

A Note on Patricia Fargnoli's Work

by Ilya Kaminsky

“Duties of the Spirit”
by Patricia Fargnoli
(Tupelo Press, 2005)

With majority of poets of her generation being employed as college professors, Patricia Fargnoli’s position of an ageing woman writing about life at the near poverty-level in America, is unique and special. Let me correct myself right away: it is special, first of all, not for its subjects but for the lyricism and passion of its language. And yet, it is the subject matter that so clearly drives her poetry, empowers it. There are two poets in America who have been justly celebrated for writing about the same subjects for years: Phillip Levine (poverty, working class) and Stanley Kunitz (ageing). And, yet, while she has clearly learned for both, Patricia Fargnoli has found her own, very distinct place, and from there she speaks with a very moving—and, at its best, deeply spiritual, wise—voice that tells us about what it means to live in our time.

Fargnoli is not a poet who hesitates or is afraid of people. Her beautiful second full-length book, “Duties of the Spirit,” is filled with names, situations, invocations, animals, human characters of strangers and dear ones, dying and staying alive at whatever’s the cost.

Now, the obvious question arises: how, given the heaviness of these subjects, can this poet—or, for this matter, any poet—achieve wisdom and grace in the space of a one or sometimes two, pages? Fargnoli does it in several ways. Her trademark is perhaps her ability to juxtapose the direct, open, often rhythmical, statement such as “Yes, I am getting old; / Yes, being poor takes too much out of me” with an image that is unexpected, but gratifying: “Here is the safe way station, filled with the seaweed / Scent of salt. The waves emit light / As if from a thousand windows.” Generous image and the directness of tone are the tools Fargnoli finds most useful.

But it is not that simple. For instance, when I say “directness of tone,” I mean more than one thing; what in the previous example constituted mere two lines in the act of accepting the inevitable, can in another poem (“Happiness”) extend through the two page long precise and quite painful observation, spoken by a woman who looks at the old photograph of “the old couple sit[ing] on the stone ledge to their stucco house / laughing, while bells ring in the village.”

In “Happiness”, Fargnoli’s directness of phrase and voice are the tools of tightly controlled passion. We begin with looking at the photograph where “the man has one of those flat wool caps the Irish wear. / Maybe they are Irish and have lived through The Troubles. / May be

they remember hunger. // And because they are old, I know people died in their lives. / Friends with hearts that burned out, sons caught / in crossfire—something like that.” Ok, direct enough; almost innocent enough. But at this moment, very quickly, we get inside the mind of not just the speaker, but these people in the photograph: “They know this, but they don’t think about it.” Then the movement shifts, and we are in the future—or, what must have been the future, the realm of prediction: “I’ll bet they buried him in his absence of teeth / with his back horn-rimmed glasses // and her next to him under a matching stone / in her scrubbed-thin dress, her blue socks, her sandals, / Bet they kept her watch on.” The passion grows larger, it is on fire, the details make things grow hot, each next detail, precise as it is, makes us feel the heat.

At this moment in the poem, Fagnoli shifts the gear again, and gives us a broader picture – we see the city: “In Sorrento, the widows come with buckets of water” and then, one stanza later we are back at the direct address: “I’d like to do something like that for these two. / I’d bring them bread. / I’d ask them // do you remember the day of the photograph / or why you were happy?” Here, at the poem’s finale, she is addressing us, herself, and the page: “I doubt they’d know it -- / happiness arrives for one moment / and then flees past the sheep.” The happiness of the final words is earned: it is lived through, both in the lives of the characters on the photograph discussed, in the life of a poem and its author meditating in front of us, and in ourselves, as we read it, as we go from one emotion to next, as a mood shifts, as the wisdom arrives on its heels. The poem becomes both the story and the lyric address; it is built on precise physical images, direct statements in which the author both argues with herself and learns something in the end. Final idea of happiness is unexpected perhaps, and yet it is there.

There are many poems like this one in the book: “Arguing Life for Life,” which is about overcoming suicide, or “Locked,” about being left alone in the middle of a suburban prairie, with one’s car locked at the parking lot, in the very early AM and no one to call for help. But to describe such poems in this way is to do them great injustice for each of them is extremely theatrical, each a little play that is staged right in front of us, as if it is going on our own open palm as we speak. What gives these poems power—in addition to their meticulous design and poise—is Fagnoli’s passion. This poet can be lyrical and passionate, narrative and passionate, humorous and passionate, erotic and passionate, wise and passionate, silly and passionate, despairing and passionate, even somewhat cold and controlled and still, somehow, passionate within that frame.

Things that move Fagnoli most, as mentioned above, old age and poverty, allow her to talk a broader look at the existence itself, give her voice a certain volume: “I am slipping on the scree on my mountain, / I am sliding, my knees give, my hips. If there / Is a bottom to all this, I haven’t found it. // If there are answers one comes to after long life, / They are illusive.” She speaks for the certain part of American society (that her even tittles claim right away: “On Reaching Sixty Five” or “Old Woman Dreams”) which before “Duties of the Spirit” was published never had such a clear spokesperson in verse. “We old women,” she says “when someone tells us / what passes these days for the truth / we argue with them and refuse to believe. / Instead, we look to the stars for faith and confusion.”

These almost epic claims are supported and given integrity by her lyrical voice: “I write about beauty; I cannot resist”. “I am asking for the clarity / of a fogged-in morning,” she says, “I am asking if it’s possible—/if it’s still possible.” The title poem, “Duties of the Spirit” is a brilliant example of how it is still “possible;” other pieces, such as beautiful sequence of “Desire[s]”, which sometime echoes Kunitz’s “Hornworm” sequence and his “desire, desire, desire” of “Touch me,” and yet as Fagnoli’s sequence comes together it is entirely her own, a voice of an ageing woman in search of the ability to “give praise, if not to a god, / then at least to light.../to herons performing tai chi in a salt marsh.” This sequence, as all of the book, is held together by the absolute honesty of the speaker’s voice, which tells us the truth, something not always very pretty, about herself and the world—tells us the truth without patronizing: “How hard she tries to be good, to be good enough. / And fails. More often, she feels like the man / in the novel about Africa, who stumbles like a child / through the rain forest howling: *I want, I want, I want.*”

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