

POETRY

Commentary: Accountability and Praise

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The juxtaposition of these two poems, “In Praise of the Birthing Vacuum” by Martina Nicholson and “Account, Accountable” by Arlene Katz, although random (like much in life) should give us pause. They describe two momentous alterations in life (one usually eagerly anticipated and the other dreaded) – the point at which a couple becomes a family and the moment at which the American dream of home ownership disintegrates. They also describe the promise and potentiality of what might be in this world as well as the despair and injustice of so much of what is. They beg the question, which view is right?

Despite their overall difference in message and tone, the poems have certain features in common. For example, both portray loving couples; both include the presence of an empathetic third party, the narrator who stands ready, in John Berger’s words, “to speak of experience.” But there is also radical divergence when we compare these two works, right from the beginning. Contemplating their titles, we understand immediately that “Account, Accountable” is a poem that witnesses to social injustice and calls us, as individuals,

communities, and perhaps as a nation, to account. “In Praise . . .” pretends to celebrate a simple tool of medical technology, but is really a paean honoring the miracle of new life. The styles and tropes of each poem also serve to embody their disparate messages. Katz tells a confusing story in “fits and starts,” using multiple voices that often blend and converge. She sacrifices linearity and the conventional elements of narrative to better portray the dislocation and disruption of the couple she describes. Nicholson, by contrast, has a single strong narrative voice that tells a clear story with a beginning, middle, and (triumphant) end. Like the narrator of “Account, Accountable,” she is humbled by what she observes; but unlike Katz’ narrator, who feels guilty and helpless at her inability to forestall the couple’s catastrophe, the narrator in “Praise” has a unmistakable and essential role in facilitating the joyous birth of a child. The narrator of this poem *can* do something to help, and does.

Perhaps the most telling difference in the poems has to do with family and community. In the Katz poem, family is crumbling. The couple’s child has died, and they cling to each other, seemingly alone in the world, except for their sympathetic but powerless visitor. Even the husband’s birthday, normally an event that unites family and friends, is now a reminder of terrorist threat. This poem decries the absence of community and civic responsibility in American society, which

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allows a hardworking, stoic, seemingly salt-of-the-earth couple to fall into economic ruin. It witnesses against the phenomenon documented in the book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), which argues that we have become a nation of disengaged, mistrustful, isolated individuals lacking all sense of social connectedness. Nicholson's poem, on the other hand, is about the building of family and presents us with a fully functional community of wife, doctor, and husband, a caring, synchronized team that mutually supports and holds up its members. The dominant emotion in "Account" is anger, the righteous anger of those who refuse to turn away from injustice and continue to look for accountability on all levels, from the individual to the communal to the societal. The dominant emotion in "Praise" is gratitude for the blessings of life.

In these times of subprime mortgage meltdowns, collapsing financial institutions, rising food and gas prices, two wars, global warming, ongoing threats of terrorism, routine human rights violations, endemic corporate greed, and almost 47 million without health insurance ("State," 2008), it is easy to despair. But despair, although psychologically understandable, gets us nowhere and perhaps may be accused long-term of being an ethically untenable position. Rather, as we can through these poems, we need to listen to voices espousing both justice and mercy. Now more than ever, we need prophetic voices that protest our complacent tendencies toward moral blindness and deafness. As pastor Martin Niemoller (1955) said after the Holocaust:

When the Nazis came for the communists,

I remained silent;

I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,

I remained silent;

I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,

I did not speak out;

I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,

I remained silent;

I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me,

there was no one left to speak out.

We need people like Dr. Katz who are not afraid to speak out in the face of others' suffering. But just as importantly in these times, we need voices of gratitude and rejoicing, like that of Dr. Nicholson, voices that praise daily miracles, that acknowledge glimpses of wonder and beauty shining through the cracks of our very imperfect world, that remind us to celebrate as well as dissent. As Nicholson realizes, the world is recreated moment by moment; it exists in a constant state of renewability and promise. But, as Katz realizes, much of the time the worlds that surround us, the worlds others inhabit, are not ones we would "necessarily choose to enter." We need to listen carefully to both these voices. They give us variously a rebuke and a vision, each of which can guide us toward ways of "creat[ing] community," (Katz, 2008) so that together we can realize each "unbelievably miraculous new world" (Nicholson, 2008) that lies within our grasp.

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