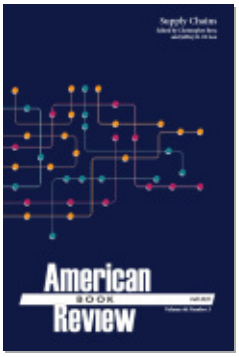
T'shuvah by Richard Jeffrey Newman (review)

Elizabeth T. Gray Jr.



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T'SHUVAH
Richard Jeffrey Newman
Fernwood Press
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76 pages; Print, $16.00
Elizabeth T. Gray Jr.

> "Done right, t'shuvah means
> returning not to where you were,
> because that's where you went astray,
> but to where you should have been all along."

Richard Jeffrey Newman's *T'shuvah* ("repentance" or "atonement" in Hebrew) draws its spiritual, erotic, and musical elements from many sources: Orthodox Judaism, Islamic mysticism, Renaissance sonnets, classical Persian *ghazals* and *rubaiyat,* and his experience of South Korea, Iran, and the five boroughs of New York City. All of these are called upon to illuminate the process of arriving at (and returning to) a self that has finally come to terms with an experience of violent childhood sexual abuse.

Newman's prior collections, *The Silence of Men* (2006) and *Words for What Those Men Have Done* (2017), address that trauma. The poems in those volumes explore the suffering of the speaker as a boy abused by an older man, and also his subsequent deep pleasures as lover, husband, and father. In doing so they braid the terrifying and confusing and existential questions of identity, religious faith, self-worth, and desire. They are a visceral distillation of the tempering and fruits of a harrowing journey. *T'shuvah,* which feels like a capstone to this trilogy, is in a different key.

T'shuvah's first poem, like several of the poems in *Words for What Those Men Have Done,* centers on a Jewish holiday ("Yom Kippur 5780," the day in 2019 that a gunman tried to murder Jews in a synagogue in Halle, Germany). The poem is a syntactic tour de force, and its first section opens with a feline encounter in Queens:

Black cat in the browning grass
at the base of the red brick wall
as you turn the corner at 77th Street,
its yellow eyes taking the measure
of the danger you represent
despite the fence you'd have to leap
to get to it, and the slow,
inscrutable turn of its head
tracking each step you take
as you walk past, ear buds in,
Philip Glass's "Symphony No. 8"
turned up loud enough
that you don't notice,
till you're almost on the other side
of where he's sitting,
the elderly Sikh . . .

The rest of this single sentence moves across pages and stanza breaks as the "you," presumably the impersonal pronoun as mechanism of narration, returns the Sikh gentleman's wave, and crosses the street, "keep[ing] pace with the eighth-note pulse of Glass's strings." Here

you feel him focus on your face
a vigilance that makes you nervous,
so you force yourself to look back
as you turn right onto 25th Avenue,
and I wonder, as you leave his line of sight,
if you feel my scrutiny as well,
because I too am watching,
sitting here this Yom Kippur morning
as the path you weave
back and forth
across this page
revises the mental map
I hold in my head
of my own early-AM treks,

which is not the metaphor
I started these lines to plumb,
but then you, the second person
flowed so naturally into their rhythm
that I chose you
without even realizing I'd chosen.

In this moment the impersonal "you" becomes a "Thou," albeit one not entirely differentiated. It has become an embodied person intimately observed by the speaker, and a metaphor, and a grammatical construct.

In the remaining sections of the poem this pair wanders on, revisiting family outings, religious holidays, urban parks, and Iranian bazaars. The speaker, looking out on, but also looking back at, a twin self, is clear-eyed, protective yet tough. He knows what the "You" has yet to encounter, or to understand. These are the final two stanzas of the sequence:

I don't know why you do not panic
when the latch clicks shut behind you,
but you move through that space
in which you suddenly cannot see
the hand you lift to rub your eyes with
like it's the last time you'll walk
through a much-loved home.

Then the floor begins to crumble
and the walls, and through the cracks
opening in the ceiling
light starts seeping in,
each bit of brightness
a stone you step on
to stay above the surface of the dark.

With the deepest compassion, and in a lyric space-time fusing past and present, the speaker offers and recalls the beginnings of a way through; a breaking-in of light; how the Thou will find his way; and perhaps how the speaker arrived here from there. Yom Kippur is a day of atonement, of return. In Abrahamic mystical traditions, repentance is the first stage of the path forward.

The second section of the book, "Do Not Wish for Any Other Life," contains eight very brief poems. The first brings a dramatic shift:

> What hangs around your neck will not take wing.
> What closes like a fist around your heart
> will never keep you safe. Pick up your pen.
> Refuse the comfort of your own white skin.

Gone is the deceptively casual ambling through neighborhood and complex syntax. This is no longer the intimate conversation with an Other, or prior self. These are vatic, adamantine pentameters, offering the "you" (and the reader, and the speaker himself) transcendent aphorisms of wisdom. One can detect, behind these poems, not only images from literatures, such as Coleridge's ancient mariner and albatross, but the sonnet fragments from which, as Newman tells us in an interview, the book is made. Further, because we know Newman is a translator of the classical Persian poets 'Attar and Saadi, we hear in such *rubaiyat*-like quatrains the spiritual, moral, aphoristic tones of those revered authors.

The rest of the poems in the book build, gorgeously and movingly, from these twin foundations of personal experience and timeless illumination. There are full sonnets, fragments, declarations, cautions, revelry and revelations, and wisdom texts. The form and tone of recollected history and spiritual advice blend across the work. As an example, "What Will Not Let Itself Be Washed Away" begins in Seoul, at a disco, narrating a past moment when "the dancer your friends insisted you had to see / stepped when the applause stopped / down from the stage / and paraded herself naked . . . to curl naked in your lap." In solitude and in the present moment, nursing a scotch, the speaker toasts the dancer and her handler, and then conjures "a girl whose name / you want to say was Rachel / walked with you every day / halfway home from school . . . [and] always turned / her large and hazel eyes / to you, waiting / for you to say goodbye first." Then the "you" opens out to embrace us all:

> Once, in spring,
> a rhythm entered you
> and you found words
> you wish you could remember.
> They were perfect,

meant *I love you,*
but then the girl is gone,
and nothing you have written
has ever brought her back.

Newman's first two books were first-person narratives, a victim speaking about, and surviving, sexual abuse. Here, this poet has found space and distance from that experience, a way of reframing it as part of a process toward light and joy, without minimizing the pain or relinquishing compassion for that younger self. In section 14 of "This Sentence Is a Metaphor for Bridge," the poem that concludes the volume, he advises that young boy, and us:

When the God-who-isn't
returns to enter you,
and the river you skipped stones across
when you were hairless and untouched
becomes the past you want
but cannot have,
reconcile what you can.

The poems here are infused with clarity, experience, and perspective; with the wisdom of the Judaism he studied and spurned; and with his immersion in the works of great poets of the world. As Newman writes in the final section of this poem,

Enter there the path in you
that is only a path,
gather its shadows
into a dance,
a movement
that ends with love,
that keeps on moving
till love becomes the rhythm,
and you the fire, and the dance,
the life you've chosen
to make your loving possible.

You thought you had to be

the clench you've held
where none but you
could feel it.

Give yourself instead
to all that rises.
Fill that cloudless sky
with laughter.

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BEST BARBARIAN: POEMS
Roger Reeves
W. W. Norton
https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393609332
120 pages; Print, $15.95
Jerry Harp

In the title essay of his 1962 book *The Barbarian Within,* Walter Ong explored the complex relationship between Greeks and barbarians. Greeks need barbarians (outsiders) precisely because the latter are different. Arriving on the scene with their own culture and traditions, they offer Greeks something new and unfamiliar, which is what any culture needs to keep from calcifying. Fittingly, Roger Reeves's *Best Barbarian* begins with a poem titled "Grendel," who in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* occupies the position of barbarian to the Danes whose mead hall he invades. Reeves's version of Grendel is more irenic than his Anglo-Saxon counterpart, for there is no marauding and killing. Rather,

With absolute prophecy in his breast
and a desire for mercy, for a friend, an end