

GIVING UP THE GHOST (and other Hauntings)

By Tina V. Cabrera

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Fledgling writers are often attracted to the theme of death because it's 'serious'—the implicit hope being that because of it *they* will be taken seriously-- but the results, in most cases, are what's to be expected: heavy-handed and over-reaching. Yet apart from life there's no other more complicated and challenging subject and once taken on, it tests the skills of even the most mature writer. At the same time there is the concern in the reader's mind that maybe they don't want to read something (even when it's well written) that's so dark and depressing. I mean, isn't that the whole idea of death?

Well, it is and it isn't. For something that we can't experience directly it impacts hugely on us and influences every aspect of our lives. There isn't one of us who through circumstance or intellectual/spiritual curiosity/inquiry, doesn't come face to face with it.

Death, in one form or another, stalks every page in Tina Cabrera's remarkable literary hybrid. But it is not in the least bit depressing—the overall mood is redemptive, the tone—while not exactly upbeat—is footed in a considered reality. Structurally, the book is a diptych. The first part —'What Happens to Me...'—deals largely with the author's experience—while 'Happens to You', details characters and lives outside her family. But there is no way to really separate them. The interplay is too complex.

Cabrera is both character and speaker in many of these stories and we learn that she is Filipino and Spanish by descent, comes from a large family and that their

religion is Catholicism. And with these simple facts in hand, she leads us into ‘*a world unknown and unfamiliar*’, (a phrase that turns up more than once in the text) tenebrous in places to be sure, but also revitalizing. It is a book about both psychological exorcism (literally, giving up the ghost) and reclamation, on coming to terms with those around you and with yourself. In Part One cancer is the culprit. And there are three members of her family who are taken by it. In the case of her sister, Cabrera brings us into her world with powerful description:

The shock I felt at seeing her head nearly bald when just two weeks prior her full hair and had been pulled back in a long ponytail. Bending over to kiss her cheek and seeing dismembered strands of hair strewn on the pillow. Her eyes closed. My brother placing a mask with fake eyes over her face...

In both parts of the book, chronology is recombinant—the past easily slips into the present and the present itself manifests in many dimensions—spreading like a peacock’s tale that enriches, deepens and beautifies the narrative. And through this plurality of time the author’s relationships with the dying and dead (both in and out of family) and her attempts to weld her feelings into something she can live with, morphs into an exercise in writing an obituary with all its attendant puzzlements and congruent forms: a play, poem, discourse, flash fiction, memoir, essay, fugue and dream. The need to express is pressing.

Why—besides paying tribute—do we seek to summarize a life or sanction the life or sanction the writing of a life in the first place? I think part of it is related to a particular kind of fear.

In a sense, the collection can be viewed, as one person’s analysis of the creative possibilities and limitations of the extended obituary as a literary form. At other times it takes on the guise of elegy and inquiry, or something of both but in the end neither. We see this in the wonderful ‘Beckett and Woolf’ and especially in the powerful ‘Death: A Play’ with its metafictional excursions and subtle evocations of Greek theater. In every case, an armature of literary devices brings scenes to life. In ‘One Photo of Miguel Cecilio’ (the author’s grandfather) it is the use of flashback and flash-forward. Through them we see his character and changing history gradually emerge into clarity like an image in a dark room. Imagery,

probing, repetitious and always demonstrative, circulates throughout: a pet hamster, a household appliance as an instrument of abuse—‘*Papa beating her legs with the vacuum tube cleaner that one and only time he lost his temper with her—* baldness and mirrors, especially the cracked mirror—a particularly potent symbol when the author was a girl because in ‘God Is In The Ceiling’ it does not reflect the reality she expects, instead it shows...

...our disjointed body parts...pieces to a puzzle you can put back together in a variety of different ways.

And this imagistic fracturing of the body is an alpha symbol for emotions and spirits come undone through pain, loss and disenfranchised beliefs that are really the bone and gristle of this book.

What raises this hybrid from being just a clever literary take on a dark theme is the humanity that rises in quiet glory from its pages. We get to know the family intimately—in a way no stranger could—even characters that play a minor role. No intimacy is excluded.

The gasping for breath, wagging of the tongue in your final moments. Dressed in diapers, secreting liquids that had to be sucked from your mouth, into a tube, then into a canister.

Word pictures are everywhere.

The janitor at my school whacking a trapped hummingbird to death with a broom in our classroom...

A boy masturbating—

When I shoved the door open with my foot, I saw him yanking, pulling, his face squeezed like a prune.

The secondary theme that runs through the book is madness. The strongest story in this regard (and probably one of the strongest in the collection) is ‘Schemas’ in which a young man, who appears to slip in and out of gender admits...

Somewhere in the provisional instants of time we call memories lies the epicenter of the tremulous ripples that sent me over the edge.

The surrealist approach used by the author presents a perfect fit for the character's psychotic rearrangement of reality, such that an encounter with a waitress mutates into '*a world unknown and unfamiliar*' (that phrase, again) and becomes the stage where *surreality* levers unconscious desires.

Let it be said we are awed and empathetic as Cabrera pulls her life apart in front of us to be examined under the microscope of death and madness then mostly put back together—a sort of *détente* reclamation. This is a complicated collection and every story will make you work. But the energy applied will result in a lasting reading experience; an experience that will transcend mere pleasure and cause one to probe. It doesn't provide answers in the strict sense but it invites us into a world of uncertainties that we find we cannot refuse. And, like the author, even our lack of understanding can be an expression of atonement...

I'm not sure what all this means, but I'm compelled to force connection or to find patterns in matters beyond my control, so that I can find a commonality in my grief.

The 'voice' is measured, articulate and textured. The prose throughout this journey, is the kind that only comes from a tryst between talent and experience—sorcery to be sure, but in this ganglia of darkest of themes, as dazzling as a solar flare.

You have to have to have to read 'Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings). It's a book about death. And it's full of the wisdom of life.

The Editors