

Age Plays the Ouroboros:
The Last Poems of Ursula K. Le Guin

Ursula K. Le Guin, *So Far So Good: Final Poems 2014-2018*
Copper Canyon Press, \$23

*Shard by shard, we are released
from the tyranny of so-called time.*

-Patti Smith, *M Train*

Ursula K. Le Guin wore a multitude of guises as a writer, from her novels and short fiction to her essays and translations. Her last published work, completed only a week before her death, returns to her beginnings as a poet. *So Far So Good* is a quiet book of poems, which I mean in a literal sense; Le Guin writes in hushed tones. At one point, she rebukes Yeats for ordering “soul clap hands and louder sing,” countering

but the song this old soul wants to sing is soft
like a child playing alone in a sunlit loft

The gentle sounds of s’s and o’s, and the exactness of the rhyme, echo the soothing cadence of a lullaby. Le Guin is not raging at her mortality, but instead slipping gently towards sleep and its new mysteries. Indeed, she returns to metaphoric landscapes that will be familiar to readers of her earlier work: the blurred boundaries between sleep and waking. A cycle entitled “The Night Journey” opens on a winter scene, “Islanded”:

In silent houses people sleep
each one alone.
Self-islanded by thought and dream ...

The sibilant whisper of snow permeates the sounds of this stanza, but the people do not speak. Each dreams in his or her “cell of self,” disconnected, turned silently inwards. In this hush, we sense the encroaching pull of death, the “Night Journey” we must each embark on alone.

Yet elsewhere in this volume, sleep leaves room for a multiplicity of selves to emerge – from the past, and far away. In “Bats,” Le Guin recalls the sonar clicks that filled the night of her childhood in California. One such creature appears in the “twilight in [her] dream,” and as she awakens she

wonders “if the bat ... / was in California or the dream.” The past merges with the present, dream with waking.

This borderland recalls *The Lathe of Heaven*, Le Guin’s 1971 novel, in which the protagonist finds that his dreams can change reality, leaving him with an endlessly doubling array of past and present selves. In *So Far So Good*, she ruminates on a similar phenomenon, gazing at her many lives, real and imagined. The landscape through which Le Guin walks in her final collection of poetry begins to resemble a dream, with past overlaying the present. Passing through the spot where a “great willow grew,” she mourns that there remains “only to [her] in empty air/ a tree I must walk through.” She treads the shores of her memory, as the clatter of day fades to an indigo silence—and invites the reader to walk with her one last time.

—Eric Fishman

Originally published in Rain Taxi Review of Books, Volume 24 No. 1 (Spring 2019)