Those Words, Those Men

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Words For What Those Men Have Done

Richard Jeffrey Newman

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The title demands to be questioned: Who are "those men"? What have they done? We don't receive an answer until the final poem of the volume, but we immediately sense a tone of alienation in the use of "those"—not "these," or "the." We strongly suspect that what the men have done is sexual and violent. We wonder, too, about the title's use of "words." Does spoken language matter in the face of physical mayhem done? One further question: The account of the mayhem, whatever it is, comes to us from a male American poet. Could he be sufficiently acquainted with the atrocities hinted at in the title? We hear the voice of a man leading a relatively tranquil life—teaching, happily married, with a much-loved son. What is his claim to speak of the atrocities in the title? This well-wrought book has answers to all the queries it raises.

Its first three sections prepare us for the revelation in the last, and convince us that this poet's life and gifts have schooled him to speak for an abuse victim, even one who is female, Third World, and, most shockingly, a child.

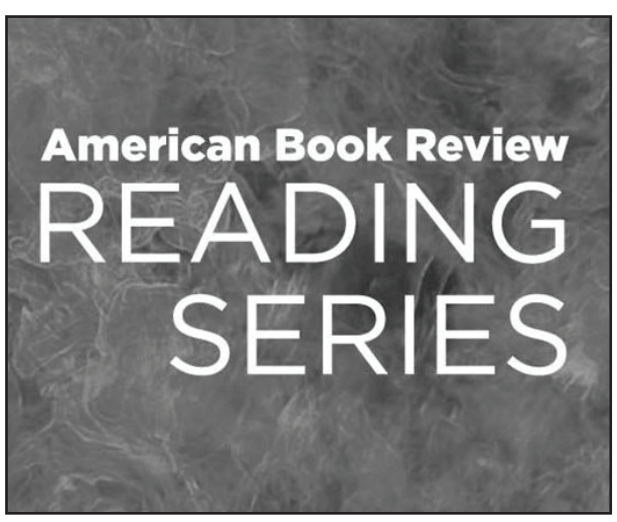
In many ways, this collection represents a man's "Me-too," a reminder that one doesn't have to be female to have one's life blighted by a predatory man in a position of greater power. Of course, thousands of boys harmed by unscrupulous priests could deliver this reminder, but few have felt empowered to do so; even fewer, as far as I know, have been poets.

The first of the book's four sections informs us that the poet himself was damaged in youth by an abusive stepfather, and we learn how the intervention of a trusted woman helped undo the deep damage. The poet, without coyness, prurience, or shock effects, describes, in measured lines, a moment of redemption:

> …nothing as I
> hardened against her tongue
> came to me of the man
> pushing himself between my teeth,
> pouring into me
> out of who he was
> who he was.

In a single lyric the poet tells both how the body's memory is scarred and how trust in bodily experience is restored:

> and then who I was
> gathered itself
> to a point in me
> I kept for myself



Newman frequently refers to dreams that conflate troubled times in his life. One four-page prose poem is a dream report which, unlike most such narratives, manages to sustain our curiosity and interest: "My uterus has colonial ambitions," she says, "a joke I don't get because in the dream I don't know what endometriosis is." She explains, telling me her doctor thinks pregnancy might be a cure and did I want to be the one…I say "No, a child is not an instrument."

"You Should Visit," a longish, ambitious poem in the second section of the book, weaves together interactions between cultures, genders, religions, ethnicities, ingeniously linking diverse periods and characters—a stranger delighted when the poet speaks to her in Korean, an insensitive rabbi eulogizing a boy's grandmother, a Nigerian

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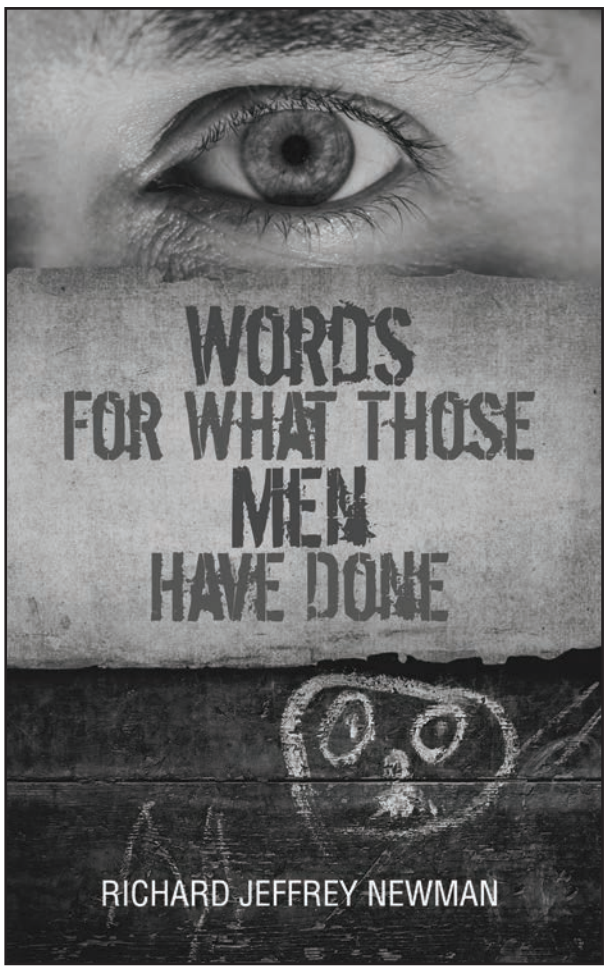
student responding to an assignment to write about "a childhood event you continue to learn from," evoking his own sister's genital mutilation. The large cast of characters in this poem includes a pair of the poet's old friends from high school who question his independence from his Jewish heritage. "What, I hear my grandmother ask, / have you kept? / You should have gone to Kansas." The poet has given himself the assignment he gave his own students: to learn from "childhood events," "keeping" some, leaving others behind.

It would be wrong to assume that Newman writes versified anecdotes rather than true poems. He is a versatile and resourceful craftsman, particularly adept at shaping a variety of expressive lines. Consider, for example, these two titles: "Because you have been a feast for me…" and "My Body Fresh from Dreaming You." Consider the virtuosic use of form—a strict Ghazal handily rhyming "embrace his death," "amazes death," "displaces death," "Face this, death!" "praises death." Consider the easy mix of irregular lines with clear iambic rhythms in the sonnet, "Metaphor:"

> The world's hunger focused in a song
> that bathes you till your need is all you know;
> riverbed swelling at spring's first touch,
> the spread wings of nightfall, cat's eye aglow…

Charming as well are the poet's son's contributions to the book, from his own very creditable limericks to a poem made to order by his father on the basis of Shahob's dream. The poet's Iranian wife is also a benign presence, contributing to our sense of the poet's deep connection with women, and his refusal to participate in mindless persecution of our so-called enemies.

When at the end of the book we finally encounter the title phrase again, it is embedded in a group of longer lines about the gang violation of a six-year-old Congolese girl: The words describing this outrage are horrific: "…gang-raped…starving…could neither walk nor talk…they stitched together / the parts of her the men had ruptured." If, as reader, you are thinking "Do I really need to read this?" I can answer "Yes, you do." Words are essential to the child's salvation. The deed itself and its damage can't be undone, but we must not deter the poet from his project: to articulate a painful predicament, hers and her million sisters', not letting them remain in prisons of blame and silence:



> where words for what those men had done to her
>
> dropped like seeds
> from the mouths of those who rescued her
> and began to take root.

This could, of course, be wishful thinking. The child's injuries and shame might be indelible, but if words are suppressed, if no seeds give rise to healing growth, she is certain to remain sick. That's why this book and the disturbing words in its title carry a moral resonance lacking in journalistic reports of sexual scandals.

Here is "An Ars Poetica of Sorts:"

> I want my words to make
> the music water makes
> when the waves mount the morning
> and the mist weaves its way
> between the trees like a ribbon.
>
> I want truth
> cascading onto my cheeks
> like a lover's silken hair.

May this staunch ally of women get his wish!

These days, it's hard to escape an onslaught of words about predatory men—family members, baby sitters, doctors, producers, actors, politicians, brokers, priests, and professors. As I opened Richard Jeffrey Newman's book, I steeled myself against lurid accounts of damaged woman and children. I turned out to be right in guessing the gist of the book, but wrong in arming myself against it. One of his strengths lies in good pacing. The poet does not belabor the news we hear every day about the victimization of women and children everywhere. This poet has the humanity, mastery, and tact to make his words a source of enrichment.

Sarah White lives in New York City, and divides her time between painting and writing. Her most recent collection is To One Who Bends Her Time *(2017).*