

IN THE EYE OF THE WIND

Piotr Florczyk. *East & West*. Lost Horse Press, 2016.

Dean Kostos

The book's title—*East & West*—is instructive: These poems trace the trajectory (geographic and psychological), from Poland to Los Angeles, where the poet resides. Like Joseph Conrad, the Polish novelist who wrote in impeccable English, Florczyk writes in a nuanced American English. One would never suspect it not to be his first language. Despite his linguistic command, however, he can still access the perspective of the outsider. That vantage point affords him a unique view on our current zeitgeist. His poems hold up a sly mirror to the experience of being American, in all its disparate, troubling, and contradictory manifestations.

As if to provide contrasts between our countries' histories, the poet reflects on periods from Poland's past. Like Wisława Szymborska, Florczyk reminds us of the Nazi's barbaric treatment of the Poles: "[W]e got hard labor, but not as bad as grandma's / stint at Carl / Zeiss in Nazi days."

This glimpse into Polish history includes the poet's expedition towards an intimacy with language and the life-affirming art of poetry: "After they shut down the colleges and interned // the faculty, your father said that words don't grow on trees, so we read the way / we ate—slowly chewing each word—unsure which words we were allowed to keep."

Now, for a moment, we are made privy to the way the author's voice sounds, as opposed to our experience of it on the page. A voice asks, "Tell me, where did you learn to speak / so fluently? Ten years, and your accent hasn't changed—you still roll your Rs / and shorten those pesky Slavic vowels." Florczyk goes on to reveal that the foreigner, no matter how adept in his adopted idiom, contemplates his dual existence: "Still, you stayed up late, calculating how far a heart travels from home / with each beat."

The necessity of almost fitting in has been achieved, but not without shame: "Our faces had already been bleached by grins. / We couldn't wait to finally sieve, sort, and disembody the impurities in our garb."

He reconstructs a persona with the words of this new tongue, bending it to accommodate fears and aspirations. Perhaps, on some level, every poem is about language, as paintings, despite their subject matter, are about the application of paint. For a poet, a "new" language, with its quirks and possibilities, can foster linguistic experimentation, as the following lines demonstrate, "Deeper now, booming, / his voice rearranges the dark / inside of me."

The interstices between words and intentions are part of how we communicate and process experience. Florczyk writes:

Silence reigns in a hall,
 where velvet pillows
 and sturdy desks conjure hell
 for uninitiated guests.

Having a hyphenated self enables Florczyk to chart his blurred identities, “[W]ater, / she says, always / finds a way to make you see / yourself as another.” And again: “Some of us pay for the privilege / with a public visage; others lose their lives.” Maintaining an elegiac tone, the poet employs a sonic legerdemain in this statement, “[R]uin invites rumination.” One pictures the devastation visited upon Poland, and many countries conquered by to the Nazis and communism. The poet writes, “I waved to them as one waves to ghosts / lurking in cellars, or lovers on train platforms.” Later in the same poem, “Elsewhere,” he asserts,

press your ear to the ground and listen
 to what the earth says.
 Don’t let my accent fool you, he added,
 then vanished without a trace.

Throughout the collection, there is a “you” to whom many of the poems are addressed. Is it the beloved, the poet himself, a hypothetical reader, or all three? Florczyk reveals, “One day / you’ll understand / the words cut in the wing by another / trembling hand.” The engagement with the “you,” however, seems to evaporate and metamorphose as the collection proceeds. The poet writes, “[W]ear your body like air.”

But the poet cannot erase his Polish identity in an American context. He finally reassesses his heritage, both historical and aesthetic. He “churns” an ongoing narrative with his tongue—meaning both language and the organ that articulates words, “[S]witching between Polish and English // and churning scraps of fiction and fact / with my tongue.”

His articulations eventually lead to an unsaying, as if acknowledging that the limitations of language are also the limitations of mortality:

I found the gutters clogged
 with the eerie silence
 of dead flowers and headless nails
 piercing the season’s first film of ice.

Conjuring Heraclitus, and his inexorably coursing river, Florczyk concedes, “[O]ur fractured shadows float in the river.” Like traditional elegies, many of these poems are rooted in nature, which knows no boundaries or languages. Furthermore, nature endlessly regenerates itself, providing hope and continuity. In the following poem, the poet speaks in persona as a tree. Notice the playful use of “I” and “eye,” as if to question the notions of self developed throughout the collection. In “Storm,” Florczyk writes:

A tree in the eye of
 the wind, I
 trembled while clouds raced
 around me.

Then I heard

a thunder, twice,
 but the bolt of lightning
 I had to imagine.