Elizabeth Savage

The Last Shelter

Gerry LaFemina. *The Story of Ash*. Tallahassee: Anhinga, 2018.

The trinity of memory, religion, and faith rotates through the best parts of a good man's life to make LaFemina's *The Story of Ash*. In this ample collection, no aspect of the three is irresistible or inevitable; all are active, continuously revisited and rebuilt in the imagination, yet the histories and stories, collective and private, are very much of the material world. Cities and beaches, wasps and Google searches, ashtrays and ice cream sundaes, Cokes with lots of ice, and mojitos with glasses sweating around them keep the metaphysical considerations connected to specific places and histories. Naming names and places—Mr. Leary, Sister Magdalene, Rehoboth Beach, Morgantown, Garrett County—the collection admirably avoids asserting universal wisdom, even when using the transcendent "we." Attention to the whos and wheres of daily life guards against the void, the poems suggest; this attention gives us the courage to face the void but to dwell in belief.

The final line of "On Failing to Understand the Dharma Yet Again" illustrates the effort to seek and to face that absence with conviction mere solitude won't sustain: "I throw the crusts to nothing, & the nothing comes." Reworking the book's epigraph from Randall Jarrell's "Thinking of the Lost World" through the winter-mind of Stevens' snow man, this poem anticipates the natural world's gradual abandonment as "Autumn like a small threat for a few more days" shoos water birds from the local lake and strips trees of their leaves. Casting bread crumbs to the lake's "meditation of ripples," LaFemina's speaker summons "the nothing for which there is no reward" that Jarrell's poem equates with one's "own unhappiness." The nothing that comes may, indeed, be unhappiness; but where Jarrell holds on to unhappiness, LaFemina traces in the absence of happiness a deeper attention, a faithful reciprocity moved by light and song. Like Stevens' long, cold nothing, LaFemina's autumnal nothingness bereaves the eye to alert the ear, and the lonesome landscape awakens the imagination to sound.

Faith and imagination, loss and creation, throughout *The Story of Ash*, are indivisible, yet distinct. The recurring motif of ashes also contemplates the mind's transformation of destruction made and marked by burning: cigarettes lit like stars consume themselves; arson incinerates a childhood apartment, saturating the speaker in "a cologne of cinder"; Ash Wednesday blots foreheads with reminders of the dust to which each of us returns; and in the titular poem, ashes are made into

ink to fill pages with words shaping and shaped by writers (and readers). Ashes pervade the collection, developing an inverse and analogous relationship to memory, a matter the poems return to repeatedly. In the horrifying "Apocrypha," the speaker recalls lighting a wasp nest on fire and watching as,

> a few precisely engineered wasps burst forth
> living embers,
> some, their bodies flaming,
> sparks of angry light against the dusking sky.

This memory, the title hints, emerges in visual details that are almost certainly invented and redesigned through emotional associations and relationships, themselves reinvented in such detail they are experienced as personal memories.

Aware of this, the poems comment on memory's instability even as they emphasize its importance. In "Shelter," the speaker recalls "how pretty" a neighbor was only to qualify, "at least in memory,/which is the last shelter any of us have." That shelter isn't mere nostalgia built to protect the speaker's self-image; it's a way of caring for others and honoring their presence in who we each become. "Basics of the Physical World" acknowledges the deliberate labor to make "that pastiche/ we call memory": 21st-century American English doesn't distinguish between the involuntary memory of "remembering" and the elective recovery of the past "recollection" once meant. *The Story of Ash* pays tribute to both and to the ways Catholic ritual (and Catholic upbringing generally)—for all the Church's obvious flaws—intersects with imaginative leaps that make poetry and memory expressions of faith.

The symbolic, metaphorical acts of smudging ashes on foreheads and burning candles to send light, like prayers, visibly heavenward are literary, literalizing performances. Although the collection's themes hold together disparate formal styles and emotional stances, its conscious delight in simile and metaphor admits to the joyful practice of reframing the familiar through new connections. "On the Remains of a Fire at West End Park" wryly binds the "like"-flavored speech of youth to the poet's work,

> Teens walk by, lean & slinky, almost feline, toward the park
>
> […]
>
> & gossip gets passed like cigarettes, & cigarettes
> like cheap vodka, & that bottle like laughter.
> There are never enough similes in the world.

Customarily, I would disagree—I tend to think there are more than enough similes in the world—but LaFemina has relaxed my prejudices. In "Honey," a colony of bees rises "pulsating & loud like a soul without a shape"; in "The Three Stages of Temptation," pleasure shakes the speaker "like finding five dollars in the gutter"; and "Thief" shakes off worries left by the burglar who broke into the apartment as "a thie[f] entered like Jesus coming/in the night." These comparisons—and metaphors like "No one could ransack her smile" and "a juke box of answers"—exhibit a welcome sense of humor that never strays into smug irony. And ultimately, it's the warmth of LaFemina's cleverness that prevents *The Story of Ash* from lapses of faith—in the goodness of others, in the power of memory, or in the promise of the imagination to shelter what's lost.