

Poetry Porch: Prose

Tremors by Cammy Thomas. New York: Four Way Books, 2021. ISBN 9781945588938 (paper).

Reviewed by Joyce Wilson

In her poetry collection *Tremors*, Cammy Thomas examines the arc of the private life through emphasis on narration. These poems, about family and interpersonal relations, from childhood into adulthood, challenge expectations about the ways family stories can be told.

Thomas develops her dramatic scenes with plain speech, minimal punctuation, and a cool demeanor. She raises questions about knowledge and asks what happens when odd behavior is witnessed but never discussed. With disarming simplicity, she sketches events through the eyes of children, who wrestle with what they see and what they understand. Thomas is concerned with events that evoke underlying fears threatening to erupt through the surface sheen. Children sit with a man who holds a frayed leather whip under the table and grabs at their legs. They see how one of the neighbors must be pulled out of her garage where she left the car motor running. While the children learn to keep “mum,” the reader sees more than they do and assembles conclusions through patterns in the details.

One poem features a trip to the country where the children find themselves on their own after their father drops them off. Without either parent, they explore the primitive strangeness of the cabin, its messy interior, the evidence of mice and their hairless young. They improvise games in a forest that blots out the sky and hides the way to the main road. All of these might seem typical of the experiences of camping. Yet after three or four days, it is clear that they are out of their element. One wonders why the mother did not come with them. And then a new kind of disorder looms when the father returns. Described as the “peerless father,” he shows up with a

“strange woman beside him” (“Fairy Tale,” 17). The poem ends here, raising specters of abandonment, an anxiety frequently addressed in fairy tales.

Thomas employs the lament as a form of argument when she turns to the role of the wife. Instead of crafting an expression of grief after death, the speaker initiates a quarrel with God on behalf of the mother before she has died. It seems that she tried and always failed. In a petition, as if for another point of view, the narrator asks, why? Was their mother wrong? Was her failing that she didn’t believe? Did she not deserve mercy, “her lone consolation the ice clink in her glass”? The encouragement to tell her own story might have helped. Suddenly, after years of withheld feelings, she demonstrates the capacity for the philosophical:

“I don’t know them,” she said at last of her children,
“but I know I love them.”

With this insight, she airs a buried perspective. The narrator takes an accusatory tone and asks if God is listening, and if He is, why:

Why spin her like a circus bear
tethered before the crowd?

(“Lamentation to Our Lord,” 19)

Focusing on the mother as a woman failed by her culture, Thomas delivers a sharp rebuke. When every stage of a woman’s life is plagued with humiliation and helplessness, why should she become an object of entertainment? As the narrator suggests that a woman without agency is the result cultural limitations, she also mourns the limitations of paternalistic Christianity.

In these poems about the family who has everything—financial comfort, security, and lineage—Thomas shows how the desire for permanence looms as a kind of farce. The mother takes up embroidery of her husband’s family crest, often a demonstration of a woman’s devotion.

Yet she keeps leaving the needlework behind in the taxi, where it is retrieved from the Lost and Found after three telephone calls.

she remembers finding the right pillow
then the light brown background
that took six years

she's seen ravens
pick at a dead dog in the road plumage unspoiled
black heads glistening handsome birds
glossy in the rain
ready for blood

(“Nothing Touches Me,” 30-31)

These lines without punctuation seem suspended on the page. The father dismisses the loss, suggesting she can always start again. He does not seem to understand that her interest in the crest has to do with the symbolism caught in the cross-stitching, “ravens ready for blood.” Suddenly her engagement with the handwork is revealed as her intentional act of subversion.

Instead of confidence and grace, the parents lash out through eccentricities, as if the pleasure they have denied themselves might be found through strange behavior. As soon as he realizes that one of his daughters, recently married without his blessing, has bought a house nearby, the father sees an opportunity for subtle revenge. He drives over every morning, signals his intentions with the bathrobe that he wears on his walk through the house to the pool, disrobes and swims naked (“Great White,” 49-50). The daughter and her husband must warn weekend guests to stay inside until he is finished. He has seized the pool for himself. The bathrobe remains after his death, regarded by his survivors as a perplexing symbol of his domination. Thomas alternates plain and italicized print in lines that create a stream-of-consciousness evocation of memories.

for summer blue and white seersucker
my sister froze when she saw me in it

I took it when he died and I've washed it
because of how he liked to slam us around
a thousand times it's ankle-length and almost like
how he used to spend his time lying to us mocking
women's clothes the arms not too long for me
why was I wearing it couldn't I feel the poison
sometimes I garden in it because it's cool and
how could I put it on as if it made me sentimental
because I know he used to care about such things
about him destroying our lives I must be deluded

(“My Father’s Bathrobe,” 51)

The fragmented clauses encourage the reader to choose between following the enjambed lines in sequence or by skipping every-other-one. The process of separating the lines holds impressions apart, the nightmarish from the sentimental, and implies additional meanings in repurposing garments, gender differences, and family ties.

Another poem looks outside the family unit and depicts women at lunch, part of the culture of liberal suburbia. Responding to the story about buying a pair of pants, returning them after they became discolored, and getting another pair, no extra charge, one of the women replies, “that would never happen to me.” She suggests that race determines the politics of returning clothing in certain stores. Then the women go outside to their cars, where one of them discovers that she has a ticket, while the others do not. They explain that, like a division of spoils,

“. . . on the other hand . . . we've got
The parking thing down.”

We laugh—
a laugh like a rusty gate, like a hacksaw.

(“White and Black in the Suburbs,” 27)

The image of the gate and saw conveys the impression that social differences might be evening out and an archaic culture opening up, like a gate swinging on rusted hinges or a saw creaking as it severs the wires of a lock.

Thomas explores how poetry in narrative form can draw from various sources and frames. The tremors in the title have to do with facing the fears that lie beneath the surface. They are also about hoping for a steady hand, taking a deep breath, and summoning the courage to write, despite the quivering scrawl on the page.