

CALLAHAN COUNTY STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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Poetry Media Service

SEISM AND SCHISM

A review of Colosseum by Katie Ford.

By Sasha Dugdale

Katie Ford's new book, *Colosseum*, takes its title from a startling meditation on the Colosseum in Rome. "Built for slaughter," the building saw gladiatorial combat, execution, and wild beasts tearing each other apart, and when the Roman Empire fell and the arena was left untended, exotic plants spread over the abandoned ground, sowed from seeds in the waste of the beasts. Caught at some oblique angle within the poem, another set of reflections concern the mayfly, whose 400 minutes of life and physical slightness are set against its survival "through antiquity with collapsing / horses, hailstorms and diffracted confusions of light." The tiny mayfly and the massive tiered structure of the Colosseum are both cycles of destruction and renewal, turning slow and small, like the wheels of God:

When it is finished it is said

the expiring flies gather beneath boatlights
or lampposts and die under them minutely,
drifting down in a flock called snowfall.

Against the backdrop of constant mortality comes the real tragedy, spiritual desolation, which numbs the voice and renders it hoarse and hollow, the speaker clutching at the straws of objectivity and remoteness: "If I remember correctly," "I said to myself." The site of suffering is no longer the arena without, but the injured soul within: "When one is the site of so much pain, one must pray / to be abandoned."

Ford's collection has at its heart the more recent tragedy of New Orleans, blasted by Hurricane Katrina and then flooded. It is in three parts, the first dealing with the storm, the second with flight and return, and the third with grief. My apportioning seems rather crass: *Colosseum* is characterized by lyricism and fluidity, and its narrative rises out of a tangled confusion of events and objects. Much in the manner of a disaster, we are never entirely sure of sequence; we live through dark days and random happenings that must be pieced together intuitively, for they hardly belong together logically. Tragedy wipes out all linear notions: time, history, inheritance. One disaster merges into another, one victim into another. In a remarkable prose poem, "Division," flight from New Orleans is within a landscape of constant geological movement: creasing, dividing. Catherine of Siena lived in hills like this, muses the lyrical voice, scouring her throat raw with twigs, so the communion she so desired would be felt:

She scalded herself at the baths, ran away to a cave,
shoved twigs into her mouth so that when the host traveled
down her raw throat she would indeed feel something, even
a god breaking inside her.

Colosseum is a study of the psychology of survival. We are left in no doubt. This matter goes to the heart of the human condition, our condition:

We love the stories of flood and the few
told to prepare in advance by their god.

In that story, the saved are
always us, meaning:
whoever holds the book.

—"Ark"

At its most immediate, this is simply the attempt to grasp the cup of grief which runneth over: the woman who uses the wind to open her wrists; the desire to be an unthinking vessel with no heart to be torn into "strips of weed" ("Vessel"). But then there are the seismic shifts in our understanding that happen slowly, over time. There is nothing of permanence. People are lonely in their suffering. In the sonnet "Injury," which opens with the plastic curtains around hospital beds, the injury is the transparency of those same curtains: "the thought we could not be harmed" has been felled and the convention of the sonnet is nothing more than a terrible empty irony.

Tragedy and devastation are hard things to write about in poetry, which doesn't of course mean that they shouldn't be attempted. There are terrible risks: voyeurism, sensationalism, the simple overbearing fact of the event. On the other hand, they are the stuff of poetry: Homer, Shakespeare, the poets of World War I in Britain, Mandelstam, Celan—all have provided a poetry that stands at some oblique angle to the suffering. Do you need to witness or partake of suffering to write about it? I think perhaps you do, if only to find the correct oblique angle from which to write. Katie Ford's is a finely wrought lyrical beauty, a poetry of detail and care, but she has set it within an epic arc—the small wheel of individual life revolves within the larger human

Submissions sought to:

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S.A.S.E. for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or liable material.

Christmas

It's Christmas time once again
When God, through Jesus, became a
man

To give the world eternal hope
Helping mortals, with life, to cope

He gave us love and the way to live
So in our lives His love we'll give
To help the weary along life's way
To see a more cheerful, brighter day

If in this world our lives we give
With Him eternally we will live
And praise Him daily with joyful song
To look on His face all day long.

Ron Vaughn
Eastland, Texas

Riding Double

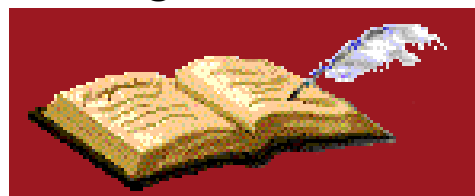
Take a slippery slope, a little hope
And little children pulling a sleigh
Because lots of fun, is sure to come
For we wished for snow on Christmas
Day.

Riding double, could cause you trouble
Because all trees you should go between
You can jump astride, a sleigh to ride
But you sure better learn how to lean.

Lean the same way, while riding a sleigh
You two, or prepare to take head-on
And become wed, to a tree ahead
Resulting from your lean that was wrong.

- Weldon L. Smith
Eastland, Texas

The pen is mightier than the sword



epic. And though we know that she has felt everything on her own pulse, still nothing is personal—the poems rise up through the clutter of the receding floods to become observations on the universality of suffering.

Excerpted from "Devastation and Digression," originally published in the February 2009 issue of *Poetry* magazine and available at www.poetryfoundation.org. Sasha Dugdale is a poet and translator. She recently translated Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* for BBC Radio. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation.

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American Life in Poetry

Column 245

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

I love the way the following poem by Susie Patlove opens, with the little rooster trying to "be what he feels he must be." This poet lives in Massachusetts, in a community called Windy Hill, which must be a very good place for chickens, too.

Poor Patriarch

The rooster pushes his head
high among the hens, trying to be
what he feels he must be, here
in the confines of domesticity.
Before the tall legs of my presence,
he bristles and shakes his ruby comb.

Little man, I want to say
the hens know who they are.
I want to ease his mistaken burden,
want him to crow with the plain
ecstasy of morning light as it
finds its winter way above the woods.

Poor outnumbered fellow,
how did he come to believe
that on his plumed shoulders
lay the safety of an entire flock?
I run my hand down the rippled
brindle of his back, urge him to relax,
drink in the female pleasures
that surround him, of egg laying,
of settling warm-breasted in the nest
of this brief and feathered time.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of *Poetry* magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright ©2007 by Susie Patlove from *Quickening*, Slate Roof Press, 2007. Reprinted by permission of Susie Patlove and the publisher. Introduction copyright © 2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Wanted: Writers & Poets

Any and all ages welcome



Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

1. We ask for first-time publishing rights. All other rights will remain with the author.
2. There will be no payment, but you will get your works before the general public. We will be sending sample copies to other organizations, the literary world and libraries for their archives and your notoriety.
3. Short stories should be brief. Poetry should be no longer than 24 lines.
4. Each submission should be typewritten, single spaced, with author's name and contact information in the top right hand corner. You must include a SASE for the return of the submission.
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