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River of Bones
Poems by Holly Guran
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Review by Dennis Daly

Perfecting a persona in poetry can be a tricky business. Personal feelings to the point of intimacy need to be balanced with distance and a level of objectivity. Holly Guran, in her new collection, *River of Bones*, achieves this equilibrium with a consistent well-modulated tone. In fact this modulation of diction astonishes with its adeptness whether she is speaking as one of her forebears or a young nineteenth century millworker or herself. Even at her most confessional Guran never descends into the rabbit hole of obsessive self-importance and soggy feelings. Her descriptive words reveal the wonder of both hurt and joy in her chosen contexts.

Guran takes us down a tidal river into a murky ancestral past in her poem *Phragmites* that opens the collection. Marvels abound. The nature metaphor suggests an expedition into the dim mirrored past, a trek through time tethered to genetic clues, as well as personal memories and soulful cross-century identifications. Here's the heart of the poem,

*Our canoe barely leaks
and the hawks dip in pairs
at first haphazard
then in tandem hungry
poised for the dive.
A lone muskrat's shining fur,
our dark underwater path*

*And ahead the golden
Phragmites and all around they
barely speak in silent tongues
a wall between water
and shore they grow uncontrollably
hold the marsh mysteries
in papery stalks and tassels.*

Notice how the apparitions (muskrat's shining fur, hawks diving in tandem) disassociate the reader from mere private emotions with their intrinsic interest. The images become omens, predicting the surprises and scope of what follows.

Fortune's ups and downs compose tragedies writ large for those lives

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gripped by them. Unsteady Cradle Rocking, Guran's gut-wrenching poem of dashed hopes and survival, uses a combination of commentary and fragments of correspondence between her grandfather and great grandfather beginning just prior to the Great Depression. The technique works extraordinarily well, aided by the understatement of their letter-writing diction. That said, you can feel the desperateness and the guilt of both parties. Consider this request and reply,

*wishing for a son to ease the fear
drive the long miles
inject hope into the troubles
Now I'm short on funds to meet the taxes.
Can you help me out?
I made some mistakes in investments,
thank you for your check.*

*loyal son helped with money
never made the trip too far
his own life, his own fortune's slings
Times have been so dull
our income barely enough
to keep us from hand to mouth.
I long to see your faces and grasp your hands.*

The matter-of-fact delivery in Guran's unsettling piece entitled Daddy's Girl conceals a sense of profound foreboding. The poet sets her mnemonic landmines artfully: a word or phrase here or there within the narrative. Her school girl persona hints about what is broken and imparts a vague feeling of unease. Understanding arrives in a perfect metaphor. Here's the metaphor,

*Remember the paper about deep sea divers —
among the first to journey down,

lowered by stages into heavier waters?
Coming up they'd get the bends.
Nitrogen bubbles formed in their blood.
I marvel at anyone
Willing to travel into darkness*

In her poem Shock Treatment Guran uses the same tone as Daddy's Girl, but the approach is markedly different, more analytical. She drains out the emotion and chooses her words carefully. The connected phrases are both economical and exact. She straight-forwardly describes her father's dual illnesses in this way,

*...I find you
wandering. You stand and talk,
even smile, mostly stare off
somewhere and take pictures,
pointing the camera at me

as you've always done, this time*

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*empty—broken father,
a fractured vertebra, chalky
marks on either side of your forehead
where the shock went in.*

Borrowing from *A New England Girlhood* by Lucy Larcom, Guran versifies the Lowell millworkers' experience of the early nineteenth century in a series of 16 poems. The genuineness of the pieces take your breath away. My favorite poem from this section is *Turn-Out, 1834*. I have some first-hand knowledge on how this works, and Guran nails it. The piece opens brilliantly,

*From the upper rooms
women walk out.
In the lower rooms
those who discussed strike hesitate.*

*Should we? Then Harriet's
I don't care. I'm turning out.
This girl of eleven leads a line
into the street where others stream*

*from brick mills so much water
bursting the dam
suddenly weak
with the weight of heavy looms*

*and arms lifting
Young women aging fast*

Through a series of petitions to the Massachusetts General Court the mill girls asked for some redress. Guran uses this historical information to fashion a piece entitled *Fight for the Ten Hour Day*. The complainants speak thusly,

*... we write of contagion, privation
toiling fourteen hours a day,*

*breathing poison air by the looms, we stay
inside barred from proper physical exercise
and send home what's needed, much of our pay.
Exhausted. How can any mind realize*

*its vigor? Now as we organize
you will learn the perils of our labor.*

Guran closes her collection with an epilogue poem she calls *Summer, Marshfield*. This striking nature piece doubles as a delicate love ode. Just reading it relaxes one with a sense of continuance. The poet rhapsodizes,

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*He moved with ease and, once inside,
set a bowl of raspberries on the table.
And then his willing back offered itself,
dough for my hungry fingers.*

*There I lived.
Sprouting moments encircled the house.
Love's sluice grew an opening in the deep canal,
and we paddled, a pilgrimage down
longing's great channel ...*

Guran deftly commands her material, and the artistic boat she propels so effortlessly into the tidal wilderness seems uncapsizable. Exquisite poetry!