

## INK STAIN ON MY FINGERS

Lee Sharkey, **Walking Backwards** (Tupelo, 2016)

In 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, what makes Jewish art? In *Walking Backwards*, Lee Sharkey touches the borders of themes—the Holocaust, Israel, Old Testament narrative—that might traditionally define a “Jewish writer” in a lineup of her gentile peers, but never allows those outsize subjects to diminish her lyric focus on the individual. In the collection’s six sections, Sharkey considers diverse Jewish experiments to recover from exile, persecution, and the erasure of cultural knowledge. Her speakers, often historical characters, reflect upon life in the Vilna ghetto, the hiding places of East European Jewish partisans, a divided Jerusalem, and the intimate relationships of the Biblical gleaners. An alter-ego for Sharkey herself is present, too: witnessing, documenting, translating, remembering. For this poet, we realize by the collection’s end, entering human consciousness through art and language is the only way to approach the character of cultural identity, to declare oneself part of a cultural tradition.

A radical act of *Walking Backwards* is that Sharkey assimilates Yiddish literature, and the acts of reading and translating it, into her lyric. That Yiddish is a familiar point on the star of American Jewish identity may seem obvious, but the Yiddish of mainstream American culture is more often *The New Yorker’s* occasional *verkakhte* or television’s slipped *shtup* than the modernist works of Avraham Sutzkever and Peretz Markish, two of the writers with whom Sharkey has poetic conversations. Her engagement with their lives and works, both in the Vilna ghetto and before the war, allow us to imagine what it might be like if their names were as familiar to American life as Whitman or Dickinson. Framing this engagement is an intimate question that punctuates the entire volume: how does—how should—a living individual serve as a vessel for cultural memory, especially a culture rehabilitating from extreme erasure, as Jewish memory still struggles to do?

In the opening sequence of poems, "Cautionaries," several different voices reckon with this problem. What's the best way to get to know the past? One can learn history by embodying, putting on a historical mask. One speaker imagines herself "[slipping] into the skirts of Rosa Luxemburg / and [crossing] the border to foment the revolution." Such experiments with memory are not without consequence; the self in the present may find itself living in terms of the past, altered by it: "Even now, / a century later: ink stain on my fingers" closes that poem. But the condition of being altered by our engagement with the past, Sharkey suggests, is a human one. We undertake elaborate mental gymnastics to accommodate or bury our histories. In another section of "Cautionaries," she writes: "Because the hands remembered what they had done / they exiled themselves from the house of the body. / From time to time they crept to the back door / where the kitchen girl would toss them scraps..." Here, she complicates the idea that we learn history in order to keep from repeating its errors: the worst parts of our histories may haunt us like phantom limbs, just beneath consciousness, but are never gone.

In this universe of truncated memory and painful history, the speaker who wishes to remember is asked to begin again as if without antecedent, and yet with awareness of the enormity of what precedes her. It's into this fragile territory, where absence and silence are tangible fabrics, that Sharkey welcomes us. Here she composes her thesis: that the individual body is the landscape where problems of history and memory are worked out, where the silence of erasure resides, and where remembrance is possible. The last poem in "Cautionaries" sets that stage:

Any sound that a sound might make has lost its history.  
Look no further than the country of limestone and fir  
whose lost name whips in the wind like an anthem  
until no one can hear the other.

Any sound that a sound might make has lost its mother.  
My friend says she will blow a hole in the silence.  
I tell her, look in the mirror  
to get the feel of absence.

Here, Sharkey already seems to anticipate Abraham Sutzkever, with whom she'll have a poetic *tête-à-tête* at the collection's end. Erasure of people and memory, Sutzkever argued in many poems, can't be reversed, but only filled with what remains, best transmitted in language. "Who will remain, what will remain? A wind will stay behind," he writes, and later, "From within our silence, trees and nests emerge. / In the humming muscles of the orchestra converge. / But who, from inside us, can play the I, all it connotes. / We are just the notes, just the notes" (34).

Rather than segue into a purely memorial mode next, Sharkey turns witness and reporter with the collection's second and third sections, which hover around contemporary Jerusalem. In these poems, Sharkey probes one of the major ways Jews have tried to fill 20<sup>th</sup>-century voids, and uncovers ways the pain of erasure can give way to national feeling and cultural division. Translation between Arabic and Hebrew, or one of those languages and English, becomes a method of witnessing in these poems. Again, the individual body becomes the medium for understanding, memory, or the lack of those things: "Sometimes the interpreter seems transparent / As if her words entered my body directly, as if I simply understood."

Translation also becomes a subtle but deliberate method of trying to repair and weave together the national memories of both Jews and Arabs. Throughout "Intentions," nouns appear in both Hebrew and Arabic; not just any nouns, but foundational elements of a human life lived simply, on the land: *mother, house, hands, vineyard, clay*. Often cognates, these words become guideposts for Sharkey as she makes her way back to a vision of an earlier Palestine, one in which Arabs and Jews might have understood each other as mutually intelligible variations—cognates—rather than as hopelessly different. The last poem in "Intentions" lays out a framework in which hope for the future is an extension of the reconstruction of the vanished past:

Of the year to come I remember the blessing of green

Our hands, *yad/yad*, waded into the clay, *tiin/tiin*, and fashioned  
each other

We could hear each other cross through danger

We could see each other hang upon nothing

Terraced hills grew green with labor and the labor of the olive

We stood in the stone-lined pool before the likeness of each  
other

One sanctified history incised the other

The dark on the face of the deep enclosed us

Horizons opened around our first intentions

I remember your vineyard, *karm/karem*

Over and over, Sharkey implies that the weighty task of repairing memory must take place through the body or not at all, must feel as if it originates there. How does a modern person do such work, especially in English translation? In the second-to-last section's opening poem, "Degenerate Art," a crowd of visual images surfaces as a suggestion:

One day roan horses are running  
The next day they turn blue in the closet

Under a scarlet roof, sheep graze in the bridal chamber  
Lovers kiss under the many moons

Her painted blouse, her carmine mouth  
The body strung together

He sees we see through to raw red  
Under the plumage, under the linen hat

A dangerous man, half eaten  
His head smokes like a chimney

One day lawn and peonies  
The next, exile, like all the others

In Sharkey's sharp lens, visual images—here pulled from the 1937 exhibit curated to showcase works that “insulted German feeling,” which featured the likes of Klee, Chagall, and Kandinsky—provide an alternate avenue to reconstructing and revising a memory narrative. In the poem, Sharkey lets them function like storyboards, connecting disparate scenes. Images also help to compose the numbed and traumatized body (“He sees we see through to raw red / Under the plumage” and “The body strung together”). In the poems that follow this one Sharkey's evocation of the visual image proceeds to do almost everything but document: images communicate another artist's efforts to transmit horror (“The mother's dressed her in normalcy.... But the eyes will be white, there is nothing for it. / I lay on paint until she is blinded”), the Nazi party's objections to confiscated works by modernist masters (“The face confused natural form”), and the uses of art in captivity (“A near-invisible witness / stealing the souls of collaborators... / sketching the writers to perpetuate them...”). In these poems, Sharkey is at her best, setting the brutal stage for her unlikely efforts at conjuring the world and voices of the dead writers who guide her.

When she does speak through them, as she does in “Old World,” a poem “in conversation with Peretz Markish,” and “Something We Might Give,” the volume's last poem, “in conversation with Abraham Sutzkever,” she straddles a space between inventing and remembering. “Sounds cross through the thin green curtain: courtyard of cobblers, minyan of thieves / My three brothers, buttering their lips with the alphabet.” This combination, of course, is more often known as fiction, but as Sharkey generates characters from Sutzkever, Markish, and others she lets them interject with their own language (in translation) and she speaks back. The voice she provides for them at times blends with her own: “At night I listen for them / Slicing black bread with a merciful knife / Their thirty fingers

drumming on the table / Turning the walls to text while history compels them... / What shall I do with so much memory."

What, indeed? In "Something We Might Give," Sharkey again looks for a mandate, for what the surviving generation ought to carry forward, and how. From here on, all knowledge is fragmented, all survival is unlikely: "What joy in a stone here, a skeleton stone / A satchel, a compact, two small gold earrings / Scavengers piece the question together." The collection nearly ends on an answer taken from a speech by Paul Celan: *For there remained amid these losses this one thing: language*. But as Sharkey writes earlier, the memory-keeper's problem is that language is also part of the loss: "The tongue complicit: *cleansed, denuded*." What to do with memory, then? Speak it, write it. And Sharkey does, having the last word and perhaps the words beyond that, as the poets would have wished.

*Leah Falk*

#### Work Cited

Sutzkever, A. A. *Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Trans. Barbara Harshav. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1991.