The Homes We Live In: A Review of *The Daughter's Almanac* by Katharine Whitcomb

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The Homes We Live In: A Review of *The Daughter's Almanac* by Katharine Whitcomb

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62 pages. $16.00.

When I first read Katharine Whitcomb's *The Daughter's Almanac*, I was in my third year at my MFA program, and I was looking for poetry of place to inspire my own writing. Whitcomb's collection demonstrated to me how a book about place could stretch beyond that to incorporate themes of loss, of the reactions to that loss, and of the way that places, people, even pets can reify that grief. In re-reading this collection, I am reminded of the complexity of Whitcomb's work. Place, or the movement through place, reflects the way in which we move through grief, isolation, and the longing for companionship as if these, too, are places we visit and houses we live in.

Whitcomb's book, and winner of the 2014 Backwaters Prize, opens with the death of the poet's mother. This first section is one of the shorter sections in the collection, and yet what happens here infuses every other section. From this loss, part two seems to develop a heartbreaking but necessary solitude. In writing about grief and memory, Whitcomb often makes use of her imagistic talents and relates the emotional experiences of the speaker through striking figurative language. In "Ghost," the first poem in the collection, Whitcomb writes, "by the filing cabinet in my small office / I try to eat cold soup, soft summer / dusk at the windows & I feel *her*." Later in this section, the poem "Balfour" further addresses this great loss and the grief that impacts the speaker and her father: "After my mother died, my father would not row our boat with me / although I needed his help. We shivered out in the great water." Abrupt transitions signify the way in which loss affects the family dynamic. This strained, or perhaps careworn, relationship is more evident later when Whitcomb writes, "I said that he must try to take a turn with the oars / then lowered myself over the side." By setting this tone, by establishing early on the sense of loss, the effects of grief, Whitcomb signals to her readers that the work in this collection stems from that initial loss.

The second part of the collection, titled "Claret and Gold," further develops this theme but also demonstrates the complexity of that grief by allowing the speaker to contemplate God, isolation, and memories. In the second section of the long poem "Vermont Suite," the speaker, replying to a series of questions drawn from *Hamlet*, states: "Sometimes I look around a room at all the faces and love each one in my old way. / Then, the good minute goes." Later, in part four of that poem, she writes, "I love every- / thing on earth even more in memory." And in "Tis Bitter and I am Sick at Heart," the speaker states, "these haunted winter nights vast / as mansions boomerang with memory." In each of these examples, Whitcomb lingers on memory. Even love, which is indeed present in these memories, becomes part of the past. As part two draws to a close, Whitcomb circles back to the place where this section began. In "Against Melancholy" Whitcomb directly acknowledges the ideas examined throughout the second section of her book: loneliness and melancholy. There's almost a sense that the previous poems avoided these ideas while also showing us that the speaker has been dealing with profound isolation. Here, at last, the poet is able to face the feelings present throughout previous works. The sense, for instance, of being alone even when "animals and lovers sleep next to you, / under your mother's quilt." Even in poems where the remembering takes a more narrative approach, as in "This Is Your Brain on Physics" or "The Plan of Ms. Wenz to Marry Up," there are moments of intense longing either for a

time that has passed or for a kind of companionship that seems perpetually evasive.

In order to further develop these themes, Whitcomb effectively employs literary allusions that mirror the speaker's emotional journey throughout the collection. In particular, allusions to *Hamlet* are peppered throughout, but especially in the first and second sections. *Hamlet* is referenced most distinctly in that second part of "Vermont Suite" which sets up the poem as a conversation between the poet and the guards of Elsinore Castle in Act One as well as Polonius in Act Two. The guards' questions are particularly interesting here as they come from the very beginning of the play where the ghost of Hamlet's father has been seen over the last few nights. In the poem, the guards ask, "*Who's there?*" and the poet responds, "Mountain face, facing north. A field above a flooded river. A crouched house." *Hamlet*, of course, works so well throughout because it echoes Whitcomb's focus on grief and the loneliness that can accompany the loss of a parent. Just as the guards in Hamlet grow weary and fearful of the darkness which brings ghosts, the poet sees herself reflected in a field overwhelmed by flooding, a house crouching in grief. Whitcomb references other works in part four, "Greening," when she writes about a destructive relationship through the lens of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Similar to the form set up in "Vermont Suite," Whitcomb writes "The Prince's Almond Trees" as a conversation between Machiavelli and the poet. But here she adopts an instructive tone where she speaks directly to the reader, writing, "The poem's title comes from Chapter XXIII in some translations of *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli. The title has also been translated as 'How to Avoid Flatterers.' To use this as the title of a poem that explores the erosion of a love affair is intentionally coy." The tone of this poem, and indeed of part four, demonstrates the speaker's movement through grief and through relationships. The shift in allusions serves to further underscore that change as we move from Hamlet's melancholy to Machiavelli's political philosophy.

But, upon re-reading *The Daughter's Almanac*, my favorite element of this collection is the animals that offer, at first, solace and companionship. Starting with "All Night," the animals in these poems become significant because they stand out as moments of missed connection. The pets in these poems become spots of love, moments when the speaker thinks she's alone but isn't. The dog, for example, in "Poem with Backdrop of Boar Hunters in Fluorescent Vests, Calling out across the Chestnut Forest" who wanders the forest with the poet: "you whisper secrets into his soft ears. / And still you do not expect the world to love you back." Just as the cat in "All Night" invites the speaker to "*lay your head down*," the dog here, "[circling] close," provides the kind of loyalty and love that human companionship fails to deliver. In the fantastic third section of Whitcomb's collection, "Sea Journals," the speaker wonders when "He writes that weeks go by when no one touches him but I think of the cats lantern-eyed, kneading his ribs." In these excerpts, it seems that the speaker of these poems becomes more aware of the presence of animals, of cats and dogs, in her grief. While she might not fully realize the power of this animal love, the speaker still recognizes their love in a way that the "he" in "Sea Journals" does not. There are wild animals, too—boar and deer, escaping hunters or peacefully roaming a backyard. In "Horse Dream," though, the poet becomes animal herself: "That my beauty / was a weighty mane, // and a muscle-body heft / with life"; "You can hear me, kicker // at the threshold, lost mare / sore-shinned from running." Here, as mentioned earlier, we begin to notice a shift in the tone of the collection. As the poet begins to see herself as a mare, as more in love with her lover's dog than her lover, she begins to take on a new, defiant tone that helps the poet turn more readily toward love.

Once the speaker has embraced this defiance,

she seems to make a return to a vibrant, living world. Having dwelt so exclusively on ghosts and phantoms in early poems, Whitcomb now focuses on the "greening" of the world, and, in doing so, she shows us the outcome of moving through grief or, perhaps more accurately, living with it.