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# Barbara Henning

## Friday, December 19, 2008

### John Godfrey's *City of Corners* (Wave Books)

Last year between Christmas and New Years I was in nyc staying in a friend's apartment. One night I was walking along First Avenue. It was cold and dark and kind of miserable with very few people on the street. It gets like that in the East Village around the holidays. Quiet. The homeless huddled under blankets. My nose was bleeding. Then I looked up and John Godfrey was coming down the sidewalk. Hi. How long are you in town? Just a few more days. Hey, John, you're just the person I wanted to see. I need a nurse. How come my nose won't stop bleeding? This has been happening on and off ever since I got on the airplane in Tucson. I was standing there on the corner in the cold holding a bloody kleenex against my nose. Nothing to worry about. It's the dry air. Just pinch your nose and hold your head forward a bit until it stops. I thought something terrible was wrong with me. No just the dry air, the heat, you know. We say nice things to each other about our writing and then along we go. Just an ordinary encounter on the corner.

This week I've been reading John's new book *City of Corners* (Wave Books).

Right at the beginning, there is a bounce:

And you go down that street  
 Rainbows ahead bling you  
 like midnight never does  
 and I wonder where  
 evening will be tonight  
 My loved ones waiting there

Who are these loved ones? I wonder. This tough poet guy is a nurse who for many years has gone door to door helping aids patients in poverty ghetto areas of Brooklyn. The poet-speaker-narrator in this first poem "pretends his swagger" as he moves through the street passing in and out of the pages in this book with the orphans, barflies, beggars, prostitutes, drug addicts and all of us. Nothing else to do but keep walking: "Hips do the work/and I cross the world."

After a few poems, I realize I am trying to construct a narrative, to solve the shifting pronouns in these poems. Who is this "she" that appears here and there and then sometimes segues into the "you" and the "you" is often the poet talking to himself. And the "she" is the illusive woman on the street: "She sees herself scurry and hide/She claps an eye before white lines/and lives on up close/to where the beautiful king."

## About Me

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Is the poet in love with the woman? Yes, he is, and is not the lover. He is a brief encounter, an imaginary doctor. "I had better not help you" (12). "The idea of a rematch is repugnant/ . . . The heartless appear in a flattering light (13), With these brief encounters, there is this heart beat and a restraint as the poet looks on the suffering of others and of the self. "I'm talking about you/The vein is exhausted/Press back on the wind/Lips not fit to kiss" (15). And the passersby merge into his consciousness and he is one with them "the inside and the outside corners overlap/The path she has chosen treads to a window/Things they hurl at the indigent/She is so very far from the scramble" (16)

And this woman, this she, who appears on a corner is the muse who disappears in a shadow. "Gust conforms her clothing/When she walks she rides" (20). And the poet walks on. "She seems to wait for me/Left no other choice/We cross with the light" (17). Whenever we meet on a corner in the city, or anywhere for that matter, there is the possibility of anything happening: "Require breath in identical ways/Diverge because it is hip/Do not save changes" (18). Yet most of the time, we continue to the next corner.

Under the clothing, there is a body to be examined, diagnosed, and saved even though there is no saving possible. "Glory in her pocket" (23). "You loosen the rope/You hang better/across her back" (24) The interaction between the abstract words and clauses bump up against each other like a mind making sense in a random chaotic way and then suddenly an image, a person appears.

Events fly in the face of ingenuity  
Clutter in the descent from birds  
Reconstitute suspension of self  
I notice the skin between breasts. (19)

The abstractions are like shards of glass in the sky—abstract words and phrases collaged with prepositions becoming philosophical wondering layered into a world-text. And then boom, the syntax evolves and an image, a person, a narrative appears.

Impulses chafe and become brittle  
Clap of thunder herds the one-armed  
Depravity compares well to contagion  
Anatomy deflates upon its ideals  
Ravages denied to the degree they're untamed  
To use denuded land to sour the blood  
The wild girl offers you her card  
and the brown waters of her skin become fluent.

When I stand in the cradle of blasphemy  
Ambrosian tongue of flame degrades exposure  
With no effort I admit ballast  
to the stage peopled with clowns and thugs  
I can dig how some grasp life as a swap meet  
But my chains lack that link  
I watch a hand convert a child's forehead

The curl of a rind in sunlight

Lower eyelid hovers above a blue shadow  
I am the only one left to consume.

This dark melancholic wandering. "I can't understand how discipline/is of any concern to the annihilated" (27). Neither can I; that is, after you accept yourself as annihilated, there is no more need for discipline. It's over. But until then, discipline helps. And the woman goes on—"she dodges calamity" (27).

There's an acute awareness of the body and desire and annihilation in almost every poem in this book--the nurse-poet's wandering body and the bodies that he encounters on all those corners. You go this way. I go that way around the space to the next line. In between I offer you a remedy for a moment, to avoid calamity. "The women linking the stairs are biased/and she hides in one palm the gold gaming chip" (55). "What color they will paint her/when she dies depends on/how quickly they forget/what you call paradise" (79). The game. And then the wounds and recovery. "I dream myself large/to overcome the forgetfulness/your death enables and/the fraction of survival" (68) Our ghosts and dreams dissipate. "I spy her through an orchard of smoke" (74) This book reads like a series of riddles, like love is a riddle, death is a riddle, these are love riddle songs in the dark  
—

Through the Wall

I forsake your lips  
to get in on the action  
Then you are gone  
and I get along

Direction all I lack  
I catch myself in time  
Angles all discordant  
No way through the wall

I take what I need  
Between me and nothing  
stands what I want  
When that's enough I know

Will you know me  
Not at twenty feet  
You pass like water  
I can always call your star (72)

The muse here is the other, the otherness of the body across from us, around the corner, over there, back there in the past. "This otherness has grown/onto us from the earth/If you all/hear the supreme/Artificial sky opens/You an island in it." We can stay lost, suffer deeply, wander around corners and still realize a direction as the poet does here: "I have no purpose at last/and put myself to use" (93). John Godfrey is a karma yogi—to be

useful in the world to those who suffer, and to write these black jewel like fractured poems for our contemplation. How does one find joy when one sees annihilation around every bend? Look for the beauty in the shards, in the poetry. I am happy to have spent this week reading John Godfrey's *City of Corners*.

Labels: **John Godfrey, Poetry, Wave Books**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **6:34 PM**



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## 2 COMMENTS:

 **At 1:58 AM,  Unknown said...**

It's great that you took some time to tell us about this extraordinary book.

Ya gotta be there to really take it in.

Incidentally, the opening poem was printed in the Nation in October.

I am amazed by John Godfrey's disciplined focus on "the poems". His workaday work in medicine would leave ordinary people grasping for a TV, not a pen and a notebook, muchless a keyboard.

 **At 9:40 AM,  Unknown said...**

I appreciate your thoughtful observations about this book of poems by John Godfrey.

I recently read *City of Corners* and was taken with the precise poems in this collection.

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