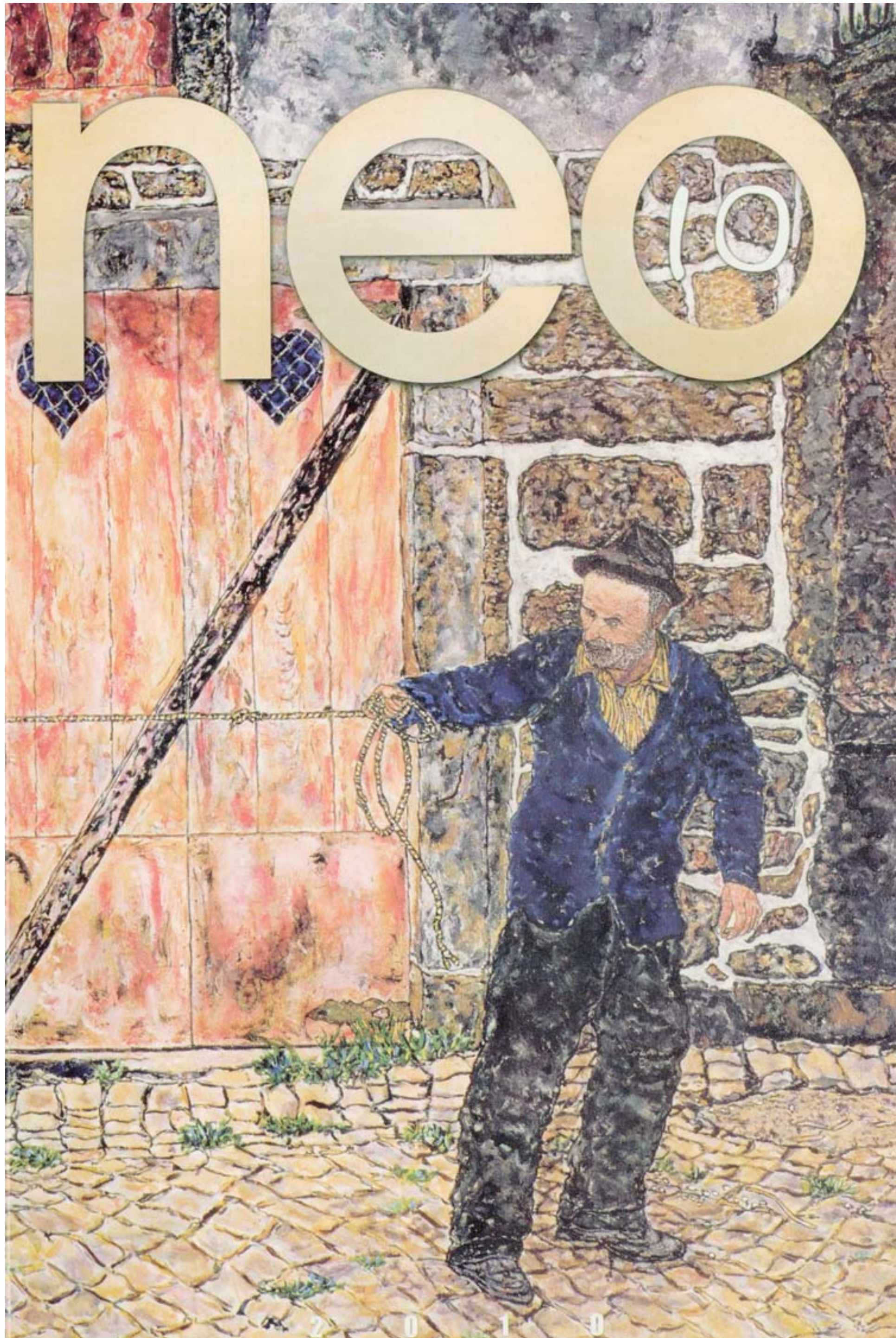

Review of Sheryl Noethe's *As Is*

Sheryl Noethe, *As Is*. Sandpoint, Idaho, USA: Lost Horse Press, 2009.
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Sheryl Noethe's new book, *As Is*, celebrates the energy and intoxication of the creative impulse—her poems display the extemporaneousness of gesture drawings, applying various pressures on the page. Regular readers of poetry who seek meter or form first, and truth second, may not come as easily to these edgy, prosy poems, but if they do they will be repaid in honesty. Her epigraph from Einstein reads, "Nothing happens until something moves," and most of these poems move, with breeziness and assurance. She does not shy away from the tragic, but her verbal irony captures the absurdity of our no-win existence, as in her witty poem about giving comfort to God: "'Call me!' I cried, and God said, *I'm all out of quarters*."

While it is outside the scope of this review, readers might take a look at the anthology *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (edited by Kate Sontag and David Graham), in which poets voice their concerns about using the autobiographical "I" in dramatic narratives, which might bring sympathy or attention to the poet inadvertently. Noethe's work, clearly influenced by Sharon Olds, overcomes much of this criticism, as she immerses herself and her own personal history (through generations, or through her mother's life experience) into the larger community, more generally, and finds commonality in a range of emotions. In a few of her poems, Noethe meets Emily Dickinson's criterion for a poem to take the top of the reader's head off.

Noethe's strength is in her social poems, where she explores themes surrounding the individual and her social and political affiliations. In "No Exchange of Livestock," she moves quite well into an original and frank account of sex from the point of view of a 50-year-old woman as she tries to analyze sex. The originality of the argument is refreshing, as is the shape of the poem (indented

lines within stanzas) recalling ancient pastorals and adding to the humor and depth of the message:

> It took me fifty years
>   and countless attempts
> to have normal sex

And this culminates with an assertion directed to God:

> No choice. No chance.
>   And where was God?
>
> They say God saved the few he could.
>   The rest, however, he kept.

Noethe eschews superfluous "rules," both formal and societal, in order to gauge the true pulse of humanity. In the speaker's view, sex has always been, for women, a private act performed by their bodies yet interfered with by copious mediators, "sedatives," "chemical euphoria," "infection," "threats," "money," "trading for livestock," "gang rape," "no choice," "no chance," "no vessel." Sex, this feminist speaker would lead us to believe, is always a signifier for something else, and has been, throughout the centuries, meddled with, especially in poetry and especially by male poets. However, the first and last meddler is God. Had it not been for God, and God's punishment of Adam and Eve, sex wouldn't exist, not by choice, not even by chance. Paradoxically, God, by his initial lack of involvement, is now totally involved in its consequences, especially in the right to live, right to choose debate. "And where was God?" Ingeniously, the answer hangs on the relationship between a pair of verbs in past tense. What is the difference between "saved" and "kept"? The reader learns that if God exists, He is a loving God who does not abandon. The poem is a wonderful complaint voiced by one woman on behalf of the rest of her gender going back to Eve.

The poem "The Long Dreams" brings up issues about the use of the historical in a perhaps well-meaning attempt to use negative capability in order to identify with the persecuted victim. As I've written in my critical book, *Signifying Pain*, the key to reading the works of confessional writers is the concept of empathy. Even the most intimate pain can be translated into a language that has the capacity to heal, primarily, the individual and then, secondly, the larger groups of family, community, and society. Empathy originally derives from 19th century aesthetics, a field from which Keats borrowed the word *Einfühlung* (implying a feeling into an object of beauty), and was later elaborated on to include the definition of one person's being "in suffering and passion" with another. Empathy is an imaginative identification with something one intuits in another person's experience. This identification then becomes real, and one can feel the horror or sadness of the other. Thus, the goal of this poem is to identify with victims to achieve *empathy*, and yet, she brings more attention to the poet as speaker than to an immersion in the other person's suffering. After explaining that the autobiographical speaker has been ill and is susceptible to excitable dreams, Noethe writes:

> I sensed distinct and separate personalities in myself,
> dark and light; each with a life, a history and complications.

From here, anything can happen, and so it does, in section two:

> In the camps, I am a young French Jew, an artist
> forced to work as an orderly in the clinics, where
> Nazis tried to turn brown eyes blue.
> We know what they did. We knew while they were doing it.
> I wake dreading the return of sleep,
> recurring episodes in the camps. I cannot tolerate
> the smell of burning flesh.
> Crowded into a boxcar I shit myself to death.

Marianne Hirsch has called this kind of restitution "postmemory," when a second generation Jew relives her ancestor's existential experience as a Holocaust victim, witnessing Jewish destruction and Jewish survival. Concern about the stanza is less about the fact that this may be a created persona, than that there isn't anything transforming in it; although we know it is a dream, we may well be asking: Why this dream? What about the ironic use of the word "clinics"? Although it is factual that this obscene experiment did happen, the speaker doesn't seem to understand the implications. And why is it important that the speaker be an artist? Finally, if it is a dream, why is it so lucid? One recalls Linda McCarriston's masterful poem "Le Coursier de Jeanne d'Arc," which demonstrates how martyrdom can represent the human dilemma of how to speak truthfully even when violence and pain seem to distort everything. In the poem, McCarriston *becomes* the tortured Jeanne d'Arc on the stake watching her horses being burned in front of her eyes because she had "no sons." By "utilizing" the Jew, Noethe risks the plausibility that there is an actual historical figure such as Irene Awret, who, like many other Jewish survivors of concentration and transport camps during the Holocaust, found work as an artist who drew portraits for the Nazis. The mingling of history and dramatic narrative often becomes increasingly problematic.

A better example of Noethe's historical poems is "The Circus Disaster March," which also describes a horrific scene, but does so with more passion than oblique reportage, as was the case in "The Long Dreams." Here, the poem opens with a litany of facts about the fire:

> All firefighters know these stories about when the music changes.
> Barnum and Bailey Circus stopped in Hartford Connecticut.
> It could have been the oil lamps, or a cigarette, a lit torch, the bald
> fire-eater;
> but the fire that ensued consumed one hundred and sixty eight
> human souls,

> four elephants, thirteen camels, nine zebras, five lions, two tigers,

Yet, at the end, artistry transforms the journalistic and brutal details, leaving a fact to inspire a metaphor, which is quite powerful:

> everyone runs the wrong way, crushing each other, a mother's hand
> pulled from the grip of her child, her child's body laid out with the
> rest of the unidentified dead.

The use of musical chairs works well, intensifying the image. The child wrested away from the mother presages the poems about the mother that will follow later in the book. It strikes the reader as genuine and not vicarious.

Noethe's best poems come at the end of the book, such as the moving, powerful, unflinchingly confessional poem called "Storage," a poem about childhood sexual abuse at the hands of an uncle. What is wonderful about this poem, and so similar to what Sharon Olds expressed in her famous neo-confessional poem, "Satan Says," is the possibility that one can love and hate simultaneously, especially children who are victims of sexual abuse by adults who should love and protect them. Thus, the uncle here is not condemned as a deviant, but is seen, through the speaker looking back, as a victim himself. Noethe's poem is absorbing and succeeds because in its innocence, it points out the truth of adult hypocrisies, how the sexually abused child will mistakenly frame the event as her fault. The reader feels for this narrator, empathizing with the writer's signification of pain, or abuse, such that this reader is already part of the cure. The poem begins:

> First there were seizures;
> convulsions, they said, caused by high fever,
> emergency room, late night, Minneapolis
>
> at the end of the fifties, my brother was two
> when the pen stabbed his small arm and stuck.

The uncle was responsible.
He claimed I did it.
I remember his big stupid grin

Then the poet's memory stops. And she recalls a different memory in which sexuality and cruelty merge into one:

He could hold three fingers up and make me say two
but when he showed me pictures,
tin-types of naked men and women,
prints of people engaged in sex acts, they could have been furniture.

How did I get out of there? Nothing. What about the pictures?
Did I ever learn to discern between living bodies and dead wood?
Between man and beast? Between man and child?
Palm and fist?
Christ, just look at these hands.

This is a powerful last stanza, which "took the top of this reader's head off," because it draws one into the meaning of martyrdom as a whole, relative to Christ, and how suffering is a shared experience of the flesh. Noethe demonstrates what she has learned from original confessional poets, particularly Lowell, who used their poetic platforms not as platforms for voicing victimization and blame, but for *voicing their own guilt and repentance*. For some neo-confessional women poets, such as Olds and McCarriston, there is a difference between guilt and blame, which Noethe intuits, and the poem must precariously balance itself between these two moral chasms. The poet must know that the first route of entry into this kind of poem is always the reader's need to identify with the speaker, often a child, and only later, much later, to judge the role of the perpetrator in what happened. Suffering is not one person's dominion. In the darkest moments, one recognizes the gravity and depth of affliction as something inextricable from morality, and a commonality as human beings.

Many other fine poems are found in the book, such as "Winter, Minneapolis, 1980," and "The Night Janitor, God," and "Special Eds at Deaf School," and poems about events in childhood that are especially painful for the mature poet looking back. Works of the confessional mode, or the "personal," often provoke the question among readers: Why should we care? Why should we care about the private suffering of others? To that position, one might respond: Why should we not? One reads these poets, who write about their personal anguish often caused by sadistic or hypocritical caretakers, not because they are brave, or scandalous, or masochistically enthralling. One reads them because they impart important truths about cruelty, about the need to unify aspects of the divided self, especially the traumatized, fragmented self, and to receive the inscriptions of one person's pain into a collective pain as language carries and transcends it. While human history may be seen as a succession of atrocities, it can also be seen as a progression of accomplishments.

Noethe is a poet with gusto. Her poetry strives to be uncommon, philosophical, meditative, rebellious, and above all passionate. While a postmodern world may yield to a lack of meaning, sensing the nakedness of existence devoid of comfortable truths, such as a belief in God, a genuine poet never declares submission or capitulation to nothingness—that would be the death of speech. Instead, language is infinitely renewed in the spirit of living, which Noethe does well by bringing the many into the one.