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Book review

DIRT, ROOT, SILK BY SUSAN AZAR PORTERFIELD
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Susan Azar Porterfield opens her third book of poetry, Dirt, Root, Silk, with the declaration, “If I call the tree, tree, then you / are there in the spaces, same as naming.” This first poem is titled “Elegy/Aubade,” which demonstrates how, even through her shortest titles, Porterfield invokes both the dead and new beginnings before addressing a loved one after their hypothetical demise. In this book, Porterfield’s talent for making the sad and mundane beautiful shines. It is no wonder that this collection won the 2015 Cider Press Review Editors’ Prize.

The book’s title poem is a reminder of how profound the slightest objects can be. This poem ends with the suggestion that we “[e]xamine the layer by layer the fibrous leaf / for the core. Tumble in.” An almost-metaphor for her writing style, Porterfield begins “Dirt, Root, Silk” with a grand view at the “brink of a cornfield.” With a jump, she then focuses in with the precision of a microscope to listen to the rows of grain: “intimate, / how slight the real, dirt, root, silk.” She eventually focuses even further on the fibrous leaf. Each poem in Dirt, Root, Silk is an invitation to the reader to “tumble in” to the smallest, significant moments in life.

One example of such a moment takes place during the speaker’s usual morning routine in “In Which You and I Witness.” In this poem, the speaker is going about the usual morning activities when the speaker notices a bird outside of the window. Though the speaker admits, “I could have gone all my life, of course, / with this secret death” because “[…] I just saw him casually,” that moment of the bird—“odd, alone” struggling to fly then burrowing its head before death—is disruptive. The morning routine is briefly interrupted to witness an end just as the day begins. Porterfield dabbles in the ordinary, and the speaker must get on with the day because “It was a Monday, / and it’s always, always the same.” We recall “Elegy/Aubade” as we push forth to the next poem with the new beginning the poem grants the reader.

Throughout the collection, the poems consistently call forth the duality of life and death, the oxymoronic tendencies for the good to exist with the bad. “April 7, 2:46 P.M.” is a good example for this duality the poems toe. This poem is a still from a moment in time, a quaint portrait of a house surrounded by nature. There is rain pouring down outside, the speaker’s legs are kicked up, and the speaker is in love. However, the poem turns on its head with the final two lines: “I’m not unaware that there’s sorrow and searing pain / most everywhere in the world today.” Porterfield proves masterful at these turns through several poems in her collection.

“Small Living Things,” the poem after which the second section of the book is named, is another piece in which Porterfield exhibits her tight control over turns. She tells the story of a woman who:
[…] whenever she
tried to speak
bugs or slight birds flew into her mouth.

This made her wary.
She stayed home
a lot or when forced
to leave, covered
her mouth with a cloth
or hand.

The poem goes on to reveal that eventually the woman stays silent for so long that she forgets the sound of her voice. Here, in the final stanza, Porterfield turns the story around. The woman who feared the small living things flying out of her mouth eventually learned to “gestur[e] and stumble[e]” around until one morning when she startled awake with an “Oh!” She learned that “small living things / weren't flying into her mouth / but out of it.” Here is the forgiving kindness that permeates Porterfield’s poetry. She writes with a wisdom that nods to everyday insecurities and struggles while at the same time gently encouraging a certain joy in life.

This collection of poetry is a journey through the good, bad, and beautiful aspects of daily life, with small twists that often accompany and break the mundane. It is pastoral while acknowledging the pain that comes with living. It is a series of snapshots into the speaker's personal life and thoughts while maintaining its universal, emotional appeal. Finally, it is a collection that defies those who find boredom in their everyday by sharing the charming, rough, and tragic wonder of the ordinary.