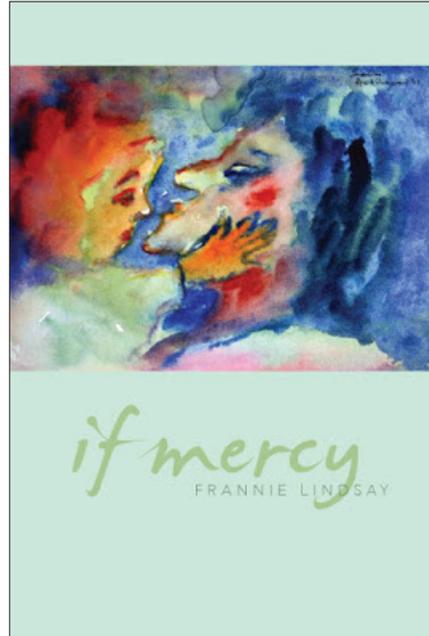


If Mercy
by Frannie Lindsay
published by The Word Works

Review by Alice Weiss

To any reader who knows Frannie Lindsay's work it will come as no surprise that in this collection the poems are lyrical, complex, imagistic, syntactically subtle and musical. But they are also philosophical; they play with with and against logic. Take the title itself and the poem of the same name. If Mercy, is, the first clause of an if/then statement. In logic, if/then is a statement formed by combining two statements, where the second is a condition of the first. In such a statement, only if the If clause is true, can the statement be true. But in the poem the statements are incomplete. A series of nouns substitute for the clauses that follow the if clause: If, August, house, joy, mercy, peace. What is true here is the lightest touch of felt image: If August...



*then ocean, with nothing to offer
the blistered foot but salt's
vacant blessing.
If house, then faucet and drip,
then rust and the putting away
of albums and goblets.
If house, then also the upright piano.*

So the question arises, why Mercy, why "then the eroded palms of a saint in a dirt-floored chapel." Because death. Because dying, because that is the way the world is made and the only way to live with it is to believe in mercy. The poems feel their way to solace. Shade, shadow, darkness, each becomes a blessing. The weeping Beech that appears five times in the book is at once an "elderly parent of shadows" and "the place where nothing will be lost." Its blackness loiters "like a vagrant," its shadows assemble

*and weep for anyone who needs
some weeping done: the adulteress
waking up to only sunlight on her breasts,

the child always playing outfield,
the knock-kneed girl sold by her father
for ten-thousand rupees.*

Note though, that in all the insistence on the legitimacy of sentiment, the tone of mourning, even the evocation of evil, there is the adulter-

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ess waking up to sunlight on her breasts, sly, I think, even heretical, the “only” preceding the pleasure, the sensuality of sunlight and skin. This slight irony would be unremarkable if it weren’t for the intelligence with Lindsay undermines the tone of grace, does battle with the necessity for grace.

That adulteress is instructive because the structure of the book is defined by Magdalene “drawing her tresses... over the aches of the earth.” We weep for our sins, the mercy is in the weeping, but is it? When, as a reader you stumble on the tone breaking raspiness “The Thirteenth Fairy Comes Back to Even the Score,” or the extended conceit of “To Heart-ache,”

*the same dress you always wore
hiked up to your terrible thighs
just so the weeds could brush them.*

you turn back to all those magnanimous images of the weeping beech and wonder wonder what you missed.

Take the poem “Abraham.” Twenty lines of truly complex poetry, Dante-esque in its allegorical structure, twisting and transfiguring the intended sacrifice of Isaac into a foreshadowing of the birth of Christ It begins as a narrative:

*Now he climbs the hill believing
His handsome son is the ram God needs as proof.*

If you already know the Abraham/Isaac tale, and the poem assumes we do, the story is over. The switch is made, the ram is already here. Abraham, believing,

*Leading the boy up the known and rocky
face of the hill, doesn't he love this child
more than the bulb adores its one lily?*

Suddenly, the narrator becomes an implicit I, a shocked observer turning to us with a horrified question. Look at the image and the syntax, the bulb adoring the lily, the grammar seems off and the allegorical content seems to hit us on the head, and this is a speaker we have learned from the beginning of the poem customarily delivers elegant language and complex imagery, so a note of ringing doubt. Then

*Easy enough to imagine the quiet
that shuttle's between them
its awful resonance
... and the breeze on the gleam of the axe blade.*

Easy? “awful resonance,” axe blade. The phrase creates the powerful turn. Easy enough is repeated in the next line,

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*Easy enough to imagine Sarah at home
with nothing important to think about,
folding the muslin bedclothes,
. . .rejoicing still. . .
that her womb has laid aside its years
of fatigue and borne them a son.*

The reader's first response, or at least mine, is to find the turn to Sarah strangely bitter given what we know is going on over in the hills. But then before I understood the allegory, I saw in that shift of attention a kind of mercy to the reader to go from the gleam of the axe blade to Sarah rejoicing. Except for the two 'easy's' that function as connectives to turn the poem. Here is, at least, a carefully designated narrator who both believes and doesn't believe. How easy is that flirtation with death and transfiguration for the speaker. How slippery is it to escape the outraged helplessness in the sixth line? How strange to be a God who sacrifices his only son.

My favorite poem is "Apple Juice," a scene with a daughter at the hospital bedside of her dying father.

*So I sat him up and tried again
to help find the words
for juice and thirsty. . .*

followed by the expert exploration of details that characterizes Lindsay's work only here in the context of developing the drama, the relationship with the father.

*Dad, you're thirsty, it's her job
to bring you things you need, and he said
oh and What and I said juice
again and button, press*