine that it is three years ago we were building our houses, having come to a sudden end of our mountain biking. I am awash in melancholy. Damned Bontrager wheel. Face has been a mess lately, causing (at least something is) dizziness and nausea. (One skill I have magnified is whining.) –Sam”

“Sam,” I write back, “three years ago we were building. Six years ago we were riding every day and writing for Catalyst. Nine years ago I was trying to think how the hell I was going to keep on with my marriage and with BYU. Fifteen years ago my brother John died of AIDS. Thirty years ago I was newly married and newly a graduate student and sure of a bright and happy future for us all. And fifty-seven years ago some Colorado doctor slapped my ass and made me cry for the first, but not last time.”

Lives lived hard and fast and yet so unexpectedly thin and wan. And my old friend is awash in melancholy and thoughtful enough to write me about it and I'm sitting here drinking a fine New Belgian trippel and listening to dissonant jazz and the snow is falling outside and the floor is warm and I'm writing about Laura Hamblin's The Eyes of a Flounder, a book full of wisdom and wit and sorrow and loneliness and celebration and by god it's enough and not nearly, ever, enough.
Laura Hamblin is a professor of English at Utah Valley State College. With this book of poetry published by Signature Books, she is among three other UVSC poets published or to be published by that Salt Lake City press: Alex Caldiero’s brilliant *Various Atmospheres* and Paul Swenson’s masterful *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake* preceded her book, and Warren Hatch’s *Mapping the Bones of the World* is forthcoming in March. With recent books published elsewhere by Laurie Whitt (see review in the September 2006 Catalyst) and Rob Carny, Utah Valley State College can boast (alongside a fine group of geologists, good philosophers aplenty, and all those other sets of expert human beings a college exists to foster) a regular passel of poets.

A signed stack of *The Eyes of a Flounder* graces the poetry shelf at Ken Sanders’ Rare Books, close to copies of *Various Atmospheres* and *Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake*. They won’t be there for long.