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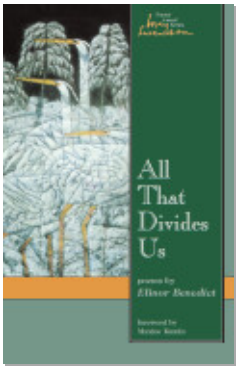
FOREWORD



Published by

Benedict, Elinor.
All That Divides Us: Poems.
1 ed. Utah State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9255.

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[18.119.104.238] Project MUSE (2024-04-26 10:15 GMT)

FOREWORD

When I undertook this brief introduction, I found myself in the refreshing position of not knowing the identity of the prize-winning poet, or where, or indeed whether, any of these poems had been previously published. Out of 728 manuscripts submitted, this one by Elinor Benedict surfaced as I read through the final completely anonymous twenty-five. On several subsequent rereadings, it rose again and again to the top.

Here are the facts about the poet that I learned afterward. Elinor Benedict lives in Rapid River, Michigan. Many of these poems have been previously published in journals ranging from *Helicon Nine* to the *Hawaii Pacific Review*, as well as in three chapbooks.

I was drawn to the narrative thrust of the book. The poet travels to China; she makes another and another trip. She and her daughter establish contact with missing relatives. These tentative rendezvous grow in intensity, and relationships develop from them. Although the poems stand as discrete units, they accumulate, taking strength from one another as we see them in their historical, chronological order. They grow on the reader as the narrative unspools, and we see the story told from successive points of view. It's an old story, full of poignant possibilities. "Don't you act so biggity, Miss Priss," Lula, the family maid, scolds. "Your aunt done married a Chinaman."

Nonetheless, an aura of romantic mystery shrouds this marriage from the poet's girlhood onward. The now aging aunt comes home to die, but the chapter never closes. Ultimately, the poet and her grown daughter travel to China to meet their Chinese cousins. Bits of the lovers' history, rescued from snapshots and old postcards, as well as face-to-face meetings with members of her family, spiral around.

Almost every poem delivers a sidelong irony, a study in contrasts that is always overridden by the sense of common humanity shared by two disparate cultures. In a poem titled "Ghost City," the poet is one of the tourists visiting Fengdu, a port city on the Yangtze River, where the dock is crowded with local entrepreneurs desperate to tell fortunes, or sell tangerines or finger puppets.

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. . . a family
at the crowded dock presents their prize
boy with legs twisted backward, a blind
mother clamps her snot-streaked child
between her knees, all stretching out
their arms with trinkets. . . .

The poet's voice is clear, direct, yet artful. Many of the poems are written in nonce forms, stanzaic patterns that arise to suit the occasion. There's a skillful villanelle, but formalism is not the issue here. The sensibility that pervades these poems is that of a mature woman with an inquiring mind and a strong sense of family attachments.

Traveling from the airport with her half-Chinese cousin in his western suit, she begs him to explain where they are and what they are seeing. The bus inches its way down a street "choked with people waiting to buy cabbages."

. . . To just
such a market he used to rush, to wait
to buy pears for his mother. . . . beside me
my cousin makes a low sound in his chest.
Turning, I find his face drawn, white.
He whispers, "In the market I saw–myself."

The final poem in the collection, "For Those Who Dream of Cranes," in four sixteen-line, sonnet-like sequences, juxtaposes the white cranes of Jinan, China with the sandhill cranes migrating through Michigan, effortlessly playing one scenario against the other. In the final poem, the two tableaux come together:

Inside the maze, you learn the language,
begin the ceremony. Gray brothers,
fly safely. White spirits, speak.

Maxine Kumin

ALL THAT DIVIDES US