

Tolstoy Killed Anna Karenina. By Dara Barrois/Dixon. Seattle: Wave Books, 2022, \$18.00 (pa)

A-tussle with the responsibilities of the maker, Dara Barrois/Dixon (formerly publishing as Dara Wier) plants a signature marker, like a country flag atop a summit, waving the logical claim that it is, of course, the author who chose to kill his creation, thus *Tolstoy Killed Anna Karenina*.

With many poetry books to her credit and with this fact check in mind, poet and readers move along the trajectory of a tragedy plot in acknowledgement of our complicity as co-creators, for our reading has re-murdered many and only resurrected a few. The gendered dynamic is not lost on us either. When this infamous literary suicide, Anna, turns murder victim, she signifies the bias endemic to literatures of these centuries past, in which men write women with impunity, and if female, we are left to ponder the male imagination in relation to actual flesh and blood, our lives subject to such comparative readings.

The author of these poems implicates a classic author as murderer instead of inviting us to the overcrowded pity party for the character he created and threw beneath oncoming traffic. There is, of course, humor in this as well as honest revelation, the sort of owning up opportunity that is presenting on every level these days. In the poem “Capitalism,” Barrois/Dixon tackles this aspect more directly, but as I interpret this poem, she calls out righteousness as much as structural inequity and suggests through a long list of individual emotional actions ending with “empathy/ humor joy sympathy love kindness courage” that we cannot change structures without changing our inner constructs.

The author pulls back the same curtain, reminding us in her “Notes & Evidence” section of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which portrays the effects of parental abandonment, as the creature quotes from *Paradise Lost* to establish his innocence; it was his abandonment by his

maker that made him a monster, not the raw flesh stolen from death and stitched to life. We encounter this nudge also in the poem “Credits”: “and from Mary Shelley I took to understand/ a creator’s responsibility to what she creates” (9). What this poet creates are patches and splices of language that walk the plank between infinity and the finite, delivering us to a quandary of betweenness through a medium that can turn a line many times over and transmute its meaning, leaving us to discover that we can follow the twists and turns but marveling that we can do so. It is no wonder that the poet propels her poems by couplets, not heroic couplets but taking from them the sliding, eliding couplet that holds itself in tension as it slices up completeness into particles and waves of meaning. At the heart of this volume is the poem “Credits” mentioned above, in which the poet samples many other sources in a postmodern romp, attempting to give credit where credit is due.

Once these many complications and complicities are raised to consciousness, what then must or can a poet write or think, be, or strive for? Self-awareness, humor, playfulness, humility, gratitude, curiosity, commitment to the art and craft and abandonment of its pomposity, as layers of art peel back to a spiritual prana, an intake and a blow-out— collaborations with mercy itself. In “This is What There Is,” the poet examines the singular subject of poetic vocation, one’s individual observations and impetus in the context of universals and self-effacement: “If you want to begin you have to go/ all the way back// to where you never were/it is far to go there// nothing to pack/ nothing to forget//nothing to remember/ when you find yourself//. The poem concludes: “don’t do it it will turn you into a poet.” This is a book to read, reread, and thereby be changed.

--Cathryn Hankla

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