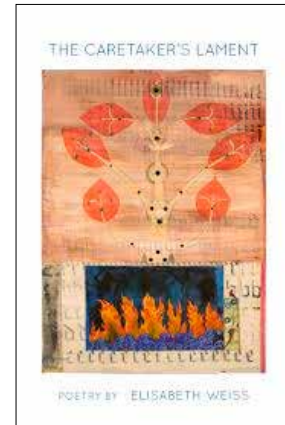


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The Caretaker's Lament
Poetry by Elisabeth Weiss
Finishing Line Press
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www.finishinglinepress.com
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30 Pages
\$14.49



Review by Dennis Daly

Desperation, whether quiet or raucous, drives conventional people into themselves, denying the obvious, and seeking out alternative universes of everyday predictability. Often these driven-down souls never re-emerge into the sweet but terrifying land of gingerbread houses littering the dread highways of leveraged sanity.

Conventional, however, does not describe poet Elisabeth Weiss. In *The Caretaker's Lament*, her sublime little chapbook, she turns every emotional swing, every vulnerability into an artistic medium of clarity, melded together by fierce family love and a determined vision of final reconciliation.

Weiss and her siblings presumably balanced paralyzing humiliation with purposeful practicality in dealing with a double curse of parental madness. The poet's persona speaks of a mother's descent into despair in her intense poem entitled *Home Repairs*. The heart of the poem captures the pathos,

Roots grew gnarled around eroded pipes.

*Icicles crashed to the slate path.
Repairmen showed pity
or they never came back.*

*No one ever considered
uprooting the trees
so that light would enter our house
and we could see past the ruddy vines*

*into other houses on the block
where people came and went
without too much thought.*

*We slept head to toe on the sagging porch
afraid to call the ambulance and watch her strapped.
We begged the police not to hurt her.*

The poet's piece *Buck Fever* questions the breadth and duration of damage done to her father's soul in battle. This age-old lament has haunted literature since Sophocles wrote *Ajax*. From the letters home to the hair-trigger explosiveness, Weiss compellingly describes her father's disorder.

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She opens her poem on the homefront,

*Think of the soldier whose war took place at home,
years after his tour
after his Chevy station wagon door
slammed over a cliff
after he cut his wrist
to make sure blood still flowed
under the ice of the dam.*

What do we do with the wounded body?

*Those who killed are also injured
and consigned to guilt at being left.
How long can a body convalesce?*

In the title poem, *The Caretaker's Lament*, Weiss celebrates the eternal connection between mother and daughter. Through the years love has deepened, despite the mother's disease, not dissolved. The poet incorporates the mother into her artistic framework and acknowledges from the depth of her nature an overriding maternal worth. First person singular becomes first person plural. The piece opens with mother and daughter exchanging roles and actions which border on sacramental,

*O mother of my sucking thumb
wedged into a body
bipolar and dumb
struck with loss of thought
O Lydia of the fallen, sick,
Wounded, coffee-eyed beauty*

*I dress your fluid limp limbs
shower your baby hair and blow it fine
kiss your hammered toes
with powder and place your feet in soles
strong enough to hold your weight and mine.*

*We stand outside of time
climbing the jagged ridge
of what memory allows ...*

My favorite poem in this collection Weiss entitles *The Four-in-Hand*. It works by repetition and a crafty use of juxtaposition and it works very well. The second line repeats as the next stanza's first line. The last line repeats as the next stanza's third line. A Windsor knot is juxtaposed with the Hindenburg disaster and the protagonist father/soldier. Madness with its own logic claims its due as the piece concludes strangely but effectively,

he thought that was it.

*Take the wide side around the neck, tighten a bit.
The mind goes in and the mind goes out.
He thought that was it.
Sparks jumped from the fabric to the frame.*

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*The mind goes in and the mind goes out.
My father reads only headlines now.
Sparks jumped from the fabric to the flame.
Nothing will ever be the same.*

*My father reads only headlines now.
A mushroom shaped flame burst into bloom.
Nothing will ever be the same.
Adjust the narrow slide through the loop.*

As a kid I hated this parentally imposed formal knot: too big, too elaborate, too noose-like. Perfect for this poem though!

Set in a hospice *The Coughing Man*, a simple dirge of death and dignity, did not draw me immediately in. But once in, I didn't want to leave. Nearing death mingles with life forces. The absurdity of music, food, and games culminate in a philosophical meditation on the stark incongruity of humanity's fate with its worldly attachments and hopeful aspirations. Innocence sets the stage with a question,

*The coughing man's grandchildren
play hide and seek*

*behind and under your bed curtains.
Why is he asleep? they ask.*

*Because he is tired.
Because he has done his work.*

*Like my Papi, they tell me.
I nod my head, later hold*

*their shaking mother
In my arms.*

*What are we to do
with the knowledge*

*that fails to comfort
if you love this world?*

Love's Ambiguity and a ghostly reconciliation share an emotional poignancy during the dreamed funeral rites in *What the Dead Want*, the last poem of this collection before the epilogue. The poet's father chooses a shaded spot of eternity, while the mother begins to fade. A burial takes place, or an incorporation of kinship that replays itself over and over. Here the poet digs toward her essence,

*If the ground is moist,
the stones unearth easily.
If the ground is dry
we must use leverage.
It is only way it works.*

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*My bones ache
inhabiting the thick air around us.
In slow motion
The thawk! of the shovel
Reaches the inner core.
I could dream myself awake but why?
I have missed them.*

Elisabeth Weiss fashioned her intensely personal poems with deep value, authentic narrative grace and real courage. But, beyond that, her verve absolutely astonishes

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