

## THE LONELINESS OF THE WORLD

*The Curator of Silence*. Jude Nutter. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

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Surprise marked my first reading of Jude Nutter's poems. Twenty-five years ago, in a creative writing workshop which I organized at Winchester School of Art, in England, the poems I read by the young art student were remarkably different from the generality of English poetry being produced at that time. With their fluency and vital imagination, the poems of Jude Nutter reminded me rather of an expansive American poetry, somewhat in the spirit of Walt Whitman. Leaving Winchester in 1982, I heard nothing more of Jude Nutter until I read some poems by her in *Notre Dame Review*, and subsequently acquired her first book, *Pictures of the Afterlife* (2002), followed by *The Curator of Silence*, winner of the Ernest Sandeen Prize in Poetry in 2007. It was the confident fluency of the early poems that made me reach for an American comparison. After a quarter of a century, during at least part of which Jude Nutter has been living in North America, it seems to me that I was right about her American affinities.

In her subject matter, however, she often draws on family life in England. There is something about her work—not just references to Rilke—that is distinctively European. This, I think, is the 'darkness', the preoccupation with death. She could be described, lazily, as a 'confessional' poet. I have read little poetry that conveys such a sense of intimate, painful personal exposure. A lot of poetry does of course deal with the *subject* of painful experience, after the fashion established by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. But I have read little that communicates the feeling, as distinct from displaying the experience, or offering it as a spectacle. Consider the first poem in *The Curator of Silence*, "To the Reader":

Out here, in darkness, rain knocks  
against the earth, unlocking tiny doors  
in the dirt of the garden. You  
have spent your whole life so far  
trying to bear your body as a blessing,  
and now you are waiting with your empty  
suitcase between your father's  
toolshed and the high, rough fence  
of the neighbours' garden, and whatever

it is the rain sets free from the soil it tastes  
 like the vacancy of the grave, it tastes  
 like the hunger you discovered  
 when you entered this world—released  
 from the grip of your mother's body and passed,  
 fully condemned, into the slack cage  
 of your father's arms: the brand-new loneliness  
 of the body you'd been given.

Initially a reader might pull away from the 'you'—a form of address Jude Nutter frequently employs—resenting what seems an assumption of intimacy. However, this is not what is being assumed. The voice is personal and intimate, but it also simultaneously gives and withholds. The withholding is a form of recognition: that loneliness is the common condition of poet and reader, and therefore, paradoxically, intimacy is strictly limited. As Jude Nutter writes in "Epitaph on Interstate 80, Nevada": 'the loneliness of the world begins in the body./And the body earns its dirt, and all its delight, in this world only.' It is the mystery of being that is being shared.

The lines from "To the Reader" introduce both the spirit of the poetry and its principal themes: the body as blessing and burden; death and desire; primary relationships. The setting, 'between your father's/toolshed and the high, rough fence', at once situates the speaker within the life of the generations, and is liminal. It places Jude Nutter as a metaphysical poet, one whose language remembers an old religious dispensation, and who hungers for what is perhaps an impossible release from life's physical conditions, except in death.

The cover of *Pictures of the Afterlife* shows Louis Schiavonetti's etching after William Blake's *The Soul Exploring the Recesses of the Grave*, which is also the subject of a poem in the book. Death and the soul are a recurring theme in *The Curator of Silence*, too. "Meditations: Tyne Cot Cemetery, Ypres" begins: 'We shall never, as Emerson reminds us,/steer our feet clear of the grave'. The poet's concern is with the dead: 'Don't ever tell me/there are too many poems about the dead: the dead,/among whose ranks we shall one day number, outnumber/us all and should be given their due'. Jude Nutter speaks of Emerson, but her subject is Ypres. Her handling of death is not like the transcendentalist's. It is more like Donne's and that of European poets and artists. She treats the theme as in 'Crow', modernizing the medieval figure:

Death, is it not true  
 you are everyone's lover; the ultimate

philanderer and our one, true heritage, packed  
at birth into the suitcase of every cell.

Her death-haunted poetry is intensely physical, earthy and corporeal, and electric with spiritual energy. Because it is so mortal, her world is vividly alive.

While I last saw Jude Nutter in the quiet environs of a cathedral city in the south of England, I learn from her books that she has subsequently ‘homesteaded on Wrangell Island in Alaska for ten years, working the land, watching birds, listening to snow, and writing poems’ (back cover of *Pictures of the Afterlife*), and lived for two months in the Antarctic. Extreme situations evidently suit her spirit. The loneliness of and from which she writes is not only a modern existential experience, but grounded in the conditions of life on earth. Thus, in “*Aurelia aurita*”, she describes the ocean abode of the jellyfish as ‘the loneliness of our first home from whose/dark, unwallled room we are forever exiled’. Her poem “The Hermit Thrush” won the 2001 Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize. “The Falcon” has a Jeffers epigraph (‘Justice and mercy/Are human dreams’). Like Robinson Jeffers, Jude Nutter has ‘stood at the edge/of a continent’, and rejected ‘the comfort of metaphor’; she too has found beauty in the merciless universe. If the exposure of extreme personal experience in her poetry is reminiscent of confessional verse, it is this refusal of illusions, together with her recognition of common loneliness, that obviates self-pity and self-absorption. Her poetry is pervaded by the knowledge expressed in “Wheatfield. With Crows” from *Pictures of the Afterlife*: ‘the world the heart inherits is its own’.

The epigraph to “The Poet in Reflection” quotes R. S. Thomas, another sea-watching poet with a passion for the elemental universe. The poem begins with a self-portrait, in a liminal situation:

I discover myself at last: a woman reflected  
in a picture window, bent over  
her work in a circle of light, unarmed, struggling  
to place one lasting thing at the threshold  
of her vanishing.

It was as an art student that I first met Judith Nutter, and it is no surprise to find that she writes about art and artists. More than this, making art is what her life is about. As she writes in “The Fourth Man”:

The body is not the only  
terror out of which we fashion salvation, but it is

the one loneliness about which we know nothing.  
 It's why we make love, and dream  
 in pictures; it's why we make art, ravenous

for prayers in our own likeness.

Making is what the poet or artist does. But the 'lessons' of which the poet speaks in the title poem of her new book are: 'that life/is not artifact, but aperture—a stepping into//and a falling away; that to sing is to rise/from the grave of the body. And still/say less than nothing.' The greatest subject, paradoxically, is what cannot be said or shown. There is thus a quality of silence about real art that is like nothing else on earth. It was an intimation of this, in verse ambitious to reach into darkness and silence, yet to taste fully of life, that surprised and impressed me in Jude Nutter's work twenty-five years ago. In her subsequent poetry, culminating in *The Curator of Silence*, she has learned to speak eloquently of that which cannot be put into words.