

Stung Like a Bee

Redefining Beauty by Karla K. Morton. (Austin: Dos Gatos Press, 2009. 64 pp. \$17.55 paperback)

As part of my coursework for a master of fine arts in poetry, I had the opportunity to workshop a poem with Houston-based poet Tony Hoagland. Although he had very good things to say about my confessional poem, he admitted that his first thoughts had been: “Oh no, not another cancer poem.” I understand what Hoagland meant. As with so many subjects in poetry, cancer has been done; a poet who wants to write a new “cancer poem” must make it fresh and relevant. When I came across Karla K. Morton’s *Redefining Beauty*, I challenged the collection much like Hoagland had challenged my poem: to take a fresh perspective on cancer, to tell me a story I hadn’t heard before. And it did.

Morton, the 2010 Texas Poet Laureate, is also the author of *Wee Cowrin’ Timorous Beastie* (2007), a combination of poetry, stories, and original Celtic music by award-winning Canadian composer Howard Baer. Her book *Karla K. Morton, New and Selected Poems*, is due for release from TCU Press this fall. Morton is a writer, a mother, an entertainer, a cancer survivor, and a Texan—and all of that is visible in her collection.

Morton’s *Redefining Beauty* is just that: a redefining of what is beautiful concerning the body, our relationships, and our poetry. Her collection of poems catalogues her experience with cancer, from the moment it entered her body in the poem “Honeysuckle,” when “it sprang up wild along the chain link fence—thick,/with glorious white/and yellow summer blooms.” Her poems continue through her treatment and recovery, ending with the poignant last lines: “You/are the most exquisite, most beautiful/creature I have ever seen.” Scattered throughout the book are Walter Eagleton’s black-and-white photographs of Morton—bald from chemo—in a range of emotions. However, readers who are leery about a collection of poetry so clearly and fully about cancer should know that Morton is crafty with the delivery of her poems, and often what seems to be a poem overtly about cancer, strikes a vein much deeper than that. Likewise, poems that begin in benign places merge with cancer in ways that whisper how close we all really are to these experiences.

For instance, the poem “Cowboyed Up” begins in a narrative about her great grandmother and her “five-foot-nothing grit.” A young girl, farmed out to rich people, she constantly had to fight off rape attempts by miners. Although the poem begins with images of ancestral power and the grit of early American industry, it moves to Morton’s cancer and ends with the speaker also “cowboyed up,” ready to fight off what awaits her. In another poem, “Jiminy,” the speaker begins with contemplation on a cure that kills—toxic chemotherapy—but as the lines unravel, they reveal the focal point of the poem: the speaker’s memory of a brother who ejected from a jet and lived, saved by a parachute, but with a body forever broken by the fall. And another poem, “Radiation,” which seems to allude immediately to cancer treatment, actually takes a

careful look at the Texas heat and the amazing healing effects of the aloe vera plant. Morton’s variations on a single theme are strong, yet subtle and sweet often. There is much in this collection to love; there is much in this collection to admire. There is little to pity.

Morton’s poems also offer some humor to readers, especially in pieces like “Spock Thinks I’m Sexy” and “The Undocumented Results of Adulterous Bastards on the Healing Process of Breast Cancer Survivors.” In the first poem, the speaker begs her husband to have a wild affair with some “brunette,” as she

is cognizant of his lust for hair. In parting, she raises her right hand in the “traditional Vulcan farewell” and her left middle finger “for a cultural combination/of good-byes: Live long and prosper, Asshole.” In the latter poem, the speaker—who has encountered casualties such as her breasts and hair—doesn’t berate her husband of twenty-three years for cheating on her but rather thanks him for being “the only person on the planet/who hadn’t treated her like she was already dead.”



Morton doesn’t waste words in this collection. Her poems, though carefully crafted, are cutting in ways that abstract lines and esoteric language can’t be. There is less to figure out in these poems, and coupled with Eagleton’s photos, the messages of many of her poems are often exact. Readers who want to piece together a challenging poem may be disappointed in this particular collection by Morton. However, that is not to say that her pieces are not profound. For instance, the moment in “Honeysuckle” when cancer steps onto the porch, “loose matches spilling out of its ugly fists” is both a lyrically stunning image and a frightening one. In “Chewing Wasps,” which takes place during an insect virus that kills so many bees that farmers panic, bee and human share in the experience of bodily vulnerability, and the sweet lyricism in the sick bee’s whisper to the sick human is unmatched: “Ah, my friend, the price/we’ve both paid, the great cost/of a little sweetness.”

Morton’s *Redefining Beauty* presents a fresh perspective on cancer. In effect, it is a redefining of more than just what is beautiful concerning our bodies, relationships, and poetry; it’s a redefining of cancer in those spaces as well. Her ability to combine beauty and ugliness, sickness and sweetness, and humor and fright makes her collection an intriguing and entertaining one.

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