

BOOKS

Voices Worth Hearing



Blood is Blood, by Endre Farkas & Carolyn Marie Souaid, Signature Editions

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30.01.2011

Blood is Blood begins with children arguing. It's an obvious symbolic gesture; a poem for two voices, Jew and Arab (so they are identified in the text), *Blood is Blood* presents its twinned speakers speaking at and sometimes with each other, now echoing and now contrasting, as they rehearse grievances, recall and debate history, and warily move toward some point of understanding. The words are heartfelt, sincere, and conscious of the gravity of their theme — but this does not always make for good poetry. As a text, it's often obvious, even platitudinous: "Let us take an eye for an eye until everyone is blind," we hear near the beginning and at the very end, a statement too dulled by familiarity to have much impact.

But saying true things is potentially part of the power of poetry. So when *Blood is Blood* opens with children arguing with each other, it is an obvious comment, but because it's obvious it works: the children's shouts become an example of the impoverishment of language and of imagination caused by hatred. As the poem goes on, the repetition of expected symbols, of cedars and stars, is often

subtly effective just because they are apposite; they carry a level of historical meaning, grounding the debating voices in a specific context, and therefore conveying identity.

If the words still seem to lack in sophistication and linguistic density, they're also only a part of the overall project. An enclosed DVD presents the authors, Endre Farkas (Jew) and Carolyn Marie Souaid (Arab), reciting their work. The performances are strong, and the text gains from this presentation, the contrasting voices overlapping like a Glenn Gould vocal fugue as they speak sometimes to each other and sometimes to themselves. The black-and-white cinematography is understated, but effective; the speakers face each other, but rarely seem involved in actual dialogue.

The format of the presentation is precisely right. The video production, hearing the speakers and seeing them in context with each other, makes the poem live; but you need the text before you as well to be able to disentangle the voices, to be sure of what the voices are saying when they're both speaking at once. You can pick out the contrasts and the repetitions, and experience the sound of them as well. The driving rhythms overcome the self-conscious weightiness of the symbols.

Seeing the poem performed also clarifies something about its structure: a key moment in the work comes with the introduction of Canada, "this huge land of possibility." It's neutral ground, a forum in which the two voices meet; the vehicle by which the poem comes to exist. Still, it seems to me that the success of the poem is ultimately not in the contrast between voices so much as the contrasts within a voice, as a speaker interrogates his or her own assumptions, or changes her or his mind. True complexity is less between people than within people.

Blood is Blood doesn't say anything revelatory about conflict in the Middle East; I'm not sure that's the point. The text on the back of the book suggests it's meant to be broadly applicable, to conflicts in Ireland, Yugoslavia, Russia, Darfur, and so on. But it's not clear that these conflicts are similar enough that a meaningful connection can be made; certainly *Blood is Blood* is uninterested in power relationships, and lacks any obvious political program other than a dissatisfaction with violence as a way of solving disputes. This is a poem, a performance, and as such it succeeds. The voices are worth hearing. And their dialogue is worth unpacking.

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