

“I AM HERE BY MYSELF”: A REVIEW OF DOROTHEA LASKY’S *THE SHINING*

Dorothea Lasky. *The Shining*. Wave Books, 2023

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Maybe due to its tensely enigmatic quality, Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) has inspired numerous responses from various artists and writers over the years, almost as if the Overlook Hotel itself offered a sort of perpetual invitation for creative minds to embellish upon it, and, by doing so, to continually add new rooms to its domain. Some of these responses have been playful, like the segment in “Treehouse of Horror V” from *The Simpsons*, and Rodney Ascher’s *Room 237* (2012), with its dizzying assemblage of (sometimes very out-there) interpretations. Other responses have approached the film as if it were an uncanny reverie that others may enter into and explore. The Caretaker’s desolately beautiful “haunted ballroom trilogy” (1999–2003) transports the listener to the spectral party perpetually taking place in shadows and folds of the Overlook. Yet, even a listener wholly unfamiliar with the novel and film may still gleam from the trilogy, its sonic evocation of a haunted mind.

Dorothea Lasky’s 2023 luminous poetry collection *The Shining* is in this later mode. While viewers of the film will certainly catch many references throughout to the movie’s characters and images, Lasky’s work is less about the film as a sociological artifact and more about the imaginal zones suggested by the Overlook and its inhabitants. In Lasky’s *The Shining*, the movie is akin to a hallucinogenic that helps the speaker drift into the in-between avenues of experience, some nightmarish and others eerily idyllic.

The collection opens on an implicitly posthumous note. “I am here by myself / And I have finished everything / There are no pretensions / No way around the door,” the speaker says in the book’s first lines. The title of this opening poem, “Self-Portrait in the Hotel,” indicates that this “here” is the Overlook, and that the speaker is on the threshold (“No way around the door”) of crossing into its not-quite-earthly sphere. (The “I have finished everything” echoes faintly with Emily Dickinson’s lines “I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable,” from “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died.”) Once this crossing occurs, the “I” becomes legion, with sometimes the “I” being Lasky (“I was Dorothea Lasky,” the poet states in “Time”), but at other times being the various characters in

the film (Danny, Wendy, and even, briefly, Jack Torrance). The speaker also takes on the persona of some of the film's most well-known ghosts, such as the man in the bear costume in a poem titled "The Bear," and as one of the twins in "Blue Christmas." A more conventional approach to this material would clearly mark out the speaking self from the art object, with the "I" highlighting each character and scene as Other. But the speaker seems to take seriously Rimbaud's famous insight "I is another," and its suggestion that any psychic exploration of self and memory is radically polyphonic—more radio than radio station.

Yet even when the speaker is talking "in character," the verse drifts from the film's storyline into lyrical spaces not set forth by the movie. One of the best examples of this is "Blue Hallway." It starts off in Wendy's voice, with the speaker telling us "I am going up the steps / With a knife / I am scared and looking around // I feel everything so acutely." The gendered violence of the story is brought to the foreground ("My husband is trying to kill me"). But Lasky's poem strays away from the film's handling of this situation (how will Wendy and Danny escape from Jack?) and towards its own vision of flight. "I decide that actually now is the time to dance," the Wendy-speaker says. "Then I invite them all in // All the people I was running from / Are here now." The speaker seems to be taking the phantoms aligned against her (her inner demons?) and, instead of casting them out, welcoming them in. Through this welcoming, she diminishes their sinister power ("We are having a party"). Jack, too, loses his power, becoming only one more guest at this party. Then the poem takes even a further turn from the film, becoming a riff on art ("the way in which form is everything") and artistic recognition, with the one-time inner demons becoming an appreciative audience for Wendy's aesthetic vision. There's even an aside to Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter," another poem about the enigmas of the creative process. Lasky's stanza "I am painting an orange / Suddenly someone gasps / 'An orange is genius!'" thematically echoes with O'Hara's lines "My poem / is finished and I haven't mentioned / orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call / it ORANGES."

Though each poem is its own free-associative meditation, Lasky's collection does offer an overall trajectory that follows, very roughly, the one laid out in the film. The book opens with the speaker's arrival at the doorway into the Overlook, follows her as she enters into the time-whirl of "The Gold Ballroom," and details the speaker's eventual departure/escape ("Closing Scene"). As such, the work traces the archetypal trajectory of the Gothic, with the speaker as the Gothic protagonist who enters into the dangers, allurements and entrapments of the manor/castle (in this case, a

hotel) and manages to eventually flee.

The last poem, "Going Through a Mountain," reads as an epilogue to the book. The speaker looks backwards at the project she has written and that we have just read. One element of the project, the poem implies, is to find order and pattern in chaos. In keeping with the famous pattern of the Overlook's hallway carpeting, the collection itself offers a mosaic of recurring phrases and images (the color blue, mirrors, children, etc.). Having left the Overlook's patterns and mazes, the speaker wonders, "Doesn't everyone feel / There's an order to things." But the post-Overlook landscape answers that there's only "Chaos." As a further gloss on these lines, the speaker tells us, "How hard it is to accept / That even the skyline / Doesn't feel anything / Like an order at all."

If the Overlook (even the hotel's name implies some fate-making sentence) is outside the human scope of things, Lasky suggests that there's a chaos and vastness even beyond the scope of the Overlook. Yet the book doesn't end on a nihilistic note.

Sometimes the genre of horror is painted as defeatist, luxuriating in a type of numbing pessimism. But it could be argued that horror can also, perversely, be one of the most hopeful and expansive of genres. The final girl fights like hell to survive (and often does), and even in horror films that don't have especially happy endings, the movies sometime have a preternatural grandeur that contradicts the notion of horror as a narrow, parochial genre. Two of my favorite horror films, Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) and Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), have such visions. And Lasky's *The Shining* seems to partake of both approaches, pairing fight with vision. Her speaker battles through the Overlook as she takes on different voices, different personas, to the point where the Overlook is no longer a threat "out there," but rather a part of her many identities ("You'll find me / That terrible terror of being / That's me"). Early in the book, the speaker informs us, "There was always something there / That was waiting." Here at the conclusion, she says, "I'll wait for you / I'll wait." The speaker is now the one doing the haunting. As the Overlook once waited for the speaker, the speaker now waits for the reader.