

Angelic Scintillations

by Katerina Vaughan Fretwell

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Greene

This is a complex, ambitious book, part search for the poet's roots, part spiritual autobiography, part critique of the contemporary world and search for redemption, part affirmation of a mystical world view of wholeness and of our ability to find scintillations, or sparks, throughout, despite violence, especially against women, and against the earth.

Several things make *Angelic Scintillations* very special. Most noticeable are Katerina Vaughan Fretwell's four beautiful paintings at the beginning of the three sections and the afterword: of Henry Vaughan's cottage in the Brecon Beacons, of women worshipping, and of Mary Magdalene. Fretwell's use of form is varied and impressive. She often uses the "Easter Wings" form of four step-down lines alternated with four step-up lines, or a variation on this form, with the result that the book seems spacious and formally sprightly. Fretwell also has a virtuoso sestina, "Home-Cooped," which uses the endwords "back," "two," "times," "island," "farm," and "chicken."

The book is divided into three parts, "Numinous Mind" (mind), "Spirited Bawdy Parts" (body), and "The Whole Soul" (soul). Each part is a journey toward wholeness and resolution, as is the book itself.

The book opens with Fretwell's charming, inviting painting of Henry Vaughan's cottage, and a poetic letter, "Dear Henry Vaughan," that begins the conversation that carries through the first section and the easy transcendence of time that carries through the book.

The next poem, "On the Wing," establishes the relationship between Vaughan and Fretwell:

Dear Henry Vaughan, my kin's searchlight
Sighted you on our family tree.
Long before that, your poem, *The World*,
In my survey course staggered me (4)

It is a small miracle, or a gift, to be related to one of the dazzling Metaphysical poets.

Fretwell explores this relationship through the whole first section of her book, both by pointing out similarities between her and Vaughan: both mystics, they are bound also by early grief (Fretwell lost eight family members before she was twenty-five; Vaughan lost his beloved twin brother), renunciation (in turning toward the mystical, both changed their course of life dramatically. Vaughan changed his profession; Fretwell renounced her citizenship and, in her thirties, alcohol).

Following the opening poem, "Numinous Mind," is a stunning series of glosas, all based on Vaughan's work. The twinning and often rhyming of Vaughan's words and Fretwell's creates poems shot through with light, and gives Vaughan a continuing presence, even as Fretwell explores her own life and some of her twenty-first-century preoccupations. This mingling produces beautiful passages like this one at the end of the section:

What you, Vaughan, on your moonlit jaunts
Call *Christ's knocking time, the soul's*
Dumb watch when we die, then see
The fullness of the Deity. ("Moonlit Walks," 37, italicized words are Vaughan's)

All the poems in this section open out into an examination of Fretwell's own life and views of the contemporary world, a complexity that makes the book difficult to summarize. The following passage alone is worth the price of admission to this reader:

Pro-lifers save
The unborn, but don't give a fig-leaf
For their fate. ("Cleansing," 25)

Nothing could be more succinct or exact.

"Spirited Bawdy Parts" introduces explicitly feminist themes through the characters of Jane (as in *Tarzan*) and three memorable poems about the painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652), who was raped by her tutor and tortured with thumbscrews as a result. Afterward, she painted the memorably heroic *Judith and Holofernes* and became the first woman artist to be admitted to the Accademia. The second section reminds us, through just a few poems, how women have suffered, just for being women, and introduces the themes of writing through wounds, finding salvation through wounds, which are explored in more detail in the final section. The section segues into a sequence of autobiographical poems where Fretwell explores her own wounds and joys, starting with birth and childhood and her preoccupied, bereaved mother, who died when the poet was seventeen. This section also includes "Renunciation," about Fretwell's "American heritage," an uncle/piano teacher who predicted that the poet would love "con passione," and three glimpses of what came after: a good marriage, Christmas in Copenhagen with the poet Heather Spears, a joyous resolution in "Animalia," a playful ease in this world – the poem dedicated to the poet's husband.

Henry Vaughan is one polestar of *Angelic Scintillations*. The other is Mary Magdalene, who presides over the third section, "The Whole Soul," and the ending.

These poems are Biblical and spiritual. Mary Magdalene is associated with Sophia, wounded goddess of wisdom, who wanders the world barefoot, and with Muktar, a Pakistani woman who was raped. These figures together preside over world healing, infuse us with peace and bring us home.

By the end of *Angelic Scintillations*, we have been on a journey through history, much of the poet's history and the contemporary world, and we have soared into the ether. This is an original, spirited and spiritual, one-of-a-kind book, in many ways a retrospective and summation of a life and career to date, which earns its place in memory. ❧

Elizabeth Greene's most recent book is *Moving*, a collection of poems.

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