

Shadows & Goatbones



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By Barbara
Lefcowitz

Review By
William Carpenter

We make poetry, said W.B. Yeats, not from ourselves but from our opposites. I wonder if we read poetry, too, to learn about our opposites, perhaps reading the poetry of others not because they are like us but because they are other and can teach us about the opposite in ourselves.

I can't think of two better opposites than this radiant, barren Maine winter day and this book, *Shadows and Goatbones*. Outside my window the ice floes nudge and shift on the Bay and the fields on the far shore reflect the white silence of New England winter, while the world within the book is warm, garlicky, guilt-spiced ethnic soup. And I can't think of a poet more opposite to this reader than Barbara Lefcowitz. She is the woman who appears as the Other in my dreams. She is an archaeologist of the ghetto and the shtetl and the concentration camp. She is the woman who looks at a sidewalk crack and sees, reflected, the place between her legs, "red and loose-

lipped as a drunk." She is a root-bound traveler in Eastern Europe, both the incendiary present and the romantic gypsy past.

I stand on my porch, book in hand, freezing, and I can't see another human being for ten miles around. Yet this is my book as well as hers. The poet has exchanged lives with me. She is from Maine, for the time being, in cold storage. I am from Prague, from Warsaw, from Auschwitz, from Vilna, from Parsippany, New Jersey. My city is dense with humanity, I can't get away from them. I go to the incinerator in the basement of my Brooklyn apartment and there are horny old women there with erect nipples and blue-roped thighs, smelling of burnt grapefruit. They are after me. It's useless to move to the country. They know where I live.

There are no open spaces in this book, no distances either in time or place. The atmosphere flutters with the shadows of the dead. The girl who died in Auschwitz at the age of nine; she would be my age

had she lived. She is the death twin I carry with me, just as, in the dead of winter, I leaf through this book which is so full of life. My own twin is a poet with the death-obsession of the Holocaust survivor: when she gets a new microwave she puts everything she owns in it including her book, her brain, her own life. Our poems are hungry little incinerators with mirrored ceilings in which the reader—in poet's clothing—watches himself burn.

We pause most longingly on things which are very old, which are placed beyond history by having been destroyed by time: ancient teeth or a goat bone exhumed at an archaeological site by someone who must always be digging because her poetry has a Draculan need for fossil fuel. Ms. Lefcowitz is a driven traveler. She visits cemeteries when she comes to town. She is the guide to the peat bog that holds the 8000-year-old woman; she is the psychoanatomist that places her own fragile, peat-worn corpse on Freud's plump couch.

Like Freud, Barbara Lefcowitz seeks out the spots on earth where the unconscious leaks through with its weird otherness: a hot-springs spa, a fake waterfall, an Edward Hopper painting, a crack in the sidewalk, an Emily Dickinson poem, an obscure juncture in the neurology of the brain. In her book, though, they're everywhere, an earthquake sidewalk full of cracks, dead mice, dead Jews, oniongrass, test-tube babies and gypsy aunts.

The day darkens, of course, before I can finish the book. I'm no longer in the sparkling polar coastal Maine, but in a night which could be anywhere on earth. I turn on an overhead bulb—"god's glass eye"—and begin to separate myself from *Shadows and Goatbones* in order to review it. Poet and reader disentangle themselves from their temporary dance and begin to write. How sad. ■