

New Orleans Suite

by Peg Lauber

Marsh River Editions Chapbook

48 pages, 2006

Review by Lo Galluccio

Over the course of five or so years, writer Peg Lauber – practically a Wisconsin native, though born in Michigan – gives us her flow-chart of journeys north and south: her main destination, the misgiving and magical city of New Orleans. Like Demeter to her daughter's Persephone, Peg is pulled into the seasonal work of a mad bird lover, a woman who raises non-migratory sandhill cranes. We see Meaghan with a wild sweet smile in a photo early on in this collection, holding a large feathered animal, who seems settled in her arms but somehow unwieldy and otherworldly. It is an appropriate image to introduce the book's heart and soul. For in Meaghan --Peg's own offspring-- lies something beyond the normal, something a little saintly, a little out of control.

"Finally turning east we see

New Orleans on the horizon

Where our daughter waits

To help us unload, get ready

For the Christmas party

At the place where she raises cranes,

Where I'll wear my Christmas crane shirt."

On Our Way: December 2001

Perhaps it is transference, but Peg –while her daughter is enraptured by her cranes – scans the landscape to behold many birds, the birds of winter and summer, the birds "of the intercoastal waterway." And the birds are as variegated in temperament and look as they can be; sacred, scary, mystical creatures of flight. Some are trapped for their own good and fed cuts of fish-meat. Some are "Muscovy ducks gone wild/living on the golf course, steam rising from water traps early....p.2

There are many good poems in the New Orleans Suite, and I detect in Peg and her work, a love and trust for progressions,

for sequences, for the simple plot of how we get from here to there. While the birds do dominate much of the book's story, it is also a book about the city of New Orleans itself. In "The First Parade: Mardi Gras, January 2002"

she takes us from the start of the parade with its police and shriners, through the floats of "gigantic glitter" whose plastic medallions litter the streets in purple, red, gold and green, to the underside of the event; its aftermath:

"At the end march more police – policing convicts dressed in yellow, who scoop piles of garbage into trucks. "Strange parade..." the author comments. And, in the end, as with her Christmas crane shirt, and like the scavenger birds with less discriminating taste, she reaches into the dirt to find, "a plush toy, a red Tabasco bottle with arms: my treasure to remember in the northern summer." P 5

Unlike Meaghan's cranes, Peg is herself a migratory creature. In "Feeding Storks" she vividly describes the kind of butchery necessary to debone fish and cut the symbol of Christ, fish, for the birds. She writes"

"It's a mean thing, taking apart large fish

who bleed as I do, but gleam as I don't:

silver beauty, slippery bracelets, gigantic rings

but here just daily gifts for those large

ungainly, yet beautiful birds." P 6

There are also more pedestrian poems concerning the humans around and how they come to bloody ends in the badlands of this City...

"Stray bullets are common in New Orleans, that other country

where almost every day

someone's child gets in the way

of a bullet intended for someone else,

while someone's child, in a drive by

shooting, celebrates the phallic power

in his hand, the money in his pocket,

the drugs in his bloodstream –

those, the only things that matter."

"Coda: Other People's Guns" p 13

And so, like the weather north to south, we are introduced to the polarity between the sacrifices made for the birds and the surrounding human territorial wars for money and drugs in New Orleans. Side by side these universes co-exist.

There are wonderous snapshots of different birds, as in "Night Bird" whose imagery is almost classical, pitched to opera: "The filthy night is laced with streaks of dawn/ like cream in tea/as the caged night bird stops shrieking./.....She works quietly and with a hard joy, tearing strips from the meat, suddenly bursting into shrieks that carry to the still shore, to the horizon, persisting, persisting, persisting..."

New Orleans is a town rife with holiday parades, history and murder. And Peg describes in her acute and elegant poems these spectacles close up; one can smell the muck, the oil, the blood, the incense. But it is also a City surrounded by these miraculous birds who are fed, and caged, and fretted over. This is the jewel-like secret of Peg's journey as a writer and mother, shared with us in "New Orleans Suite." We are treated to visions and flights of many degrees.

Recommended.

Lo Galluccio
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