

The Horror and Holiness of Life: *The Unpredictability of Light* by Harry Brown

Marguerite Guzman Bouvard's sixth poetry collection, *The Unpredictability of Light* (Word Press, 2009), has a definite vision with several central themes. The title itself comes from her poem "Praise" in which she wants "to overthrow the papacy" (73). In this poem critical of the hierarchy, power, and emphasis on sin within the Roman Catholic Church, Bouvard concludes with the book's title phrase, which I take to mean the "unpredictability" of knowing transcendence or joy in the presence of beauty or divinity. This emphasis reminds one of *Four Quartets* in which Eliot writes of the difficulty and uncertainty of achieving union with God, or experiencing the still point at which time and eternity meet. In "The Years" Bouvard states, however, that we can yet "be moved [in later years] / by a few violets shyly spreading / their colors, a caterpillar turning the earth": "There will always be / unexpected moments of astonishment" (81).

Connected to "the unpredictability of light" is the idea suggested in the title of the book's first section, "The World That Flames Around Us," a phrase that brings to mind Hopkins's famous "God's Grandeur" with which our world, especially Nature, is charged. But Bouvard's world flames also in other ways; and one sees, or does not see, the flame. In "Ana" the title character feels the "bush outside the window" throb with birds; Ana is "wrapped in wonder" at her world, her "eyes / brimming with the unseen" (13, 14). In contrast the speaker of "Weaving a Web," preoccupied on Sunday morning with a World Cup soccer match, barely sees secretive Creation in a diligent spider's art, just as secure, unconcerned citizens do not see Imam Abu Omar kidnapped in Milan to vanish into "the web that stretches / from Cairo to Amman, to Timisoara, Kabul, / Islamabad and Guantanamo" (31). "Weaving a Web" touches upon two further connected motifs that permeate much of this volume: the brutality and consequent suffering throughout our world. In "What Words Can Do" a college president who has been a Marine is able to see the "inner numbness," "tremors, nightmares / and invisible wounds" of soldiers he visits in hospital wards (35, 36); and in "Brazzaville" Bouvard is held by the "fathomless eyes" of a "Congolese woman in her hospital bed, / stump of a leg swathed / in white, stump of one arm / swathed in white. . ." (38). The poet mentions in "Sudan" "the thousands / slaughtered like prey" whose "gaze follows us everywhere / asking, why did you turn away?" (39). "My Town" focuses on victims of toxic pollution—"the phosphorescent / blue-green around the pine studded lake"

(114); and in “The Second Tide” a young woman whose “parents and grandparents vanished into the giant maw” “will be locked away, / to be ravaged by blank-faced men. . . [.]” “leaving us with songs of grief, the only possible music” (67).

But Bouvard’s book is not all dark, its credo and coda are not simply depression. Many of the poems in this collection are a variation on Blake’s line “For every thing that lives is Holy.” The poet touts zest and “reverence” for the fullness and beauty of life: for “the perfect / body of a newborn, all the wayward tendrils / of growth, the butterflies’ drunken wing beats / in a lavender field” (72). In “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” she prefers “the Mother / who wears our face” over the padre’s preaching of sin and the crucifixion (75). In “Isabella,” she writes of her dancing granddaughter who seems to carry the vision “of her great-great-grandmothers who knew / that every moment on this earth / is sacred and must be praised” (76). Bouvard champions life on earth—its joys as well as suffering, the on-going connectedness of generations, the mingling of races and languages, the pleasures of our flesh and love. In “Easter Sunday,” the poet perceives God in “forgiveness,” “in the child / wailing in his mother’s arms,” and “in the flapping / wings of our off-key voices” (95). In “Names” when she hears the mourning dove sound “its tocsin beneath / my breastbone, it’s God’s voice in the body’s nave, his / wings stirring the breath that speaks all languages” (103).

In short, Marguerite Guzman Bouvard like Whitman finds letters from God dropped in the street, each missive signed by Him; like Whitman she sees God in “the faces of men and women” as well as in her “own face in the glass” (Section 48, *Leaves of Grass*). Occupying a world shot through with the brutality of ambition, ignorance, and greed, she perceives also a world offering the beauty, richness and mercy of God—and, finally, a world proving the potential compassion and generosity of humankind. As she explains in the “The Important Thing,” the book’s final poem, “The important thing / is to give, randomly / and out of poverty, not knowing / whether the heart’s pale shoots / will create leaves or perish” (123). I am most grateful to be thus reminded, and suspect that many of Bouvard’s readers will reach a similar conclusion.