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Falling into Grace (Book Review)

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Falling into Grace, by Laura Apol (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 1998). 99 pages. \$10.95, paper. ISBN 0-932914-36-5. Reviewed by Helen Westra, Associate Professor of English, Grand Valley State University.

Some books of poetry breathe so quietly that we are never quite certain if there is life between the covers. Other volumes shout, whine, or chastise, making it difficult to tender our own thoughts as we read. But this slim first collection of poems by Laura Apol, bravely titled *Falling into Grace*, managed successfully to be both evocative and declarative. It is delicately confident as well as warmly generous in sharing the gifts of a poetic self revealed through whimsy, confession, friendship, discovery, loss, and an assurance of grace that inevitably deepens all of these. Her poems, like friends, open their doors wide to offer us a richer sense of the incarnational and holy in our own lives.

In the book's progressions from memories embedded in the landscape of family to the "burning circle of dreams" to the deepest spaces in the heart—our own hearts, the hearts of others, and the heart of God—these poems invite us home to ourselves and the divinity around us. Thus the opening poem explores the developing consciousness and sensitivities of a young child, dawdling on the way home from an errand, her hand aware of its own presence inside its mitten. In the volume's penultimate poem, painterly and clearly metaphorical, we are offered the glimpse of a fleet-winged blue jay as metaphor for the wonders of grace:

... a bird with wings so blue they are almost violet
on a branch lined with purple flowers
that are nearly pink
and it is gone before I really know that I have
seen it,
but I have. I know I have.

And the volume's last poem, one of the strongest in the collection, is a hymn to the power and mystery of grace as the "pulse of the universe" and the "center of all my circling."

Falling into Grace is essentially a book of poetry, but it is also interwoven with a half dozen prose pieces that contribute texture and continuity. Most of these short personal essays reflect on generational connections—the patterns and examples that emerge within familial and cultural histories to become received traditions, embraced or resisted, in the interior geographies that develop between the child and the adult across the years.

As Apol well knows and demonstrates, for any traditions or truths to become our own, they must be deciphered, questioned, tested, and internalized. Both her poems and prose do this; thus, in the essay "Pieces of Love," she eventually recognizes an emblem of God's grace in the succession of a grandmother's quilts

(perhaps not unlike poetry) painstakingly stitched together over time from discarded fabric and outgrown clothing. Another essay, "Sidelines," positions a young soccer mom watching her son on the playing field, her arms at last freed from the weight of her own infants and toddlers. When asked to hold someone else's restless baby, she is at first inwardly annoyed until, having walked him to sleep, she hears his peaceful breathing as "the breathing of all babies . . . the breath of my own children." In his movement from sideline to center of her consciousness, in a moment of truth he becomes "a contented weight in my arms" and thus a live reminder of her own need for human connectedness and nurture in a shifting world.

Apol's poems as well as her essays are rich with small epiphanies and ordinary moments. Her eyes catch the obvious sunset at day's end on a wooden dock, but her poetic eye goes further to see a shared orange in the hands of a friend sacramentally reflecting "that round globe, the world glowing like fire." In their lack of ostentation, these poems can seem as neighborly and familiar as the scent of warm bread when we pass a local bakery. Take for example, "Still to Be Said" on the miracle of good silences as well as good words between people who trust each other:

If we are entering silence, we are entering as
gently as the cup in your hands, gently
as the soft light at the window, the fog over the city,
your sweater tossed on the chair. Words come full
circle: like grapes pressed to wine, deepened by time
they grow lovely and lovelier still.
Keep listening: these measured lines, learning their
own places, are really your own.

The same could be said for the words and lines Apol passes thoughtfully to her readers.

But there are also poems of pain, the agony of living with a debilitating disease, the daily sensation of having stepped "off the merry-go-round/and the whole world is spinning, and you are not,/but really it is only you." Or the heartbreak of a relationship unraveling in "a series of frayed edges" and prayers for "the wisdom of knowing which things/can be salvaged." In "Waiting for an Eclipse," a poem about the deteriorating relationship between a man and a woman, the very form of the poem and an insistently echoed line ("The eclipse was not seen.") become stark reminders that the progress of an eclipse (in the midst of everyday life) is sometimes hardly noticed—while at other times one can "go blind gazing into the fire," waiting for moon to pass across sun.

Particularly in some of her poems about knowing and not-knowing, certainty and uncertainty, Apol is impressive in braiding the physical, emotional, and spiritual together. For example, beautifully sequenced and concrete, "Without Fail" is a poem dense with yearning and the awareness of human limitations. It is a wistful litany of improbabilities. We recognize the catalog of risks we take in life and the longings we have for ourselves and our loved ones:

Say the parachute always opens, the rope
on the rock's steep face never snaps;
say your fingers never fumble on the
Brandenburg and the wind always fills
your sails. Say your words spill onto the
page without effort, your brush dances palette
to canvas with ease
Say. . . the water beneath the cliff
is deep enough for your dive, your skis know
the ridge of the mountain and the coral reef
opens itself
to your eager eyes.

Against these inverted reminders of life's dreams and uncertainties, the poem's final lines, with their echoes of the commonplace and clichéd, come to us as both shock and wonder. Is it possible for humans to plan and act without fail – as we wish they could? We hope—even as we know that such certainty and such full and unstinting love is possible only from the heart of divinity: "imagine this: he loves you, he loves you,/he loves you/like an open yellow-centered daisy."

Several of the poems in *Falling into Grace* map experiences unique to a woman (nursing a child with that "thread of milk,/drawn from the space near my heart") or a girl (growing breasts she must "wear for a life time"). Many of the poems are shaped with remarkable poignancy, tenderness, and vision. Sometimes Apol offers lines that haunt like melody (sensing "the iridescent folds of this day's grace" or the power of poetry as "passing fire through my hands"). At other times, things utterly mundane find their way into Apol's consciousness and become the arresting gleam of a small beacon on a dusky landscape: in "Washing Dishes" she sees "grace, the slow reclamation as/...what was unclean is made spotless." In this daily ritual, she experiences "the

sacred beneath my slick fingers;/ redemption between my wet hands."

Her wonder and emotions – whether she takes us to the site of the Oklahoma bombing, a communion celebration, a class reunion, an Ash Wednesday service, a gardener planting tulips, a crippling illness – are those we recognize and are stirred by as they touch lights and shadows in our own lives. The mother in "First Flight: For Jesse" stands frightened, white-knuckled "here on the far side of the clouds," praying that the little son she has sent on a plane into a threatening sky will be carried beyond murkiness to see God's comforting moon and stars "welcome your fledgling self as I would." Many poems later, in "My Son Asks How I See God," the boy brings his mother a Christmas-week awareness that the presence of God can be seen in the red wings of cardinals as well as starlight, in a child's wisdom as well as a mother's tender love.

Each of her poems is a window of discovery, admitting us into ordinary experience—emotions, small celebrations, fears, tension, self-doubts, not unlike our own, given a shape and integrity. Indeed, she invites us to "keep listening; these measured lines, finding their places, are really your own." And because these poems are at once accessible, held together with rich imagery and cadences, and grace-filled, they stand up well to re-reading, a quality which for me is one of the necessary marks of excellent writing. This is the case with Apol's work, especially, I think, because she is able to reach us without sermonizing, without lecturing, moralizing, or sentimentalizing, to show us that grace is not only something one falls into or a gift received.

Grace is also sharing generously, even festively, with others all along the journey; it is the kneading, the baking, and then the offering of crusty bread with a "warm center, and silence to savor the taste . . . which, like healing, needs not be spoken." Above all, grace comes in recognizing and accepting the ambient moments, the emblems, the shapes and sounds that signal God's oceanic love, his presence as the "pulse of the universe," always alive. A collection of poems as insightful and inspiring as *Falling into Grace* makes us eager for Laura Apol's next volume.