

TO MEASURE THE WORLD

Karen Shenfeld
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REVIEWED BY CAROL DEBRA LIPSZYC

Upon entering Karen Shenfeld's landscape in this slim and rich collection of new poems, her fourth publication, I embraced the role of traveler of sites both exotic and familiar. Steered and illuminated by Shenfeld's sure, steady hand and her artistic vision, I savored the poems, their typography, their inner lines, the flow of their verses, becoming more attuned all-the-while to the sensibilities of the earth we share.

In her opening poem, "We All Come from Africa," I was bound on a map quest as Shenfeld moves seamlessly from the rocky badlands on the Atlantic Coast of South Africa, to Central Sahara, to a region along the Nile. Readers connect intimately to their sensual selves in the personified phrases: "Delta's branched veins," "the blades of your shoulders slicing Richards Bay," "the river's Orange mouth," "the shy backs of your knees shadowing Nubia and Cameroon." The succession of sites culminates at the "green centre" of self even as the poem universalizes our human ancestral line to Africa.

The natural, animated world and its sacred keeping of time is open for us to read if we but take note, if we "feel so inclined." We who are "strangely human" might then delight in the "noon shadow/ falling on turned earth/ at a telltale angle." And as we "[tread] stone, two centuries' steps over arched bridges/ the stream sings its living lesson/ carving its cleft deeper into the face of cliff." Small as we might be below a "winged sky," we might "measure the wide world" and all it encompasses.

Some of what we witness or conceive of reveals the earth's diminution and in this stance, Shenfeld gently, deftly assumes the role of poet as social/environmental conscience. There, the "island [that] disappears year by year." Here, the "iron waters once/ a tonic." A "genteel trod to the sea" and you will taste and feel the water cry "salt tears" under the "cloud's fallen heart." In her tender "Beach Poem" to her brother, the poet slyly asks him to leave her a wealth of beauty from their shared experience, immeasurable, unquantifiable as that beauty is. How to contain: a "late autumn curve of coast/ Cold waves breaking on shingle/ The cliff's weather-beaten face/ pockets full of pebbles/ rounded, smoothed, talismanic." Karen Shenfeld renders her panoramic tours of the world with the attendant detail needed to awaken if not restore our senses.

The personal and familial appear too. Adapting the biblical persona of "Lot's unnamed wife," Shenfeld's tone is at once reflective, embittered, mournful as she walks through the house she once inhabited with her husband in "Last Look Back." Reminiscent in moments of Dickens, who created physical spaces that embodied his characters, the walls of their former home through her lens are "tumbled down," as "ants feast on the counter." The new woman's "floral silk kimono [flourishes] on the hook behind the door," but outside, a sapling that soars, sheds "cold blooms white as snow." Their marriage is dead. In one of my favorite poems, "Romania," enlivened by repetition in its refrain, we learn of the history of Romania with Shenfeld as teacher until the informative guise is dropped and she presents the source of her newly-discovered interest. Romania is the birthplace of the receptionist who took her place. Retribution? Shenfeld's shift to a dark, ironic tone works splendidly.

While an earlier book, *My Father's Hands Spoke in Yiddish*, was dedicated to her father's legacy, in "Mother's Hands," Shenfeld remembers her mother, creating a reciprocal mirror effect. "Look! The same foreshortened fingers,/ spur of bone/ protruding beyond the right wrist." In "Milestones," the poet compares key events in her life to those of her mother across the "serpentine" line of time. In elegiac lines she inscribes: "in time-lapsed frames,/ your lines crease my face. I lean on your cane."

Finally, there are miniature portraits of a life. In "Cherry Picking," a neighbour, agile as an "acrobat," rooted in the earth, picks cherries, fills brimming baskets to bake pies and jars in a "sweet tart blessing." Turn the page and in "Epilogue," the woman has passed from addiction. How paradoxical our lives are.

Tasting the "sweet tart blessing" is a gift as is a cup of cappuccino topped with white foam, as are the myriad of evanescent offerings in the natural world that lie before us. I have given away more than I should, likely, in a review. But then the title invited me to extend myself beyond parameters I might have set, and I responded, gratefully, in kind.

Carol Lipszyc's book of short stories on children and adolescents in the Holocaust, The Saviour Shoes and Other Stories, (2014) and her book of poetry, Singing Me Home, (2010) were published by Inanna. Her edited anthology of eighty poems on the heart, The Heart Is Improvisational, was published by Guernica Editions (2017). Integrating chants and narrative for ESL Literacy students, she authored People Express for Oxford University Press. A chapbook of poems, In the Absence of Sons, is slated for 2020 publication by Kelsay Books. Her web site can be found at www.carollipszyc.com.