

Paradise Drive, Poems by Rebecca Foust
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Review by Marc Zegans

There's nothing braver or more startling than a poet having the guts to write a book of sonnets, and nothing more giddily delightful than reading one that works—Welcome to Paradise Drive, Rebecca Foust's Petrarchan jewel-box. The turns these poems take and the narrative twists in the course they travel are high voltage volta. You'll be amazed at the speed with which you traverse this book's course, and the degree to which you are torn between the desire to forge ahead and the insistent urge to pull to the side, breathe and examine with care the compositional masterwork that each poem represents.

Paradise Drive, a journey from grief and alcohol soaked origins in rust belt Pennsylvania to the painful perversities of life inside the headlands of Marin, follows the narrative arc of a sometimes actor, sometimes observer, Pilgrim, who tellingly decomposes progress as premise. In notes to the volume, Foust tells us that Pilgrim is inspired by the life of Ann Dudley Bradstreet, part of the 1630 Winthrop fleet of Puritan emigrants, and "a seeker among seekers...in love with the world and struggling to maintain the piety demanded by her faith." Though Pilgrim may be Bradstreet, the Colonies' first published female poet, transmuted into a contemporary witness to broken pieties, painfully questioning her own, Pilgrim echoes and silently inverts John Bunyan's travels in Pilgrim's Progress from the "City of Destruction" to the "Celestial City," Mount Tamalpais a material substitute for Mount Zion; the surrounding towns, Belvedere, Tiburon, Mill Valley, Ross, capsules containing the empty promise of transcendence through comfort and affluent hedonistic bliss, leaving their inhabitants crushed and empty, dropping into the river of death in a "straddle" and step from the red ochre rise of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The stakes could not be higher, nor the wire more tightly strung, yet Foust gives us to understand that these tragic emptyings of lives are unnatural, creations of the self-destructive and very human desire to reach beyond what is given, as if in that we will find love and safety, satisfaction and perhaps fulfillment. And so, as preface, she places us in nature, "Purple against orange, maple and sage... Trout lilies and wild Iris. Mount Tam mantled/ each dawn in fog. Then naked and lit..." before delivering us, through Pilgrim into the abyss.

*"Her dreams/ —Macy's-parade-balloon-sized dreams—/now lie,
a tangle of downed silk and line." (from Meet Pilgrim)*

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Pilgrim, seeker, visitor and possibly introvert, has mastered the art of inclusion. She has found her way into money and into the rolling party to which those of us born with noses against the glass on a Winter's night dreamily aspire, and yet internally she remains an outsider, knowing that the passed hors d'oeuvres can feed, but not fill her.

*"Cowed by all those straight-white teeth,
Pilgrim ran for the bathroom, not for coke
as others supposed, but for something
more covert and rare: a book... (from Cocktail Party)*

She is party to this life, complicit, but not fully in it, and it is this ambivalent complicité that opens the tale to the quality—torn empathy—that lends it gravity and makes successive sonnets appropriate vehicles of transmission.

To work, a sonnet must embody acute, original, and sensitive observation that extends beyond the features, primitive motives and behaviors of its subject to that individual's psyche and spirit. To rise to grace a sonnet must do more though, it must implicate the observer in the agon and in the outcome, and it must make readers feel the blood, pulsing or spilt.

Through Pilgrim, Foust complicates the empathic connection and the possibility of bond that the best sonnets trouble and provoke. Her character mediates between the poet and the anxious characters ("Marin man," wives left bereft by divorce and those who ultimately take to the bridge) for whom the poems invoke empathy. But where does this empathy lie, is it with Pilgrim, or the poet, both? Foust doesn't give us simple answers, she doesn't fully disclose, leaving us instead with the beating pulse, the feel of the blood, one-step, perhaps, removed.

In this mediation, Foust expands the possibilities of the form and elevates Paradise Drive above the level of an Ice Storm in verse; she and Pilgrim are working deeper channels, and their effort to bring something (someone) new to the party extends to the making of the poems themselves. Foust's sonnets embrace, honor, violate and expand on Petrarchan form, unfolding with a turn over fourteen metered lines, ending in a couplet, but dispensing with strict iambic meter and formulaic end-rhyme over each poem's body. Her sonnets offer us instead powerful, telling, urgent and contemporary internal rhyme and varied meter, the meter of poems pulsing with life, palpitating at the edge of death and never forced to form.

It is through her undoing of that expected by the form that Foust, via Pilgrim's search for truth, gives us the sonnet as something new, as a once more viable container for yearning inchoate, conduit to loss and instrument of grace in beat and rhyme varied by necessity rather than clever calculation. And so, the lives, the suicides, the guilty participation and the being other that she knits together through Pilgrim's character in the land of excess tears through the surface, puncturing the familiar, revealing the price of Paradise less than celestial.

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I admire the quiet bravery Rebecca Foust expresses through this channeled flood of sonnets. As I read, I had the sensation of water, unexpected, pouring through an arroyo, and then gone, leaving me in dazed awe. This is not a book for children, and thank god!

Marc Zegans is a poet. His most recent collection, The Underwater Typewriter, was published by Pelekinesis Press in September of this year.