

Next Time You're Dreaming, Look Up

By Tom Lombardo

Book Review:

The Weather of Dreams, by J. E. Pitts. David Robert Books, 2007.

The middle section of J. E. Pitts' three-part volume puts the reader through the pre-op, anesthesia, surgery, post-op, and the recovery, as well, of the author's own kidney transplant experience. While in his mid 30s, Pitts discovered that he suffered from chronic kidney failure of unknown origin, a rare fate for a normally healthy young person. Pitts avoided a life sentence of dialysis when he found a match in a donor—his mother-in-law.

The author weaves those events into a larger metaphor of how life, like weather or dreams, takes surprising and mysterious turns: "In dreams, no one thinks to look up," he says, and later, "we do not take note of the weather of dreams." For Pitts, the weather is always there, in his dreams: thunder, lightning, rain, sunshine, and wind propelling his stories.

Pitts demonstrates his figurative skill with metaphors that lead readers into the despair he felt over the failure of his body. In the title poem, "The Weather of Dreams," Pitts explains a kidney's filtering function through the trope of sunlight filtered through a net. In "Young Hawks," a feeling of dread comes upon a narrator when he observes the hunter circling in blue skies and the hunted furrowing into the grass thicket:

All of us trying not to think of
all the things, just ahead,
that lie in wait.

In "October Carving," the pumpkin tradition turns surgical:

A certain slice and pull—a rip and give,
A slice into the interior, a scoop of the spoon.

You pull out the strings and discard them,
peel back the flesh with a flourish.

The weather in this first section turns stormy as winter approaches, and the foreshadowing turns toward paranoia in “Winter Mystery.”

Something tapped me on the shoulder . . .
What was that thing? I ask myself,
that lit upon me and was gone.

As the narrator plunges into frailty, he realizes that his body has passed its “sell-by date” earlier than he expected:

My life’s on backorder—
I’m out of print.
Thirty-seven editions now
. . .

The advance was spent on advertising,
the posturing of the self.

The second section of this book is as clinical as the first is metaphoric. Pitts holds the reader in the glare of the surgery lights and doesn’t let up for one line. The rooms are “cold and bright, / the tile walls shiny.” There are strong chemical smells and angels hovering, and the speaker seems to be heading toward, “something not of my own making.” In his first days after the surgery, the narrator begins to understand that his life has turned toward something new:

I was left with the memory—small and pleasant,
like cold purple grapes after a hot day working in the yard,
or the sudden thunderstorm that
rises up and rains out the picnic—
you babble towards recovery—or enlightenment.

During his recovery, Pitts faced infections and rejections and bruises, “like purple drawn on maps of the mountains of the great

Rockies.” His scars prompted a friend to say, “You look like the victim of a shark attack,” which sends the narrator into an inventory of all his life’s scars: an auto accident that required steel screws to fasten ankle bones, a bicycle wreck that sliced an Achilles tendon, a high school fist fight during which a class ring took a chunk from an eyebrow.

During the healing of these scars, he starts again to notice the weather in this dream. After storms and thunder, the March wind blows and the sun begins to emerge.

The final section of *The Weather of Dreams* wanders through poems about President Kennedy’s assassination, the Tower of Babel and other biblical references, the Shiloh Civil War battlefield, the poet’s mother, and letters to Charles Wright and Charles Simic. At first, this section seems unfocused, but upon further reading, this series of reflections snaps into clarity as a mechanism for the recovery from regrets and losses. The author discovers his own life as a work in progress through a dream:

The old lady who lived on the side street
asked me plain:
What are you supposed to be?
I said what I keep saying:
I’m still working on it.

Despite frailty, despite regrets, despite loss, *The Weather of Dreams* ends with the continuity of life, the healing of scars.