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Luminous Language

Doris Barkin

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REVIEW

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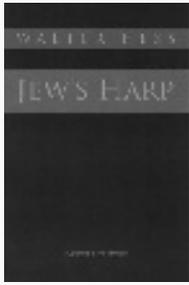
In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Luminous Language

Doris Barkin (bio)

Jew's Harp. Walter Hess. Pleasure Boat Studio.

<http://www.pleasureboatstudio.com>. 49 pages; paper, \$14.00.



Walter Hess's collection of poems *Jew's Harp* sits on my

coffee table. Illustrated deftly by Herb Stern, the book's cover is nondescript; nevertheless, its title beckons. *Jew's Harp* calls for an inquiry, a cross-examination, a response. Visitors to my home pick up the book, blindly scanning its pages. They press me: "Jew's harp? What is *that*?" Their tones are impatient, skeptical, and, finally...dismissive. I wonder about this. Is it the word "Jew" that provokes? Do the words together suggest something incongruous or inscrutable?

I delve further: a Jew's harp, an ancient musical instrument whose sound is produced by mouth and fingers, is so named, some sources claim, without any deserved reference to Jews. Apparently, in some quarters, the name is avoided altogether, considered too controversial to be uttered. Hess's collection, too, albeit doused in Jewishness, struggles with themes, motifs, and feelings that the Jew's harp arouses—utterance and avoidance. Walter Hess's poetry, like the sounds of the Jew's harp, is resonant and earthy, has deep overtones, and seems as ancient as the civilization from which he hails and of which he writes.

A quick glance at Walter Hess's biography confirms his abiding interest in Jewish identity. Born in Germany, he emigrated to the US in 1940 via Ecuador. He earned a masters degree from the City College of New York in 2003. He has translated the poetry of the German-Jewish émigré poet Hans Sahl in *Metamorphoses*, has had his own poetry published in, among other journals, *New Vilna Review*, *American Poetry Review*, and in the anthology, *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* (2007). In 2001, he won an award from the The Academy of American Poets. *Jew's Harp*, his first collection, comes at a pivotal moment in Hess's life: as the poet Marilyn Hacker has remarked, "Here is a 'new' poet whose voice breaks through in late middle age, in poems deep with memory and wide with history and writerly skill."

The poems in the collection explore the dimensions of silence and utterance, the buried expressions of a survivor. On Kristallnacht, Hess witnessed his own father taken off to Dachau. Soon after, the family fled to Ecuador. In Hess's own words:

As a teenager growing up in New York's Washington Heights, in which lived a large colony of refugees with histories similar to mine, I heard the almost constant repetition of...prayers for those who had died in the camps. The Holocaust became very personal and painful. Probably, because of that pain, I needed, for a very long time, to distance myself from it. For many years, I could not, for instance, read anything about the Holocaust. Only when I began to write poetry...did that begin to change.

In "Survivor," Hess expresses that distancing:

that book of shadows
when we were kids
who knew enough
to fill in that which happened;
knew to perfection that desire,
no, the need to stay apart,
away from them...

This necessarily brings up Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted declaration that to write poetry after Auschwitz is "barbaric." The debate lingers and the poems in this collection do nothing to quiet the debate. Can the Holocaust be represented adequately, compellingly? Does the systematic extermination of a people resist our ability to render the experience into art? Is the only appropriate response silence? Although Hess's poems wrestle with silence and have a beautiful quiet about them, the answer to these questions in Hess's poetry is resoundingly affirmative: art can be created; poetry about the Holocaust can and must be written and read.

The poems in the first half of the collection are in one way or another about the Holocaust or Judaism or Jewishness. The collection tellingly begins with "Survivor." Poems that follow are "Haimat," "1938," "Opa—The Old Synagogue," "A Midrash on *Genesis* 23." At around midpoint, the collection turns outward, not to the post-Holocaust or European world, but to the "new" world: "Melville Crossing Madison Square," "Washington Heights..."

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JEW'S HARP

Walter Hess

Pleasure Boat Studio
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Walter Hess's poetry, like the sounds of the Jew's harp, is resonant and earthy.

There is a quality about the poems in the collection which recalls old black and white photographs with serrated edges. The poems are sad, often heart wrenching, though not sentimental. They are filled with images of death, of the past, of bones, of knives, of concentration camps, stones, burials. In "Oma," Hess comes closest to allowing himself to imagine the death of his grandmother and slaughter of other Jews. He recalls the memory of his oma in a Provencian avary:

We sat in front of bread and butter then—
mothers and grandmothers rising like steam
from sweet creamy coffee,
safely like missives among the blue-lined chim
and the nougat fathens dotted along the four
o'clock mepery.

The contrast is stark in the very next verse:

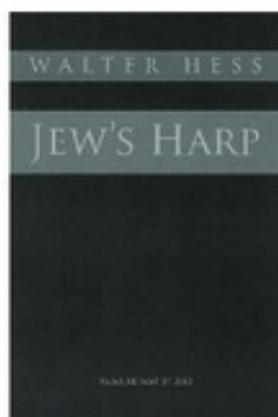
This is for my grandmother, an unimportant
Jew,

.....
who, in a walled city, died of Typhus
in Tereszin, city of Therese, Empress of
Typhus,
eight days before the liberating Russian army
came.

Bulldozers may have shoveled her to stuff the
pit,
to stem the stench and sickness....

As the poem progresses, Hess imagines that a Russian soldier has picked up his grandmother's corpse and shown piety, treating her "totting flesh" gently, with "awe." Hess, the grandson, cannot face the specter of gruesome death; instead, he disappears into silence: "I am not here— / almost."

Hess has a unique voice to impart. The rhythms



and cadences of Spanish, of a childhood in Ecuador, underscore the exile nature of his life as a survivor; the quintessential wandering Jew is infused with the culture of South America. In "1940—In the Heart of the Andes," one senses his alienation, yet also perceives how the landscape sustains him:

Andean bells in silent office,
cross-clangon sweeping
into half-remembered streets
cross Chimborazo switchbacks.

Among the oranges of "Riobamba" the "plantains," the "baroque tiers" of the "Machachi church," he hears the scream of an ancient woman: "Judío! Judío!" As remote as this is from the farm in Germany, from Dachau and Tereszin, he is still singled out.

The poems in the collection are highly wrought. Demonstrating his craft in a ghazal, an Arabic lyric poem, Hess catalogues Jewish poets of medieval Spain, perfecting the form in couplets, each line ending in the resonant "Al Andalus," conveying mysticism, awe, and even comedy: "Shiver zu sein a Jid," Yiddish for "It's hard to be a Jew," is a perennial, ironic lament. Or in "Walking Zoe to Sleep," a personal poem, Hess masters terza rima in a soothing lullaby to his granddaughter.

The latter poems are smaller universes, more familiarly personal, and only tangentially Jewish. While they may not be as powerful as the earlier poems in the collection, they too, exemplify Hess's luminous language and skill. The poems are contemporary: they are about jazz, family, or life in the metropole. While the locales have changed from Godseberg to Manhattan or Miami, the poet is still struggling with his legacy.

In the last poem of the collection, an amaryllis bulb is a metaphor for the unpredictable blossoming in life. When may it flower? In any season. So, too, with the poet Walter Hess, blossoming in his seventh decade. The very last word of the collection conveys hope among the ruins: it is fittingly and finally, "possibilities."

Doris Barkin is a lecturer of English at the City College of New York, where she teaches writing and literature and serves as faculty advisor to *Promethean*, the literary journal. She is completing her PhD in comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has served as a contributing editor on various publications and is currently a judge of several writing awards and competitions, including the New York City Poetry Festival. She is a child of survivors of the Holocaust.



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