

Small Wisdoms, Large Spirit:
Patricia Fargnoli's Duties of the Spirit
by Edward Byrne

Duties of the Spirit
by Patricia Fargnoli
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*The stars continue as far as we know,
as far as we can see, and as far as we can't.*

—Patricia Fargnoli, “Small Wisdoms”

When Mary Oliver, as judge for Utah State University Press’s May Swenson Poetry Award, chose Patricia Fargnoli’s first manuscript of poems, *Necessary Light*, to be the 1999 winner, the selection seemed admirable and appropriate for a number of reasons. Foremost among them, Fargnoli’s poetry appeared directly descended from the works of May Swenson and Mary Oliver, as well as additional distinguished women poets who had written about the relationship between nature and self with great insight, especially when the subject of the poem involves experiences of marriage, motherhood, or other aspects of life viewed from, and enriched by, a distinctly female perspective. Indeed, the strong sense of affinity for nature’s beauty and grace, combined with a feeling of awe for its mystery and power, in Fargnoli’s poems may be traced back in an honored line through the finest works of Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, and Emily Dickinson.

In 2004 Patricia Fargnoli produced *Small Songs of Pain* (Pecan Grove Press), a sequence of 37 poems inspired by Marc Chagall’s 1920s paintings portraying LaFontaine’s fables. Although such an endeavor may seem to have the potential of being limiting to the poet because of the precise content of the paintings and the derived context of the fables, wisely Fargnoli often allowed herself to wander from an objective rendering of the content or a strict interpretation of the context; instead, she invited readers to witness inventive personal impressions and innovative flights of insight arising from a skillful ability to closely observe and openly imagine the emotions one might attach to such images or the concerns that might accompany such narratives.

Patricia Fargnoli’s new book-length collection, *Duties of the Spirit* (Tupelo Press, 2005), presents a wonderful blending of the characteristics displayed in the two volumes. The poems in this new volume continue to demonstrate the shrewd wisdom, generous spirit, and astute intuition introduced to readers in Fargnoli’s first book with the keen observation and free association needed to assure originality in the second collection. In addition, the poems show once more Fargnoli’s command of language and careful crafting of lines. The voice of

the poet is reassuring and welcoming, while at the same time exhibiting vulnerability and humility.

However, again and again, readers are repeatedly impressed by Fagnoli's refreshing images of nature—the surrounding landscape and its animal inhabitants, the borders between wilderness and civilization, or the long course of coastline that separates the land-locked speakers in the poems from the vast openness of the ocean before them. Readers are particularly rewarded with poems revealing instances and experiences where contrasting elements of different habitats meet or the distinct environments come into conflict, as well as when an individual resident of one world trespasses upon another. On just such occasions, Patricia Fagnoli's poems resemble most closely similar pieces by Elizabeth Bishop. Indeed, if a poetic kinship with Fagnoli were to be determined, Elizabeth Bishop would be a prime candidate.

Marianne Moore, the nearest poetic spirit to Elizabeth Bishop, once commented in her review of Bishop's first book, *North & South*: "Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular." Likewise, Patricia Fagnoli is at her best when a poem subtly allows observation of the outer world of nature to be comprehended and complemented by the inner realizations arrived at naturally by the poet or speaker, small wisdoms by a writer with a large spirit, rather than forced to fit some preconceived notion or manipulated by a desire to close the poem with a clever, but unearned line. As in Bishop's poetry, there also exists a persistent sense of loss, or fear of losing, and an elegiac feeling to many of Fagnoli's poems as they examine issues of illness and dying, death or absence, aging and pain, as well as human conflict or diminishment of nature. Similar to Bishop's poetry, Fagnoli's poems pose questions with an exacting clarity of purpose, yet with a consistent charity of human kindness.

Like Elizabeth Bishop recalling her own home area of New England and Nova Scotia, Patricia Fagnoli is most comfortable and at ease when delivering to readers the landscape and shoreline of her native New England. Born in Massachusetts and raised by relatives in Nova Scotia and New England, Bishop attached great emotion to geography, especially to the settings she remembered from her childhood. Fagnoli, who lives in New Hampshire, also associates some of her speakers' emotional states with the geographical New England states and the characteristics of their landscape she knows so well. As in Bishop's poetry, Fagnoli explores her surroundings, focusing primarily upon those features where nature and humans, wilderness and civilization, the real and the imagined seem to blend, overlap, trespass, or intrude on one another. Jeredith Merrin has written of Bishop's attention to "blurred boundaries": "She seems always to have been fascinated by what occurs in the liminal state between consciousness and unconsciousness, waking and sleeping."

In Patricia Fagnoli's poems such a blurring of boundaries or intersection between nature and human supplies significant imagery. In "Happiness": "The sheep wander into the dooryard and eat the grass." In "From a Clifftop Overlooking Pigeon Island," the speaker confides: "The only need I have is this enclosure, this day / folding around me, / and beyond the cliff, the sea alive with silver." In "The Small Hurtling Bodies," readers are made aware of the dangers in the conflict between nature and humans:

. . . they hurled themselves
toward the light, their wings, their bright bodies flung
through glass, flung at the beacon meant as warning,
flung at the source itself until feathers and smashed glass
sprayed out north, east, south, west.

Yet, in “Brief Encounter” the blending of human and nature contributes to a moment of reflection: “How easily we slid through waters too slick / with swirls of reflected light / to give back our faces.” And in the lovely “Couplets by the Cove after a Hard Year,” the union of nature and human opens an opportunity for mending:

Below my rock, the water laps in—gentle as hands
on a breast—bits of foam, blades of sunlight.

Dried leaves, blood brown, mend the fractures
between the boulders. Waves’ gravely speech.

There is healing here: poultice of salt, bandage of moss,
the little enduring hips of the beach roses.

Impressively, Patricia Fargnoli surprises the reader with the multitude of emotions evoked by encounters with nature: joy, serenity, contemplation, danger, violence, awe, etc. The variety of incidents in nature and varied responses to them prevent predictability or boredom; instead, they preserve and present the possibilities of a fresh glimpse at the relationships between one’s self and one’s surroundings each time a new line is read.

In poems that serve as an extended metaphor for the trespassing upon nature by humans, and the intrusion into wilderness by civilization, Fargnoli’s poetry reminds the reader of classic Bishop poems such as “The Moose,” “The Armadillo,” or “The Fish.” “First Night at The Frost Place” begins with the introduction of an unexpected visitor: “The bat veered erratically over us / on that first nervous night.” While the twelve writers continue to eat dinner, “pass the good food, / continued to reach tentatively, / stranger to stranger,” the speaker is ever-conscious of the bat flying overhead, in and out of the shadows, “so dark, it seemed / snipped from the burlap of shadow / high in the rafters above our candlelight.” Throughout the poem, the “frantic silhouette” and tentative movements of nature’s intruder mirror the anxiety of the speaker among strangers, as the poem closes:

And, for all that society, I
might have missed it entirely—
so far above us it fluttered.
Seen/unseen. Seen/unseen.

The metaphor of natural uneasiness exhibited by the poet’s speaker reappears in “Evidence” (a terrific, if not quietly terrifying, poem that also hints at the influence of Robert Frost, another poet for whom the New England landscape mattered mightily), where the boundary between wilderness and civilization is kept in mind for fear of becoming lost outside one’s

environment:

I walked carefully, and as far in as I dared,
trying to keep sight of the road and the field.

But the forest drew me into its vast density.
I lost the road, the field, and all sense of direction.

By the final lines of this poem, the speaker is immersed in nature—the forest, the falling rain—and if not completely lost herself, at least alert to something becoming lost, leaving only evidence of its previous presence.

I turned in a full circle, and turned again,
I saw nothing
but I swear I heard some spirit go away
brushing its sharp antlers against the trees.

In “The Village,” elements of nature serve as cautionary metaphor. Almost as if in reply to the sound of a carillon, when its “bell notes bounce against the winter sky,” a woodpecker taps its own beat on a nearby tree:

A woodpecker raps against the highest trunk,
and what melted in yesterday’s rain
has frozen into sheets of ice.
Walking’s treacherous.

The dangers represented by parts of nature—the cold, the ice, the broken limbs caught in branches overhead—echo the warnings in the society temporarily left behind by the poem’s speaker: “The country’s on high alert again.” Nevertheless, this rural natural landscape is home for the speaker: “Here is the life I know.” The poem closes with a vivid and ominous image of tension and foreboding that appears an appropriate commentary on the situation in nature and, even more suitably, in the civilization to which the narrator knows she must return:

Above me, in the giant maple,
one branch lies winter-snapped
and ready to fall but for the way
it’s cradled across two other limbs.
One good wind could bring it down.

“The Undeniable Pressure of Existence” is perhaps the poem in *Duties of the Spirit* that most closely resembles Bishop’s poems about encounters with nature, conflicts between nature and civilization. This poem describes a fox caught out of its element and roaming among symbols of the human environment:

I saw the fox running by the side of the road
past the turned-away brick faces of the condominiums
past the Citco gas station with its line of cars and trucks
and he ran, limping, gaunt, matted dull haired

past Jim's Pizza, past the Wash-O-Mat
past the Thai Garden, his sides heaving like bellows
and he kept running to where the interstate
crossed the state road and he reached it and ran on. . .

The speaker reacts with frustration, helplessness, and sorrow: "I watched him / helpless to do anything to help him, certain he was beyond / any aid, any desire to save him . . ." One is tempted to also remember the response by the narrator in William Stafford's "Traveling through the Dark," perhaps another influential work for Fargnoli. As in various Bishop poems or in Stafford's poem, the speaker indicates a position of powerlessness, incapable of any action that would alter the outcome, nearly resigned to the consequences of various invasions of society on natural landscapes—the many extended highways and suburban malls or expanding housing developments ("the perfect / rows of split-levels, their identical driveways / their brookless and forestless yards") slowly encroaching upon the habitat of nature's creatures. The speaker characterizes the fox as "out of his element, sick, panting, starving, / his eyes fixed on some point ahead of him." How does one interpret that gaze: what might that point of focus be? Fargnoli's narrator suggests the animal is staring ahead, seeking "some possible salvation / in all this hopelessness, that only he could see." Such a final line implies that the speaker cannot share the suspicion that a salvation exists anywhere ahead. Instead, Fargnoli emphasizes the far more limited vision of humans, just as she does in "Small Wisdoms": "The stars continue as far as we know, / as far as we can see, and as far as we can't."

As in Bishop's works, an elegiac tone filters through much of Fargnoli's poetry, and in this case it applies to her sadness over the steady loss of natural settings crowded out by suburban sprawl and the accompanying rapid rate of new construction of highways with roadside shopping malls. However, Bishop's poetry also contains an ongoing concern with vulnerability and a fear of losing those closest to her. Similarly, the sense of an overall elegiac theme in Fargnoli's poetry extends to mourning the absence of loved ones lost to death or the increasing importance of acknowledging one's own mortality as aging occurs. Often, Fargnoli combines her considerable descriptive gift, especially in communicating the transition of seasons and the progression of changes during the natural life-to-death cycles of time, with a poignant meditative note on personal vulnerability and the aging process. In "Talking to Myself in This Late Year," Fargnoli records:

Even in the second week of September, the sea
enamels itself with a brilliance that comes
from the start of cold weather.

Where did youth go?
Not to mention marriage and motherhood.

She reports an awareness of death and its influence on her has been consistent for many years: "When my parents died, / the aunts pretended nothing had happened. / What could not be spoken / was held in the muscles and flesh of my body" ["If Too Much Has Happened"]. Readers discover more of Fargnoli's meditation on the temporality of life in "The Last Day,"

where an April morning is perfectly pictured (“the sun has risen / to vibrate three inches above the mountain / and light shimmies along three wires looped / from the tall trunk of the pine to the house”). Nevertheless, while “one bird sings the sweetest notes into being,” Fagnoli questions and laments the fleeting passage of time: “Stalks are rising—exploding in yellow / in last year’s garden and one ladybug climbs / the screen—as if it had all the time in the world.”

“Arguing Life for Life” is a remarkable poem that draws upon Fagnoli’s professional background as a psychotherapist and begins with the following startling lines: “Today in my office someone wanted to die / and I said *No*.” The piece transforms into a self-examination as the speaker confronts her own concern and consternation about mortality, closing with two moving stanzas:

I leaned back, let my hands fall;
both of us were tired of pain
and loss tallied week after week.

He didn’t know how sometimes I stand
at my bedroom window looking out
where the steeple lifts over the town,
wondering what is left to tether me to the earth.
We sat a long time in silence.

Fortunately for readers, Fagnoli’s frequent times in silence allow for moments of contemplation and writing on important issues of life and death, joy and sorrow, contributions and loss, nature and the natural flow of living a life filled with a large spirit. In the title poem of this collection, Fagnoli remarks upon Thornton Wilder’s “duties of the spirit.” According to Wilder, the first duty is “joy” and the second is “serenity.” Fagnoli suggests the third duty must be “grief,” which “comes bending on his walking stick / holding a trowel to dig where the loves have gone.”

However, Fagnoli concludes the poem not with a final note of sadness, but with another small wisdom that reaffirms the value of living despite the temporality of life or happiness and the eventual stage of grief, reminding readers: “the first is slippery joy.” Consequently, Fagnoli’s poetry provides readers with another source of just such a spirit of joy in living and a small wisdom of the ages that appears to advise grasping life to the fullest extent while we can with an awareness of the natural beauty around us, and she presents readers with poems that counsel a total appreciation for the people and places we experience in the brief time we are granted.