

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

The Lesser Guardian
By Joanna Nealon
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Review by Dennis Daly

VISIONARIES VISIT US INFREQUENTLY with their scientific insights predicting future worlds of exotic machinery and wondrous societies. Even less do we hear from that particular brand of prophetic dreamer who imagines humanity's ethereal, yet existential, destiny. Joanna Nealon, in *The Lesser Guardian*, divines out, poem by poem, a transfigured world of the human heart, beyond DNA, transcending corporeal flaws. She compels her hoped-for eternity into the reality of poetic lines that ring of clarity.

Nealon's collection has a trajectory that gloriously ascends into the atmospheric layers of earth's heavens from sulfuric depths. Her opening poem, *Have A Nice Day*, showcases a dry wit (exhibited in its title) as it cries out for human understanding and the salvation it brings. She opens the piece with a prison metaphor,

*Anchored in its bone cage,
The heart lives alone.
It cannot breakthrough the bars
Without destroying itself.
It can only send out cries,
Some soft, some strident,
Through lips and eyes,
Calling attention
To its solitary confinement*

In *Banbury Cross* the poet's persona is visited by disaster (presumably riding a cock-horse), the imagined conclusion to a nursery rhyme's innocence. Old Testament Job has nothing on her. The lightness of glee devolves into grief's weightiness. Her misfortune begins,

*He snatched away my joys,
Tore my loved ones from my arms,
Killed my creatures or drove them into exile,
Drained the color from my dawns.
Begrudging me my bright raiment,
My light laughter,
He pulled the rings from my fingers,
The bells from my toes,
Unmade my music.
'And she shall have dirges wherever she goes'.*

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Nealon seems to confront reality internally, mulling it over and challenging it. Meditation becomes another sense used by her, and her mind's eye sees the construct of fragile personhood facing off with mortality. Her poem, *A Cold Exchange*, highlights this in a dialogue with Death. She posits the evolution of human essence through the perception of truth. Here's the heart of the piece,

*"Death," I say,
"I have known you for so long,
And yet we are still not friends,"
"True," says Death,
"I never knew how to win friends.
But I do know
How to influence people."
"But not enough," say I,
"To teach them how to live.*

Yeats had his Rosicrucian esoterica, which he mined for poetic inspiration to very good effect. Nealon does likewise with her terminology derived from anthroposophy and stresses the point with the introductory referencing of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and cabalist, who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that she employs. Nealon clearly seeks the light of truth in her art. She transforms the raw and arcane material of mysticism into imaginative craftsmanship.

The longest poem in her collection, Nealon entitles *Crossing*. Here she lays out an optimistic blueprint of striving beyond her disappointment in life's obtuseness and rampant ignorance to imbue her idea of consciousness with transformative powers. In addition she personifies with authority this stage of understanding and lets her persona speak thusly,

*I am The Lesser Guardian of the Threshold,
Who bars your way.
You brought me into existence
Through your thoughts, your words, your actions.
Before this,
You bore me invisibly within you,
But now I stand revealed.
From this moment on, I charge you to transfigure my form
Into radiant beauty*

Throughout this collection the poet as seeker discovers the invisible world and its characteristic boundary beyond mere physicality. She speaks of eternity and remembrance. Her religion mirrors life and her exemplars grow great hearts, propelling them into the angelic hierarchy, or perhaps further. The transitory nature of flesh and blood gives up its secrets slowly and in a way that does not decrease its consummate attraction. Nealon in her poem *Not A DNA Signature* makes sense of her dual nature this way,

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*I am merely borrowing
A body and a geography,
Though I helped to make this body
From ice and stones and astral dregs,
Shot through with memory of Sun
That warms my blood!*

*I am a spiritual being
Sitting by the wreck of my ancient mother,
Cradling the hurt in my children's lives,
Listening for my husband's courageous step.*

*I am a spiritual being
Singing to parakeets in the morning,
Crying after a newscast,
Trying, trying to remember
That I am a spiritual being.*

Utopias, both spiritual and temporal, have a long history of human obsession. Nealon suggests a near perfect consciousness that exists as a parallel and spiritual entity. She sees this invisible existence as a consequence of perceptible internal actions. Her poem Learning To Tell Time concludes with such a declaration,

*Stepping forth from the dream of Night,
The self stands juxtaposed
To the fierce gatherings of Group Souls.
The self is its own unique species
And bears allegiance to all.
Its mission is Love,
Lifted from instinctive depths
To freedom's conscious heights.*

Nealon's poem, Beyond Astronomy, provides inward directions to the source of her muse. Stars flame spectacularly there. She describes the mode of sensation and the potential for creativity,

*Through the heart's clear glass
Shines the gaze of the hierarchies,
Spirits of stars,
Weavers of worlds,
Molders of form,
Upholders of life.*

Joanna Nealon burns with the flames of inner visions and the heat of cosmic identifications. Happily for us, her shimmering and aura-prone poetics benefit.

DENNIS DALY is the author of a forthcoming book of translations from Cervena Barva Press titled Alisher Navoiy (1441-1501), Twenty-One Ghazals — from the Uzbek, translated and interpreted