

Literary Reviews

Dark Card

Author: Rebecca Foust
Winner, Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize, 2007
Texas Review Press, 2008
36 pages; paper, \$8.95



Though not a formal poet in the customary sense of the label, Emily Dickinson saw a correlation between poetic technique and emotional honesty. After reading Rebecca Foust's masterfully executed and heart-rending chapbook, *Dark Card*, one would have to conclude that this is Foust's poetic as well.

For Foust, the power of poetry rests not in its effusiveness but in its exactness. What this means for her poems is what it meant for Dickinson's poems: a prosody of paring down language, meter, and rhythm until she achieves a spareness and a pulse that is very much her own. Not a sonnet or sestina to be found in this debut collection; yet, in verse lines that remind us of Dickinson's compression chamber of sounds, Foust chronicles with searing insight the heart ache in raising a son with Asperger's Syndrome. Witness her poem, "Instrument" about the failure of a school system to provide a venue for her autistic son's growth:

That
bewildered
look in
your eyes,

the hours
spent liberating
School Project
Butterflies,

your
baffled, raging,
muted-coronet
pain

And what music would her son, this "muted-coronet", play? Foust answers with stinging steadiness:

they
taught you to sit

on the rug,
dumbed
your shout-singing
tongue,

instructed
you in the art
of staying
unstrung.

Foust's son suffers a form of autism that is characterized by both intellectual brilliance and social awkwardness or difference from his peers. "Yes, he's different," Foust proclaims in the book's title poem, "all kids are different, him/just a little bit more" A central question that these poems ask again and again is whether or not *being different* need necessarily earn one the label of *being disabled*. "It's hard/to know what to do," a crestfallen voice wonders aloud in another poem, "whether to try to make true/what may not be awry – is it disability/or just the difference in intensity/that makes turquoise not quite blue?" Only a child's advocate poses these kinds of questions: *Is it my child – or is it the system – that is the problem?* Or, as in a later poem, *how will my child thrive in a culture where being "gifted" turns out to be the same as being cursed?*

He's gifted
but he never asked for
that special
mark of blood
on his door,

that forehead-
touch-chin flash
of fire; he never
invited
the giver in.

After a collection of poems in which she has paced in angst for her son's well-being and in which she has chastised the social systems that have dismissed her son's humanity, this excerpt from her final poem promotes a compelling alternative perspective.

The Peripheral Becomes Crucial
in ways we'd never have guessed, like when
they unwound the crocodile-mummy shroud
focusing on what was within,

casting aside as trash the papyri cartonnage,
which when kicked, unscrolled to reveal
what Sappho wrote.

Sometimes more is inscribed
in the chemical signature of mud
than in the Sanskrit writ on the pot.

As a final piece, this poem is both antidote and epilogue. As antidote, it neutralizes the poisonous effects of labels like “disability” and “difference”. The poem retrieves for us that which we have cast away as “trash” and encourages us to look again; reassess its value. Our finding is that what we have discarded as having no intrinsic value is in fact the artifact itself. In summoning us to shift our way of seeing toward the “peripheral”, the poem asks us to receive into our lives the very things and human beings that we customarily marginalize. Rather than simply sounding the call for inclusion-for-inclusion’s-sake, this is a call for *enriching* our lives: “Sometimes more is inscribed/ in the chemical signature of mud/than in the Sanskrit writ on the pot.” For the standard bearers of our time, the poem holds out an ethical as well as an aesthetic question: why do we view the finished pot as separate from its clay matter? In other words, how do we justify our hierarchies for what is good and beautiful? As epilogue to the book, it functions like the best of poems that expose an errant morality, while withholding the moralizing. In short, it offers us a coda to live by. Whether or not we have the moral fortitude to accept this coda is unclear. What is indisputable is that, for its technical achievement as well as for its social significance, this is a stunning and important book.

Reviewed by M.B. McLatchey, April, 2010.

Excerpted from *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, Summer/Fall 2010