Helping Us Think and Be in the World

Linda Sillitoe. *Owning the Moon.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2017. 200 pp. Paper: $22.95. ISBN: 9781560852667.

Reviewed by Lisa Bickmore

In 2016, the poet Solmaz Sharif said, "More and more, I am becoming convinced that poetry is not a form of writing, but a form of reading. And a form of thinking and being in the world."[1]

I recalled this remark as I was reading *Owning the Moon*, the book of poems by Linda Sillitoe, published posthumously by Signature Books. I'm struck by the aptness of the remark for Linda's last poems, which are both a great gift to us, now several years after her too-soon passing, and a reminder of what we lost in her. While these poems must have been written over the course of many years, they seem aware of their own lateness—of what has been lived and then lost, of what has been taken, and what has been relinquished. It is awash in memory, beautifully reconstituted, animated, revived. This is one of the things, I think, that Sharif means when she says that poetry is "a form of reading"—that is, it holds the text of the world and inspects it closely. Poetry can also give form to the ways we think and are in the world, and Sillitoe's book is engaged in this life-altering work.

The great mystery of being human, one could argue, is the nature of the bodily self, taking up space in the world, breathing its air, eating its plants and animals, feeling the surges of desire and want and will: and the fact of other people, who also breathe and consume and feel

1. Asian American Writers' Workshop, "War on Terror Poetry with Solmaz Sharif, Ricky Laurentiis, Mariam Ghani, Cathy Park Hong," YouTube, accessed Aug. 10, 2016, https://youtu.be/d9xmaXcThSo.

and surge. “Ballad from the wilds” speaks to this mystery, in fierce and enchanting song:

> In the wilds of love you seek the other
> who’s seeking you. In forest, needles fall
> to east the random slope where you take cover.
>
> By sea, the moon bedazzles sight, as salt
> sparks everything to flame upon your tongue.

The world cannot help itself—it must stagger us with its sensate glory, and we are a part of it and also at its mercy. In its alchemy, we are made, we fashion ourselves and are fashioned:

> yet don’t expect
> to confront behind so many shrubs or palms
>
> unmasked and varied selves: who you were;
> who you are; and who you always were. (42)

The poet knows the self is always simultaneous and various, and in so many ways: the selves we assemble to meet our infinite circumstances (“there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet,” as Eliot’s Prufrock muses, in a different register), the selves that represent our pasts, and our enduring always-present. Even in a poem about a slow morning, “For now,” the speaker recognizes that her circumstances are both transitory and to be cherished:

> We move carelessly.
> The cat snoozes in the curl of the quilt,
> knowing I can’t make my bed.
> My daughter sleeps so soundly
> she may wake whole again.

The savor of this quiet, almost still, moment is part and parcel of the speaker’s recognition of its fleetingness. What is to be done in the face of it?

A sun ray flings a diagonal
Across my keys, my work.
I must work and work well
on this empty beach of morning
That promises like a lover's goodbye,
Hoping soon, meaning *now.*

The divide between being and doing—is the self whole as it is, or must it be understood as its actions?—is here bridged in a performance that only appears to be simple. The sleeping of the beloveds, cat and daughter, the stillness of the house, are a space in which the poet registers sunlight and recognizes that the work at hand is what she will, she must, make of the stillness.

Sillitoe's poems help us to see that these necessary words are to be assembled, and to be meted out in the kairotic moment, the exact, opportune moment when speech is necessary and ideal. In "White space," the poem's speaker recounts the ending of a phone call, "a silence [that] thickens / between mouth and mouthpiece / tying both ends of the line / until we manage goodbye." She considers: "How does it halt and hold us?":

We could try to say more
or feel less. No, leave it
to savor later—

that eloquence.

This is the dilemma of what to say, when to say it, whether to say anything at all, and every writer—every human being—stumbles into it sooner or later. The eloquence of not saying, of implying, is the perplexing conundrum of every kind of speech. Here, the poet knows what speaking risks—that pushing past reticence can mean the loss of eloquence. In "Saguaro lake," we see more of what this reticence, this holding something back, might look like: the poet recounts events at and around the lake, including a drowning and a fire nearby, where

"brittlebush and poppies / [are] torched as tinder." But the afternoon of the poet's visit, "seven eagles / hunted the deep red cliffs,"

> tracing circles above the cholla, whose needles
> cupped the light.
> Nearer earth, birds winged around the secrets
> we cached in the air.

The air full of secrets, kept hidden there? Sillitoe's poems brim with this magic, so casually loosed, yet so carefully held.

The poems show a person who has chosen a kind of exile—no accident, in fact or in the relevant myths, that the new home is a desert—but who gives us lessons in how to dwell in a landscape, how to make a home of a place. In "Arizona wind," the speaker queries the "wind's howl," wondering about its provenance, about what it wants:

> Is this a choir of ghosts
> Blown south from the caves
> Near Hopi mesas where bones
> Of their ancestors sing?
>
> What, near my urban pueblo,
> Justifies the crescendo and roar
> Of the dry gusts now shaking
> The jacaranda trees like rags

The wind is hostile, but the speaker faces it, inquires of it, personifies it, imagines it into a spirit. She seeks to know it, in other words. What a contrast with the people, in "Return to the Rockies," who are not curious whatsoever about whence the speaker has returned, and what she experienced there:

> People don't request those stories.
> They say, *Welcome back*
> *To this, the right place.*
> Crickets translate:
> *About time.*

To really be in a place, the poet suggests, requires opening oneself to it, and then remembering to tell the tale of how one arrived and how one left.

A quiet but insistent inquiry of these poems is how to address what is sacred—how to see it, remember it, conjure up a form of worship. In "Broken sonnet," Sillitoe names herself the "pagan daughter" at the death of her father, and, in "Imposter," she describes speaking outside a church with an interlocutor:

> you say you hate the god
> ranting this scripture and that
> like the leader of a cult.
>
> As you speak, God glitters along the leaves,
> hovers by a nest,
> and rests in your dark eyes

The disquiet the speaker sees in this person is consuming—in the poem, it gestures at some form of abuse—and yet the person

> still harbor[s] that same light
> of God silking the leaves
> and tending nests,
> seeing everything
> the faithful will unsee.

This is a powerful kind of gnosis, and the poet summons the numinous again and again. Sometimes, it's the ghost of a beloved, as in "Encounter," when she opens the medicine cabinet at her parents' house and catches the drift of her dead father's scent: "The room wavered like my knees." But the poet is unafraid of more explicit forms of prayer. The poem "Lost moons" speaks the names of many different moons, which appeared in all their guises to humankind at various suitable times:

> We would wake in the haze of the Plant-in-Secret-Moon,
> Anticipate languid lovemaking under the Corn-in-Tassel.
> Sorrow, borne by the Moon-When-Reindeer-Return-from-the-Sea,
> Or hunger below the Cold-Meal-Moon, would fit like lost skin
> if each year thundered forth the Moon-When-the-Buffalo-Ruts.

That the body of the moon, showing its avatars, might be imagined to somehow clothe a human being in skin that had been lost: surely this is prayer, a plea for what is missing and what might only be possible to find through a celestial apparition, one that could know the weather, connect broken lands, gather people to the dance.

The poems in *Owning the Moon* do the good work Sharif described, of helping us think and be in the world. The poet Rickey Laurentiis, in talking about the ways poems work for us, notes that "We only have so much time on this planet, really. For some of us, because of political or social or national agendas, even shorter. If I'm reading a poem, I want to be taught how to live, and how we can live better. I want to be reminded how precious life is, really." Reading *Owning the Moon* caused me to grieve the loss of Linda Sillitoe, but I am grateful for these parting words, for their irreplaceable reminders.

Horror Becomes Banal Under Scrutiny but Loss Is Lasting in *The Apocalypse of Morgan Turner*

Jennifer Quist. *The Apocalypse of Morgan Turner.* Berkeley, Calif.: Linda Leith Publishing, 2018. 300pp. Paper: $18.95. ISBN: 9781988130620.

Reviewed by Rachel Helps

Although courtroom dramas can be entertaining, providing a formula for introducing new information through surprise witnesses or new evidence, simple procedurals can grow tired. An antidote is a realistic