

Zwicky, "The Long Walk"

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Volume 33, numéro 1, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050872ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050872ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Chang, D. (2017). Compte rendu de [Zwicky, "The Long Walk"]. *The Trumpeter*, 33(1), 117–120. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050872ar>

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Book Review

Zwicky, Jan. *The Long Walk*. University of Regina Press, 2016.

In the weeks following Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election, I was flung into a daze. The world I knew seemed to churn beneath an unsteady turf and I lost grip of its familiar texture. With the loss of order came a looming fear of environmental chaos, social unrest, and vicious war. In my grief, the poetry of Jan Zwicky came as a steadying hand that accompanied the fall. The opening poem, "Courage," in her new collection *The Long Walk*, offers counsel from one who has lived a life of unremitting commitment. "And now you know that it won't turn out as it should" (Zwicky 2016, 7), she begins, speaking to those shattered by the tumultuous turns thrown by the world's vicissitudes. The poem raises questions of how we shall live knowing that justice fails, that ignorance reigns, that tragedy is inescapable. With the tenderness of a mother, she offers the following direction: "Come, step closer to the edge, then./ You must look, heart. You must look" (Zwicky 2016, 8). The poet's offer here is not one of easy assurance, but a gentle reminder not to turn away: in looking deep into the unfolding crisis, one maintains a fidelity to life itself. Courage in these unsettling times consists not in brazen bravado, but in steady poise, a willingness to attend to even the most disheartening upsets.

Zwicky's poetry has long received widespread recognition. She won the Governor General's award for *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth* (1999) and published several volumes of poetry in the ensuing decade. She is a respected philosopher who draws deeply from the traditions of Heraclitus, Plato, Freud, and Wittgenstein. Zwicky is also a dedicated violinist who appreciates music from many genres. These considerable talents coalesce in her poetry—her verses are crafted with the aphoristic poignancy of a Wittgenstein and the melodic precision of a J.S. Bach. More notably, Zwicky is a committed environmentalist whose ecological sensibility informs much of her lyrical style and poetic imagination. In many respects a continuation of the themes introduced in *Songs*, *The Long Walk* reads like a sombre sonata that mourns loss while also savouring the gift of ordinary joy. The tone and timbre of her words will ring true with those for whom the love of the earth is never without the sorrow that attends its decline.

Music emanates throughout the volume, but its aural presence is felt not in a contrived motif, but rather a fluid spirit that traverses contrasting registers, as a symphony of three movements might ascend emotional heights, plunge unsearchable depths, and resolve in a sage placidity. Evocative reveries of triumphant treks ("To The Pass") find their place opposite moments of heartrending severance ("Leaving"). The overture touches on our shared plight along the precarious path of being—the child soldier ("Near"), the species facing extinction, including the Table Mountain Ghost Frog, critically endangered in its native South Africa ("Consummatum

Est”)—each reflection plucks on the nature of suffering, ringing the consonance that links human pain with ecological demise. Music, in Zwicky’s hands, is the “geometry of the emotions” (Zwicky 2015, 52), a way of “charting the bottomlands of the Nile, the floodwaters of the heart...a way of charting life” (Zwicky 2015, 52). In poetry, the musicality of instrumentation is inflected in the prosody of words. Thus, the poet plays a tune, a eulogy, a ballad, a wistful ditty. “Music is the form of light we hear,” Zwicky writes (Zwicky 2016, 54). The verses here may seem dark, but read closely, there is light seeping through their song and strain.

Perhaps the most wrenching moment in this volume is found in “No,” Zwicky’s memorial to Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow, a thirteen-year-old Somali girl who was stoned to death in 2008. Aisha was raped by Al-Shabaab militants on her way to see her grandmother. Her family reported the incident to the police. A few days later, however, they were called back to the police station, where Aisha was arrested for adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. On October 27th, 2008, Aisha was executed in a stadium with a thousand people in attendance. Those who tried to intervene were shot. When the stones appeared to have pulverized her young life, the nurses checked Aisha’s heart and found it beating still. So the stoning continued. In the dust of this grisly scene, neither silence nor words serve an apt response. Zwicky concedes: “language could no longer bear the weight of poetry” (Zwicky 2016, 50). And indeed we are left with the question of whether life can bear the weight of itself in a world where an innocent life is devastated with such vicious violence.

Although the collection features the anguish of brokenness, it is not without delight. If a reader journeys carefully, she will ascend with “a tumbling ecstatic / roar...hearts leaping...thrown against the tangled white, we were our best. / There we are still” (Zwicky 2016, 19). There is also the kindness of strangers at a doctor’s office (“In Winter”), the simple assurance of touch (“Late Love”), the magnanimity of a vast ocean horizon (“Meditation looking west from Berkeley Hills”). Each moment, in its glaring simplicity, is a jewel in this fragile and precious life.

The Long Walk is a small volume, but its emotional breadth speaks to a lifetime of journeys. If one prefers the playful revelries of Mozart, one may find this volume off key. If one is gripped by the haunting ruminations of Beethoven, at times ravished by luminous delight, *The Long Walk* strikes a resounding note. Those who prefer their poetry more sanguine, who look for consolation in facile optimism, will find no solace in these pages; those who resolve to walk the long walk can find no assurance outside their own inner voices. Once in a while, however, the company of a fellow traveller can freshen the journey. Zwicky’s poetry delivers the gentle whisper of one who has looked unflinchingly into the abyss of pain, reached into its depths to discern our undiscovered faces. She speaks with a weathered wisdom, but never comes across ponderous and sanctimonious. There is airiness to her substance. As the madness of political strife spreads, we may shrug at poetry’s power, its seeming inability to offer concrete action for

those concerned with matters of the planet. Can we agree with Percy Bysshe Shelley's declamation that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley 1993, 765)? With Zwicky's volume at hand, we may at least say that poetry has the potential to recalibrate our souls and realign our spirits, to "purge from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being" (Shelley 1993, 763). And it is when the soul recovers itself, despite all its wounds, that we can rise to Zwicky's challenge: "did you raise your hand? Did you say something? Louder. Louder" (Zwicky 2016, 31).

David Chang

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