

CORTNEY DAVIS

In a way, both poets often adopt a similar tone. It is compassionate, yet detached. Both look at the world with complete honesty and clarity and do not turn away from what they see. Becker often has a slight smirk on his face. Amidst so many differences, this similarity is hinted at in the titles of both collections. Becker's *Second Chances* implies that the first chance has already been taken – and has failed. But beyond this despair is the idea that everyone deserves another opportunity to get it right. When Davis writes that "I Hear Their Voices Singing," she still finds the song, but it only after witnessing the prodigious suffering of one body after another.

Cortney Davis is a poet of moments. Her poems are often depictions of particulars rooted in time and place. She excels in capturing a specific incident, a moment in time, and then developing the image in unexpected and profound ways. She pays close attention, unwilling to let any aspect of the scene escape her. Because of their exactitude, her poems are intensely vivid – the pregnant teen, the abused woman, the sexually violated child.

The structure of the collection is highly intentional. It is organized around the theme of "voices." Davis believes in the power and multiplicity of voices; and one of her goals in this book is to ensure that we, the reader, pay attention to the voices she has heard throughout her career that others may neglect or overlook. The idea of "voices of healing" bookends the collection; and comparing the poems at the start and the end suggests the maturing of Davis' understanding of what nursing and healing are all about, as she evolves from a young nursing student into a grandmother leaving her clinic. She also spends time reflecting on "Home," the voices that shaped her growing up, her early romances, her first marriage and divorce, her children, the lives and deaths of her parents. She also considers "Desire," "Suffering," and "Faith" as she pursues her vocation. Ultimately, she wants to show us that all of these voices are singing and beautifully so, no matter the content of their song. She hears them, clearly, without compromise, and she wants us to hear them too.

Much of her poetry is deeply rooted in "Details of the Flesh" (the title of one of her poems and a previous collection). Davis rarely loses sight of the fact that we are embodied creatures, and that many of the sources of our suffering are deeply rooted in the frailties and imperfections of the body – as are our pleasures. At the end of the day, both she and her patients understand "that the flesh is everything" ("The Nurse's Task"). The body burns, it drowns in its own fluids, it decays and rots, and the human encased in that body suffers, sometimes endures, and sometimes dies.

Davis loves the body and sometimes she hates the body. She is proud of the body when it is "the one that laughs down death's trumpet" ("The Nurse's Task"). She is aware of the body, its skin, its heart, its fluids, its smell, what it feels like in her hands. These poems have an almost uncomfortable physical intimacy – it is almost as though she knows more about your body than you do yourself. Patients' bodies broken and suffering remind her of her children's and grandchildren's bodies that she wants to kiss and caress. The work of nursing is rooted in the body in physicality, physical sensation, touching, bathing, lifting, turning, stroking, holding. She longs for the kind of hospital "where it's okay/to climb into bed with patients/and hold them - /...to tell them/they are still whole." ("I Want to Work in a Hospital").

Davis is acutely attuned to "Suffering" evoked by an abused infant, a child who dies in a bike accident, a drowning victim, beaten women, crazy women. Anchored in the senses, she describes pain first as

shrieking, moaning sound, and then, even more horrifying, as silence. In "Becoming a Patient," she peels away the mask that makes suffering noble; instead she knows that pain is just pain, that it empties and depletes the sufferer, and when it *"is relieved I feel no joy/...suffering has exposed me: intolerant/confused, selfish, unloving/,,,am I being punished/what does my suffering teach others."* She deplores the tendency in medicine "To Make Nothing out of Something," its tendency to diminish and dismiss the suffering of patients.

Many of these poems are about the suffering, violated bodies of women, girls and even children. Davis sees them when they have been beaten, when they are pregnant, when they have been raped. She tries to console when consolation is impossible: *...Rape takes only your body, never your soul* ("Nunca Tu Alma") yet somehow the patient and her family treasure these words as if they were medicine. Bravely, to a mother whose three children have burned to death, she attempts a kind of anti-consolation: "Carry your children.../Call them by name" ("To the Mother of the Burned Children"). In one poem "It is August 24th" she tries to separate herself from a young woman going into labor at 25 weeks after a coke binge. "I'm better than her," she thinks, and turns away from her. When a strange man starts to follow her, she remembers "I am a woman/like any woman -/just skin and hair and that sharp primal cry." In her poems, Davis often becomes the voice of surrogate mother, protector, and guardian to these wounded women and girls.

Many of the poems are about death. Death and dying (or not dying) captures Davis' curiosity, sometimes her admiration, often her compassion. In the collection's very first poem, Davis explores the prospect that death as well as birth may be a beginning, an opening into possibility. Sometimes Eros and Thanatos are inextricably intertwined in the same poem – death and desire become inseparable, each seeking a kind of liberation. In witnessing her first death, (the poem "Surgical Rotation"), as "death like a building fell" she feels not horror, but "hard desire, *let this be, let this be, let this be my life's work.*" In the presence of death, she finds her life – and her life's work.

In a wonderful poem about the death rattle, "The Barking Dog," as the patient succumbs, visitors and passers-by wonder "Why doesn't someone/bring in that dog?" They worry about the dog, they name the dog, and when the barking stops, "everyone is relieved," fantasizing that the dog "was taken to a farm/and set free./How the dog/drinks from a stream/whenever it wants." The poem reminds us how much we misunderstand death, willfully do not wish to know it, and are pleased when it ends and life is good again. Only the nurses are mindful: "every nurse knows/the story/of the barking dog."

In "Stoned" Davis admits the futility of keeping death at bay: "... we nurses with our flimsy cures/pushed every chair against her door// to keep death out." But they can't, as their patient, Marion, dies stoned and hungry. In the face of death, she is powerless "I don't like when it's over/and I realize//I know nothing" ("What the Nurse Likes"). Davis lauds patients' courage in facing death ("The Nurse's Pockets"). They focus on simple things, while their doctors stall outside their rooms. After they pass, it is the nurse who gathers what is left, their simple belongings, the ordinary things that the patient no longer needs. With her dying patients, the nurse cannot be "frightened away." The nurse expects nothing of the patient, not courage, or anger, or will to live. The nurse simply stays ("The Body Flute"). In "I Want to Work in a Hospital," Davis wonders whether "as if somehow because I stay/they are free to go." In a touching metaphor, she wants "to become the flashlight they [her dying patients] carry" so that God will be able to find them. In the process of scattering a friend's

ashes, she realizes that while she studied “...How a nurse/might help the body live/... our hardest lesson – when to let the body die” (“Scattering Her Ashes”).

Like Becker, she feels the contingency of life. In “Late Afternoon Nap,” even as the narrator and her husband drift into sleep, they “hope all hunters are lost,/ all predators too full to bother.” Though she tries to hide, she knows death lurks: “Death is in the meadows and the fields” (“Almost Fifty”). In “Taking Care of Time” she decides to cherish each moment, although the sky is dark and ominous.

Another important theme for Davis is the nurse-patient relationship. She likes the power of nursing. In “What the Nurse Likes,” she confesses that patient care “It’s like owning them.” She likes telling patients what to do (although also when patients don’t do what she tells them). She likes caring for patients and putting them aside “I like taking care of patients/and I like forgetting them.” Many of the poems have this intriguing combination of detachment and connection, which seems to reflect Davis’ way of managing the suffering that she observes daily. She feels a fierce loyalty toward her patients derived from the deep physical intimacy they share. In “The Body Flute,” she writes scornfully, “The doctor and his theory/never owned you.” She, the nurse, is the one who walks with the patient, who washes the body, who holds the hand of the dying patient when the doctor is asleep and loved ones have departed, and accompanies them even to the morgue. The nurses who cared for her during a personal health incident (“Blood Clot”) inspired her vision of care: “...I vowed/ I would always love their way: Fierce./Physical.” Later in life, again as a patient, it is her nurse’s arm and bracelet that anchor her to life after surgery (“Becoming the Patient”). “Entering the Patient’s Room” shows her intrepid commitment to each patient, as she enjoins herself to “Remain steadfast,/...Let her mind and her body be all that matters.” “The Circulating Nurse Enters the Operating Room” emphasizes the role of the nurse is to “stand beside her patients” reassuring them that “*we will take care of you.*”

Doctors are peripheral to these stories. They put in a brief appearance now and then with their diagnostic theories, their medical language, occasionally make unwanted sexual advances toward nurses, insensitively tell Davis as she’s retching that she’ll be “fine,” and are uncomfortable with talk of death. In medicine, healthcare professionals like to frame things as miracles, and marvel at their own abilities (“Waking”). But it is all “white lies.” The only things that are real and true are the faces of the nurses. Working in medicine, everyone ends up “stained” – doctors, residents, nurses (“The Dark Marks”), prone to avoid the uncomfortable or the devastating, offering false hope when there is no hope at all. The stains remind her that “we are flesh,” glorious but imperfect.

Davis seems to have been raised Catholic, and poignantly describes the simplicity of childhood faith. But in adulthood, faith offers little consolation. In her illness, when she feels God has abandoned her, it is only her husband who is faithful. She rejects that suffering has a purpose, or that it somehow balances out because of what it can teach. In bitter irony, she asks, “*Hello, woman who died in agony./...Have your cries turned to singing//Do you stand before the face of God?*” (“The Vocation of Illness”). She trusts angels more than God, feels their passing presence in the corridors of the hospital, has seen them, with a whoosh of joy, rise from the bodies of the dead (“The Swam by the Mall 😊”), and has beseeched them to help with her suffering, dying patients: “you be the one who gentles the world./you be the one who stays.” (“The Night Nurse”).

