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Eleven Poets Recommend New and Recent Collections

Forbidden City by Gail Mazur (University of Chicago Press)
by Joyce Peseroff, *April, 2016, On the Seawall*

Forbidden City is Gail Mazur's seventh book of poems, and at its devastating, honest, and luminous center is the loss of her husband, the artist Michael Mazur. Freud wrote about the way we bow to grief, noting that "It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us." Mazur examines her response to desolation with unsparing meticulousness. The results are poems that expand our understanding of the consolation of nature, the miracles of art, and the power of imagination.

The book begins with the title poem, and its first lines introduce the reader to everything at stake: "Asleep until noon, I'm dreaming / we've been granted another year. // You're here with me, healthy." The speaker sleeps the morning away, dream- life the only bearable life. It's where she hears her husband's voice: "Time is the treasure, you tell me, / and the past is its hiding place." How will the poet find her way, alone, into a future that loss has made so bleak?

This is the book's narrative and drama. Mazur has written about the world's natural splendor in lines vivid with color and texture, but in these poems the powers of nature diminish. In "We Swam to an Island of Bees," the "...forbidding little island" that Mazur "heard the Wampanoag called Get Off It," is snarled with "thorns and poisonous leaves," but holds "nothing in that/first chapter of our life that stung." Gathered with friends to watch a night-blooming Cereus open in "At Dusk, in the Yard," Mazur, alone, observes "...the spiky white petals / lifting slowly from their homely bud." At midnight -- "the luscious bud half-open"-- she goes home before "I'd have seen the golden starburst's / withered casing,/ pale ghostly vessel of the night's spectacular." Nature's briars may not scratch much, but neither can its "ethereal glory" completely console.

The power of art offers Mazur some respite from debilitating sorrow. "My Studio" rings with the repetition of one long vowel sound linking "True Value" with "blew" and "do," "bamboo" with "view" and "hullabaloo" -- all the "oohs" that accompany unrestrained tears. Some words punctuate the

end of a line, other rhymes are internal, but all sound as natural and imperative as a stone bounced to the bottom of a deep well. At the end of the poem, the writer places herself "... still at my desks, it's all I can do/here in our little dream house at dusk/when the bay turns lavender, without you." But it's the imagination — always exact, sometimes antic -- that offers possible relief. In "Elephant Memory," the appearance of a colossal beast on Mass Ave — "this sudden elephantine apparition, / this unlikely hallucination"-- creates, like Elizabeth Bishop's moose, wonder and awe. The LPs, Deco pottery, and Bakelite boxes in "Things," like the objects in "Crusoe in England," reek of meaning; Mazur's litany ends with "Your steel tool-case with molded grooves to fit / each mystifying tool..." and "Art — the walls, the closets, the flat files-- / humming its demanding song. Or not just demanding, generous /...."

Mazur braids together art, imagination, and the natural world in "On Jane Cooper's 'The Green Notebook'." Mazur has always written deftly about how thinking feels; here she performs, stanza by stanza, the ways both understanding and feeling evolve through language. Her close reading of Cooper's poem is dramatic, posing a series of questions, including, "Is there wistfulness in her voice?" "Greenness is all. / But is it all?" The knot at the poem's center is a quotation from Cooper: "It seems I am on the edge/of discovering the green notebook containing all the poems of my life, / I mean the ones I never wrote...." "Rueful, a melancholy idea," Mazur writes; "Annihilating." As one poet identifies with the other, parsing the potential of a life's work "unwritten," Mazur's responses guide the reader to adjust, backtrack, counter, and affirm an ever-deepening involvement with both as sensual, feeling, uncertain human beings. Nature green and hot, the music of Haydn, and "The life of the artist, the life of making" — "surely," Mazur concludes, they are "ongoing."

In *Forbidden City*, Mazur struggles to find a way to live in time while the wellspring of her life exists outside it. Though the journey through grief is endless, in "Morning Letter," she's up and writing, not lost in sleep; the last line of "Grief," the collection's final poem, includes in its conditional future tense the possibility "that in black ink my love may still shine bright." The book includes an elegy for Alan Dugan which is possibly the best poem ever written about a committee meeting, and one about the pain of reading "awful poems late at night." In its passion and invention, line by line, *Forbidden City* reveals Gail Mazur as an artist writing at the height of her powers.

-Joyce Peseroff, in *On the Seawall*