

No End of Names

By David Lee Garrison

Book Review:

Moonbook and Sunbook, by Willis Barnstone.
Tupelo Press, 2014.



Willis Barnstone is a poet, translator, biblical scholar, memoirist, and world traveler, and he brings all those roles into his work. Here is a sonnet that shows the power and beauty of his new collection:

THE LILIES

The lilies in the field below a sphere
of half moons in the rain, of fowls and moths,
go unclothed, do not spin or toil or hear
the prayer of Solomon in radiant cloths,
and yet their nakedness is perfect snow
under whose textile galaxies the seed
lies comatose. The lilies only grow
and burn. Their meditation is to feed
on light. Naked of thought, a multitude
by the day Adam learned to stand, these plants
are human, living in chance villages
like breezy monks sworn to mute elegance.
When thrown into the oven, no lord says
a word. The lilies fall in solitude.

The poem borrows from the New Testament passage, “the lilies of the field and the grass . . . cast into the oven” (Matthew 6:28-30), and takes that meditation back to the origin of man and forward to the 20th century, as a testimony to the Holocaust. In spite of the embedded, traditional language from the King James, each line is dense with surprise. The imagery is both biblical and modern, and its irony permeates the text: Jesus says the lilies will be taken care

of, and, in the end, they (as humans) are executed; the lilies burn in the sun, then burn to death in an oven; monks are Jews; and, the flowers form a multitude that dies in solitude. The poem sketches an arc of human history as it adds nuance and meaning to the parable of the lilies.

All but a few of these poems are sonnets, although the poet experiments with the form in many ways. Some are Shakespearean and end in couplets; most are Petrarchan and conclude with tercets that rhyme in various patterns. Barnstone's use of enjambment is always fluid and interesting. Sometimes the lines have only four beats instead of five; in "Federico García Lorca," there are lines of only one syllable:

No
 one knew and understood
 the moon like you, Federico.
 She was your child, lover, death. No one could
 save you. . . .

The book is a tour de force of sonnets, an exciting elaboration and revitalization of the form. Again and again, we meet our old sonnet friend, and it takes us a minute to recognize him.

The first half of the book contains moon poems, the second half sun poems. Imagery of moon and sun provide coherence, as the poet plays with ways of looking at these celestial bodies and brings them into his vision of the world. At one point he says, "Like God, sun has no end / of names although we cannot look him in / the face." At another point, he plays with naming the moon:

The prairie rose moon blowing on the glass
 of heaven hangs a moment on a bud
 of fire. A windy angel, I am pass-
 ing through. Her dignity, like Billy Budd
 swinging forever on the mast, compels
 her permanence of rolling flame. I stare.

In many poems, Barnstone alludes to literary works—here, to Herman Melville's novella, *Billy Budd*. Throughout the book he

interweaves references, epigraphs, and echoes of the work of Antonio Machado, Emily Dickinson, Borges, Emerson, Shakespeare, Dante, Donne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Rilke, Unamuno, Jack Kerouac, Wang Wei, and many other writers in a tapestry of literature. Incorporating these authors takes us all over the world through poems set in China, Latin America, France, Greece, Spain, Burma, and Lapland, as well as various parts of the United States.

A recurring theme is the poet's loss of his father, who committed suicide. As Barnstone states in the epilogue, "I was his son, he was my sun, and I learned, through his early violent death, what it meant for the sun to set yet persist even now." Some poems allude to the father/son relationship; others, such as "Give Me Another Mile with You," deal with it directly:

You'd be 103
today if you were sitting with me here
alone as you were when you took the stair
up to the roof, the narrow path to death.
Too young. Now I'm your older brother. Stare
at me out of your horror pit nowhere.
I love you. Help me taste each lucky breath.

We are lucky, through these poems, to enter into a cosmic vision of life that embraces joy and sorrow, flesh and spirit, human and divine. In the words of Andrei Codrescu, "Willis Barnstone's new book is a magnetic miracle that draws the solar and lunar magic of his immense learning into the space of marvelous poems. His language joins the mysteries of the sky with the enigmas of the heart in a music unmistakably his own."