
BOOK REVIEW

Nautilus and Bone, by Lisa Richter. Frontenac House, 2020. 112pp., Pb., \$19.95 ISBN-13: 9781989466124

Reviewed by Michael Greenstein, University of Sherbrooke,
greenstein@rogers.com

Lisa Richter's second collection of poetry, *Nautilus and Bone*, is subtitled "An Auto / biography in Poems," the slash not only suggesting Emily Dickinson's phrase "tell it slant" to arrive at truths, but also pointing to diagonals in the poems themselves. The diagonal tilts in the direction of mirroring Richter and Anna Margolin, a Yiddish poet who emigrated from Belarus to New York early in the twentieth century.

Richter begins with three epigraphs that prepare for her multifaceted poems about locating place and identity: 1) Madeleine Thien's sentence about crossing a river by feeling for stones; 2) Yiddish poet Irena Klepfisz's "self-dialogues" about finding a place; and 3) Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Chambered Nautilus." Holmes's nineteenth-century poem gives rise to Richter's "nautilus," which is featured on the cover. Involved and convoluted, the labyrinthine mollusc serves as an ear that captures her submerged and subversive rhythms of a Jewish matriarchy and sisterhood.

"Like a Copper Bell: A Preface, Prologue, or Overture of Sorts" opens the book in multiple directions. The image of the copper bell appears in Anna Margolin's poem, "My Ancestors Speak": "They trample through me [...] rattling my heart like a copper bell, / [...] I don't know my own voice" (8). The bell echoes until it blurs the distinction between Richter's and Margolin's voices, for one of Richter's ancestors, her maternal great-grandfather, was born Samuel Margolin. "I still do not know if I chose poems to / for / about Anna Margolin, or if Anna Margolin chose me" (11). Found poems and *dramatis personae* recur throughout *Nautilus and Bone*.

Her first poem, "Jewess," is written mainly in couplets: "Don't call me Jewess. Call me hellfire and fish-hooks, / the moon as it violets the earth in mollusk-silver shadow" (15). Defiant and diagonal, the Richter / Margolin call invokes fish-hooks to capture merged and submerged shadows. Violet as a verb violates our expectations, and colours earth and water in different shades. The mollusk belongs to a shadow world of submerged truths – nautilus refracted, hooked and hooking, a feisty sailor shadow-boxing anti-Semitic stereotypes. "Hang me on your boudoir wall in a frame of

nautilus and bone,” (18) but both poets break those domestic frames by unhooking their tongues. With backbone and crustacean tenacity, nautilus adheres to the sea and gains the surface diagonally.

“Mother of Exiles: Ellis Island, 5 December 1906” begins with an epigraph from Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus,” once again telescoping the past and ventriloquizing women’s voices. A couplet encapsulates the transatlantic steerage crossing: “pummeled by tantruming storm, all rupture and enjamb- / ment, now coming to dock. Will you lift your golden lamp” (19). The line ruptures the enjambment carried over to the next line that rhymes with it, in imitation of the tip and tilt of bodies at sea.

“Flâneuse” also uses an epigraph from a relatively unknown British poet, Amy Levy (1888): “The female club-lounger, the flâneuse of St. James Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on the nose, remains a creature of the imagination” (32). A walker in the city is an imaginary creature, taking in the sights and sounds of East Broadway, 1907: “Hush, do you hear the frogs’ tenor chorus?” (32) The “o” sounds carry through to the pantomime and accordion in the next line, while the second stanza focusses on a newsboy who “fishes for his childhood off the Williamsburg Bridge,” Richter never far from water or Whitman. At the poem’s centre we are drawn again towards nautilus: “My wet hair comes undone, wraps tentacles around men” (32). The tenacious flâneuse returns home to examine her acoustic labyrinth: “What’s this behind my ear? An ancient book.” Other voices and books are behind her ear, and the antlers she sprouts at the end of the poem.

From tentacles to antlers, Richter anatomizes and metamorphoses in myriad forms. As she wanders, she finds her sea legs, whether in the sonnet sequence “Beshert,” or in “After / word: The Jewess Plots Her Escape Route.” In this final poem the poet looks in the mirror and coughs up her double, before concluding: “You can’t empty the ocean with a spoon” (100). Richter fills the Atlantic with her nautilus, and flies: “O bone fragments growing little wings, take flight!” (99). Her ventriloquial verse revives a Yiddish world of marine mothers who traverse cities and seas.