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A Bittersweet Homage

Bonnie Proudfoot. *Household Gods*. Sheila-Na-Gig Editions, 2022.

Bonnie Proudfoot begins her chapbook with a Louise Glück quote from *The Wild Iris*: “. . .you are everywhere, source of wisdom and anguish . . .” This epigraph encapsulates the title’s household gods, where Lares and Penates are explained to be the protective deities of one’s home. Proudfoot takes inspiration from her family home’s deities and transfers her memories onto paper, both vivid and painful, to describe a life upheld by the self-sacrificing women in her family. To be a self-sacrificing woman is to be a caricature where knitting needles and cleaning supplies decorate the job description. Proudfoot pays homage to these women by reliving childhood memories spent observing bittersweet moments. This chapbook is a journey through Proudfoot’s past where she experiments with time to demonstrate an act of love towards family that makes up for moments when love was absent.

“El Tiempo” sets the tone for the rest of the collection through its representation of the speaker’s relationship with the past and time in America as a third-generation immigrant. The speaker invites readers to picture a scene where one must lie about being American, knowing that strangers will not believe them. Following this painted scene, the speaker presents herself in Spain where a poet vendor deals her a poem: “*The matter of time, she types (en español), / is immaterial, a bubble. Two dogs face each other / from each side of a spiral.*” To the speaker, time is an abstract bubble that holds the past, ready to pop at any moment. The speaker’s family observes a Flamenco dancer in a Barcelona cafe where “The past / is gaining ground, it’s snapping at her stamping heels. / We clap faster and faster, hold tight to each other as she bows.” Proudfoot’s enjambment is working hard to communicate the family’s encroaching past catching up to them as they clap along to the fast beat. The last enjambment elicits a breath of release as if the readers are also with the speaker’s family, holding tight until the music stops and time catches up.

As time’s bubble pops and the past floods out, each memory’s revival invites both negative and positive emotions of the past where childhood naivete is bittersweet. In “Superpowers,” the speaker calls back to a childlike interpretation of powers as destiny’s accidents. Instead of fictional superpower’s infinitesimal odds, the speaker understands powers as something that “slipped in / under my bedroom

door with the smoke, the smell of gin.” The speaker’s grandmother is someone she “inhaled like the smoke from the tip of her Parliament.” Growing up with family means inheriting parts of their behaviors, habits, and personalities. For better or for worse, the speaker has taken on certain traits from her grandmother, like the ability to play the dealer for her own children or the habit of reaching for a cigarette.

From these musings on the past and childlike imagination emerges subtle notes of a troubled childhood. In “For Christopher Robin,” the speaker considers her past to bring attention to childhood ignorance. Innocence is communicated through the imagery of her father’s unclenching jaw preceding descriptions of her imaginative youth: “You loved Eeyore, / mourned his missing tail. I loved / the Hundred Aker Wood.” A picturesque childhood dedicated to Christopher Robin is constantly jeopardized by a destructive father. Even in the face of neglect, when looking back she pardons his behavior. In “Sweet Forgiveness,” the speaker experiences secondhand guilt and responsibility when noticing her father’s “bad breath, and the fact that he was / just kind of mumbling along, didn’t seem to know / the actual words to the prayers.” Later, in “Jetstar 88,” the speaker experiences a similar secondhand shame: “I wish I could say he never cheated anyone out of / anything.” Through Proudfoot’s recollection on her memories she is able to concretize those initial emotions and transform them into contemplative pieces about the past.

“Blues for Apartment 5G” is positioned strategically across from “Jetstar 88” to demonstrate the differences between the speaker’s mother and father. Leather and Old Spice juxtapose a blue velvet sofa to communicate how her parents are entirely separate but remain two halves of the same whole that make up the speaker’s life growing up. Each parent is represented through household objects infused with associated memories to make sense of the emotions surrounding them. From this comparison, the speaker dives into the struggle of being a mother in an unhappy marriage where “A woman’s body is a vessel for pain.” Unlike the constant threat her father poses throughout her childhood, the speaker portrays her mother as a self-sacrificing woman caught up in feminine expectations as described in “Consider the Aunties and Grandmothers.”

Proudfoot concludes the chapbook with the death of her grandmother in the titular poem “Household Gods.” She conjures the images of her matriarchal lineage filled with the homey comfort of her great-grandmother to supplant the definition of Lares and Penates. Just as they were a house’s protectors, the Aunties and Grandmothers were the speaker’s vanguards with “A gold ring on one hand, / a mop in the other.” A look into the past manifested into this emotionally moving chapbook reminds readers to similarly revisit their own to understand

what superpowers they have inherited or what objects Lares and Penates have manifested into inside their own childhood homes.

