

Reader's Companion
for
WALKING BACKWARDS

by Lee Sharkey
(Tupelo Press, 2016)

CONTENTS

Introduction and Critical Praise	2
Responding to Questions from Alan Michael Parker	3
Imagining “The City”	5
Biographical Note and Links	7

Introduction and Critical Praise

Walking Backwards examines resistance to violence and repression through evocations of contemporary events and through conversations with poets and artists whose voices arise from the Holocaust. Employing a variety of formal strategies — lyrics, quoted testimony, parables, paratactic narratives, re-castings of Torah stories, and inter-leavings with other texts — these poems offer a complex vantage on cultural erasure and persistence. Sharkey conjures a simultaneous present to reclaim a heritage expressed in gaps and silences. Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and the Yiddish-language poets Abraham Sutzkever and Peretz Markish become contemporaries in our era of refugees, as her words mingle with theirs to bear the weight of the unspoken. “What have we come for,” the poet asks, “to sleep where the dead slept in the bed of our absence?”



“In *Walking Backwards*, Lee Sharkey deftly gleans the ancient stories and old cities for news, picking from Biblical narratives and old poems the grains that might feed us in our hunger. Like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History — whose wings are buffeted inexorably into the future while facing the past — Sharkey walks backwards through Jerusalem and Vilno, witnessing the ghosts of refugees and concentration camp victims, while cradling a tender vision of kindness and hope. ‘So we mark our dark accomplishment,’ she writes, ‘Drawn between us, a line like living hair.’ I'm so grateful for *Walking Backwards*, its ‘scalded beauty’ and words that ‘light the long slumber.’”

— Philip Metres, author of *To See the Earth* and editor of *Come Together: Imagine Peace*

“Step by step, line by free-floating line, Lee Sharkey walks backwards into the Jewish catastrophe in this deep book of remembrance — a collection of parables, an ongoing conversation with the dead, a tablet of fire.

— Edward Hirsch, author of *Gabriel* and *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*

Praise for Sharkey's previous book, *Calendars of Fire*

“An exemplary poetry of conscience that exposes and refutes that ‘the warden is also the historian.’ Her ‘slit-tongued questions’ and ‘throat song’ are reminiscent of Lorca's Deep Song and Darwish's celebratory lyrics of life.”

— Fady Joudah, author of *The Earth in the Attic* and *Alight*

Responding to Questions from Alan Michael Parker

adapted from the BEST AMERICAN POETRY blog, September 2016

Which of your new poems predicts your future?

Allow me to subvert the question to talk about a dream that led me on a journey. In the early summer of 2011 I woke in the middle of the night hearing the words “Tonight I am walking backwards”; I scribbled them in my journal before falling back to sleep. The sentence had the peculiar quality of utterance that has led me over the years to germinal poems, yet I had no idea what it might refer to. In a month I was to fly to Vilnius for an SLS (Summer Literary Seminar) program, an opportunity for me to explore the Jewish history and culture of a city that had witnessed both their heights and their depths, but I made no conscious connection between the trip and the image of walking backwards.

In Vilnius, I lived in the garret of an old building on one of the seven streets that had constituted the Jewish ghetto during the Nazi occupation. Between 1941 and 1943, over 35,000 people were confined there; almost all would die at the hands of their captors, the majority by execution in the nearby killing fields of Ponar. I literally walked in their footsteps as I traveled the cobbled streets and as I climbed four flights of crumbling stairs to a room some number of them had crowded into and tried to sleep. By chance or fate I found myself “walking backwards” into the vexed history I claim as my inheritance. Night by night in that haunted room, in the company of the poetry of the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, I listened to the silence as the poem of walking backwards grew into “In the capital of a small republic.”

Which poem in your new book should be read aloud first?

“The City” began as an exercise, an attempt to work with the form David Ferry invented in his “One Two Three Four Five.” (See the accompanying essay for a commentary on how this poem developed.)

I had been thinking about the vision of the City on the Hill and reading about cities of refuge in ancient Palestine, where those who had committed involuntary manslaughter were protected from punishment for their crimes. It was only when Jeffrey Levine accepted the completed manuscript of *Walking Backwards* for Tupelo and the press asked me to write a brief description of it that I realized the quest for a city “with water for cleaning and drinking” and “bread to quiet hunger” had become the thread that holds the book together. So, if you’re not wont to read books of poetry from the beginning, do turn to “The City” and read its fifteen lines aloud.

Which poem in your book arrived mostly whole?

“Lashing the body from the bones” came all of a piece and quickly. Essentially a found poem, it is a distillation of the transcripts of the poet Peretz Markish’s testimony at his trial for crimes against the state in the last months of the Stalinist era, as published in Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov’s *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish*

Anti-Fascist Committee. Markish was a Yiddish-language poet widely acclaimed in the early years of the Soviet Union but later executed along with twelve other prominent Jewish writers and intellectuals on what has become known as The Night of the Murdered Poets. My contribution to the poem consists entirely of my excisions. The testimony is so Kafkaesque it bore no emendation or commentary.

What are you doing formally in this book that's new for you?

Like many poets I see my work as being in conversation with the poetry that has informed it. That sense was particularly acute when I was working on this book, where I was engaged in retrieving fragments of what was almost lost, particularly in the case of Markish and Sutzkever, condemned to present-day obscurity as a consequence of writing in a tongue largely annihilated by genocide. In poems such as “Old World,” “Lyric,” and “Something we might give,” I conceived the page as a simultaneous present where poets whose voices were inflected by the Shoah and I might engage in intimate exchange — a risky enterprise but one I felt impelled to. Integrating words from their poems directly into my own gave me the sense that they were speaking through my mouth, a way of ceding space to them, an act of homage in which reading and writing, listening and speaking, and (it seemed) self and other merged.

List five books that mattered to you during the writing of your book.

When I was writing the poems in *Walking Backwards* my reading became concentrated on work by and about Jewish poets whose voices have outlived attempts to silence not just them but an entire cultural heritage. Among the familiars on my bookshelf: *Poems of Paul Celan*, translated by Michael Hamburger; Nelly Sachs's *Glowing Enigmas*, also translated by Michael Hamburger; *Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs: Correspondence*, translated by Christopher Clark; Joseph Leftwich's *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Literature* (particularly for his translations of Peretz Markish); and *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav. Ilya Kaminsky and G. C. Waldrep's anthology *Homage to Paul Celan* — may I slip in a sixth? — was also invaluable. Of many, these are but a few.

Imagining “The City”

Published in *Epiphany* 11, Fall 2016

“The City” began as an exercise, an attempt to work with the form David Ferry invented in his “One Two Three Four Five”: a single word is repeated in each line of a five-line poem, placed initially toward the front of a line and with each succeeding line moving further toward its end. I didn’t adhere strictly to David’s form in my poem, but the principle of progressive repetition in his model helped me construct a parable that remains resonant for me.

I had been thinking about the idea of the City on the Hill and reading about Cities of Refuge in biblical-era Palestine, where those who had committed manslaughter were protected from acts of vengeance.

Hebron was one such City of Refuge — what a contrast with the West Bank city of Hebron under Israeli occupation. The first time I visited Israel/Palestine, in 1979, an Israeli taxi driver drove me and my mother slowly through its narrow streets as an act of provocation, he boasted, against the Palestinians who lived there. Nowadays Hebron bristles with tension as fewer than a thousand Jewish settlers live barricaded and guarded by the Israeli Defense Forces among 215,000 Palestinians. Demolitions of nearby, centuries-old Palestinian villages proceed unchecked.

But let us imagine ourselves in Hebron almost a thousand years ago, in the year 1166. The Sephardic philosopher/astronomer/physician and religious scholar Moses Maimonides has just arrived here on his pilgrimage to the tombs of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah, sacred to both Jews and Muslims. We find Hebron, whose name derives from the Semitic root for *friend*, to be a cosmopolitan city, a cultural crossroads with a tradition of hospitality. We secure a room in the public guesthouse and are welcomed with a meal of olive oil and lentils. Tomorrow we will climb down into the caverns where the ancient, cloth-wrapped bodies lie in their sepulchers. Maimonides writes of the experience, “I stood in the cave and prayed, praise be to God, in gratitude for everything.” Maybe we’ll catch a glimpse of him and engage him in conversation. But tonight we are tired from our journey. We walk for an hour or so under the stars then retire to rest.

Even in the best of times, every actual city has its problems, but it seems crucially important to me that we retain the ideal of the City of Refuge. We know from life experience what its essential elements are — clean air and water, good food, housing, safe streets, access to education, a shared sense of citizenship and community, open cultural and intellectual exchange. And it’s not hard to generate a list of cities that within living memory have been multicultural and welcoming, in ferment with movements for bettering the lives of its inhabitants. Vilnius pre-World War II was such a city, as was Beirut before the onset of Lebanon’s civil wars. Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, named for a tenth-century Iraqi poet and renowned for its book sellers and open-air poetry readings, was a hub sustaining the memory of Baghdad as such a city until a car bombing blew it apart in March 2007.

Over the last several years I have been focused on the power of personal pronouns in poetry: how isolating and blinkering an *I* can be, how a poem might bridge the gap in perspective between *I* and *you*, how *I* and *you* might become a *we*. The traveler who recounts the tale of his arrival in “The City” has been taught that he is one of the “chosen people,” but chosen for what? What constitutes this chosen tribe? What responsibilities does “chosenness” entail?

As I worked my way into the poem, the strictures of the form I had adopted helped me depict the speaker as “without forethought,” open to all that was offered him and able to experience the questions that filled him as a casting of bread on the water — the traditional Rosh Hashanah ritual for disburdening oneself of past failings — as a state of grace.

Biographical Note and Links

Lee Sharkey is author of *Walking Backwards* (Tupelo, 2016), *Calendars of Fire* (Tupelo, 2013), *A Darker, Sweeter String* (Off the Grid, 2008), and eight earlier poetry collections. Her work has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *FIELD*, *Kenyon Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Nimrod*, *Pleiades*, and *Seattle Review*. She is the recipient of the Abraham Sutzkever Centennial Translation Prize, the Maine Arts Commission's Fellowship in Literary Arts, the *Shadowgraph* Poetry Prize, and *Zone 3's* Rainmaker Award in Poetry, and she is a Senior Editor of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

Lee Sharkey's website:

www.leesharkey.net/index.html

Lee Sharkey's pages on the Tupelo Press website:

www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/lee-sharkey/

Find Maine Writers listing:

find.mainewriters.org/writers/lee_sharkey/

Poets and Writers directory listing:

www.pw.org/content/lee_sharkey

POEMS:

“Three poems by Lee Sharkey,” from Kenyon Review Online:

www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2013-fall/selections/lee-sharkey-763879/

“Eye,” from the Split This Rock blog:

blogthisrock.blogspot.com/2010/05/poem-of-week-lee-sharkey.html

Recordings of Lee Sharkey readings on the audio-poetry website From the Fishhouse:

www.fishhousepoems.org/artist/sharkey-lee/

INTERVIEWS:

Best American Poetry blog:

“Eleven Questions for Eleven Poets,” curated by Alan Michael Parker

Part 1:

blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2016/09/eleven-questions-for-eleven-poets-by-alan-michael-parker.html

Part 2:

blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2016/09/eleven-questions-for-eleven-poets-by-alan-michael-parker-part-ii.html#more

***The Daily Bulldog*: “Lee Sharkey’s New Book”**

www.dailybulldog.com/db/arts/words-on-words-poet-lee-sharkeys-new-book/

“The Next Big Thing” Interview:

www.leesharkey.net/interview.html