

Seared dignity

Myles Gordon's poems are linked to a long Jewish literary chain that extends deep into the heart of a suffering world
By Robert Hirschfield

THESE DAYS, with the mushrooming of MFA poetry programs all across America, writers of first books of poetry are often 20- and 30-somethings, many of them skilled stylists, adventurous imagists. But their creative energy is usually offset by their lack of depth (Yehoshua November being among the exceptions).

It is heartening, then, to come upon a first book by a 51-year-old poet who explores with seared dignity the pain of historic inheritance, whether that be the Holocaust, Hurricane Katrina, or even, for that matter, "The Godfather."

The poet is Myles Gordon, and his book is "Inside The Splintered Wood." A teacher of literature at Revere High School, just north of Boston, Gordon is a poet whose gravitas comes in part through genetics. His mother lost much of her family in the Holocaust, while his father, a World War II veteran, was one of the soldiers who liberated Buchenwald.

From somewhere, Gordon finds the ability to smuggle into his work a leavening sense of humor. In his poem, "Passing Another Patient On The Staircase On The Way To The Psychiatrist's Office," we find these lines:

*I want him to know
 the therapy is working—
 I'm learning to
 hate outwardly
 as efficiently as I've
 done inwardly.*

Gordon's poems are links in a long Jewish literary chain that extends deep into the heart of a suffering world like the miner's pick that

drills into the darkness for ore that cannot be found in the light.

Some of the poems in his book's first section, "they work on a man," owe their inspiration to his former day job as a TV journalist in Boston for the news/magazine program, Chronicle, for which he was producer, interviewer, script writer, overseer of editing. They are mainly factual, accessible, topical, like the poem "Torch Song" about Katrina.

*They say to him:
 I lost my city and this is the song
 you give us? I lost my savings in
 the suitcase beneath the floor boards.
 I lost the only house I knew. The last
 time I saw my baby was three weeks
 ago heading to the dome.*

In his work, Gordon is, by turn, witness, mourner, stand-up-comic, secular Jewish assembler of the prayer-like poems to be found in the volume's aptly titled second section, "recite every day." It is the longest and most daring section of "Splintered Wood." In it, pain is broadened to where it becomes a kind of collective act of remembrance, an obligation to remember.

This is one of his "2008-Massachusetts" poems.

*The rabbi asks how she's doing with her
 soul
 Now that she's reached end stage cancer,
 meaning: is she ready with God? She's
 pretty well
 come to terms, I say. A passenger
 like a Russian doll inside a Russian doll*

arriving at the last one, finally.

*What about you? The rabbi asks. I'm fine
 with it, and all
 the rest of it at forty-seven is ancient
 history.*

*Skipping work to go to Costco, buying
 her a high definition TV,
 hooking it up, teaching her the clicker, cry-
 ing
 all the way to the car. Bullshit. History
 is one teetering log from flooding in.
 Here I am reliving it again.*

It bears noting that this section is written in sonnet form. Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, editors of the anthology "The Making of A Sonnet," claim that the sonnet, a product of 13th century Italy, can survive anywhere. Far from the Shakespearean sonnet of three quatrains and a couplet, Gordon, while true to its standard 14 lines and required rhyme schemes, often substitutes near rhymes, or slant rhymes, for full rhymes, at the end of lines. In an email, he maintains, "As best as I know, it is considered completely kosher to vary the sonnet. Slant rhymes enable me to use a more natural diction."

In his poem "2002-Massachusetts," one of Gordon's "Godfather" poems, we see his effective use of slant rhyme together with full rhyme.

*Sitting watching The Godfather Part Two
 on our couch, my wife between us,
 my mother and I recite lines seconds
 before they do
 on screen, Jody wondering what kind of
 family is this?
 That Michael, he just went bad, my*



Myles Gordon: Gravititas through genetics

*mother says
when he chastises poor Fredo on the
lounge,
foreshadowing the awful thing he does.
Not when my mother's alive, Don
Michael warns
his hit man, but when she dies, Fredo's fair
game –
waiting, then, for his mother to die,
so he can kill his brother__all families the
same
in flesh, in film, in poetry.
I sit alone in Starbuck's wondering how
to let my brother go. You're nothing to me
now.*

IN WHATEVER form he employs, Gordon is always taking the pulse of suffering. There is nothing self-indulgent in his work. It is the product of a deft orchestration of dark and light tonalities. The Godfather poem is one in which the two are woven together successfully.

There are few contemporary Jewish poets whose work is as deeply embedded in *tikkun olam* (healing of the world) as Gordon's. A few of Philip Schultz's poems have that quality. (It was there certainly in the poetry of Schultz's friend Yehuda Amichai.) But it is not in vogue these days for poets to journey outside themselves into the heart of the suffering world.

Gordon, for his part, has been on this journey even as a TV journalist. One of the documentaries he produced and wrote was "Touching Lives: Portraits of Deaf-blind People." Narrated by the sister of three deaf-blind siblings, he takes us into

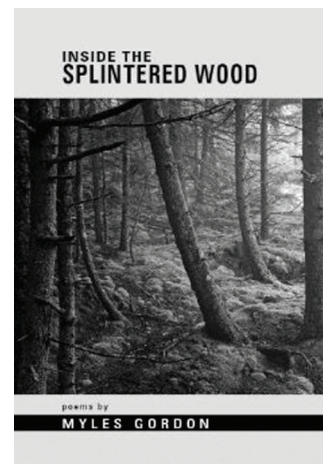
their existentially unapproachable world ("like living in a cocoon of silence") and its murderous solitude, with an eye that goes straight to the heart of their pain, and deeper, to the coiled lust for life beneath their pain.

The richness of Gordon's poetry is that it is able to transport readers from deep pain to colloquial levity and inhabit that world fully. One might be forgiven for thinking that his poem, "Anne Frank In Space" that appeared in *Poetica Magazine* (Fall 2013), was written by a different poet altogether.

*So there we were, a bunch of Jews
at Amy and Becca's commitment
ceremony, cynical about the whole thing
in the loving way only Jews can be,
rolling our eyes at the inspirational
quotations we'd been asked to
recite sprinkled through the ceremony
like some annoying spice that keeps
popping up in an otherwise pleasantly
bland dish—Gandhi, Hannah Senesh and
Anne Frank, God, Anne Frank at a
wedding, when, and I don't know
how it started, we noticed that our friend
Linda was wearing earrings that
looked like space capsules*

As gratifying as it is to encounter such a flexible register of poetic expression, one always returns in Gordon's work to its focus on what it means to embark on this perilous journey of a life – the poet's primordial undertaking, though forgotten by many in their desire to be clever instead of profound.

The ground of Gordon's poetry is ground that belongs to all of us. ■



Inside The Splintered Wood

By Myles Gordon
Tebot Bach
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