Book review

CAMOUFLAGE FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD: POEMS BY LORENE DELANY-ULLMAN
FIREWHEEL EDITIONS, 2012

Lorene Delany-Ullman’s Camouflage for the Neighborhood displays the many dimensions of war. The collection perceives war in a universal, humanistic, complex, and anxious way, which points the reader’s attention to the idea that “war is never clearly war” (64). Delany-Ullman’s excellent images and juxtaposition of child and adult, man and woman, the outsider and the soldier, and the machine and the institution, fully grasps the overall intricate relationship of violence and the individual.

Appropriate for the collection’s overall approach, there are no sections that separate any specific poems. Further, each poem has no title, making not only juxtapositions within and between individual poems but also throughout the collection. The table of contents identifies each poem with the first sentence or first couple of words of each poem. Each poem is a narrative block of prose, as if each forms a snapshot of the speaker’s experiences and observations of the past, present, and future. The collection does not emphasize a single war throughout. Moreover, the speaker does not limit herself exclusively to the observations of external violence but also focuses on internal wars, such as war and the body, war and the speaker’s young-versus-old self, war and the outsider, war and the identity of women, and the psychological effects of people after a war.

Delany-Ullman’s speaker internalizes the effects of war in her own body. There emerges a pattern of physical battle, which her body experiences throughout. Her “symptoms of constricted flow” (7) at first seem to be mind-over-matter due to anxiety, but the reader later learns that there is a battle of sickness going on in her body. Since the reader frequently associates war with death, she is worried that her body will lose the fight and “[she’s] not ready” (7) to die yet. The speaker battles with internal suffering, as well as external, including the effects that violence has on children and her own sons.

One of the most affecting aspects of this collection is that the reader sees the observation of war and violence from the view of the speaker as a child. There is no doubt that, for most of her child and adult life, she experiences fear because of war. The poems’ speaker observes the lack of understanding of war that one has as a child, with her parents “buying furniture at Sears” while there are “missiles in Cuba” (2). There is a hint of ignorance of what war really is, or of the inability to comprehend the juxtapositions it introduces into life, while “lick[ing] frosting off the feet of [Marines]” (5). As an adult, the speaker observes children’s views of war, such as a child thinking a knight is the “bad guy” and using Barbie and G.I. Joe to glamourize war. The observation of children throughout the collection serves as a device to present the reality of war and violence. As an adult, the speaker is still fearful and “[doesn’t] like guns,” which the children believe are just “pretend” (52).

The observation of the external effects of war, as well as the speaker’s observation of the effects on herself, displays a paradox of power and objectification. For example, since women are “not allowed in the fort,” (4), they work at businesses. At first, Delany-Ullman focuses her observations on women who submit to the gender stereotypes throughout the war because “the pay was that good” (25). However, when the speaker is older, she obtains the power “to pink-slip men” (25), but is never equal to men. As another example, the “Struggling Vet” (31) who is booed when he comes home from war is also objectified as a negative symbol of the war, referring back to the disconnection between soldier and those outside the battlefield.
Ultimately, Delany-Ullman’s collection gathers together views and opinions of people affected by war, while also showing how opinions formed about war as a political institution, such as the “protestors on Market Street” (65), affect the individual and the community. The most delightfully intricate aspect of the collection is that the idea of right or wrong is not being imposed on the reader, but Camouflage for the Neighborhood gives bird’s-eye views of the complexities of war, while also observing individuals by “travel[ing] on their tail-wind” (71).