The Things We Fear Most
by Gloria Vanderbilt

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In The Things We Fear Most, Gloria Vanderbilt brings together short stories and pieces of micro-fiction in intricate juxtaposition with each other. They read like prose poems, each line having a measured cadence and tone modulated for irony and meaning.

A preoccupation with time and fate is embedded in the language and imagery, from a suggestion set up by a nursery rhyme or the notion that “rooms” wait for events to happen in “Little Mouse,” to the act of redecorating a room that is described as “autobiography” in “Interior Design.” A theme of time’s incursions on events that have already been predetermined by other factors, including the actions of characters involved in a particular scenario, is captured by the title “what we fear most,” with the phrase being variously echoed in different contexts.

The title “The Hours Between” captures a sense of suspense between events that are bound to happen. An awareness of the time against which the drama unfolds, whose events, once set in motion, cannot be stopped, pervades this story, giving it a fatalistic aspect. In the dreamlike depiction of the lovers in an Edenic setting, with the unnamed female narrator gathering tulips, we watch the effects of dissension build up between the couple to nightmarish effect:

A voice that sounded like mine, but it was not his, far and away, coming from a face distorted as by a mirror in a fun house. But it is not him, it’s mine too, struggling to prevent a quarrel that fast accelerates into a roller coaster speeding over the top, on down, crashing, unable to stop. (13)

That the damage is done during the titular “hours between” is conveyed by the mention of the paroquets that are bought before the quarrel but which, in a gruesome tableau, are later discovered dead in their cage after an evidently bloody skirmish. Rather like Eve, who is tempted and succumbs to the snake, and Adam, in his turn, to Eve, original sin would seem to have been built into this cyclic event. Accordingly, the titular “what we fear most” may still be waiting to happen, and prevention impossible even as the dread sets in.

Just as time waits for the inevitable effects of the characters’ decisions to take form, and those actions are necessarily determined by personality as much as by external influences, so in “The Eyelet Lace Dress” we watch as the naively ardent country heroine, Phoebe, whose first boyfriend, Pete, as in a romantic fairy tale, wants to save her virginity until marriage, is casually exploited by her subsequent admirer, a third-class actor in upper-echelon New York. After a date in which Phoebe finds herself kissing her actor-friend and pretending that he is Pete, the imposter lover terminates the evening with sex rather than, as he sees it, taking advantage of her. His reaction to her tears of loss is deadbeat and seemingly innocuous. “And who the hell is Pete?” he thunders, and then tones it down:

“Hey, hey there, calm down. The neighbours will hear you – don’t want to get me into trouble do you? San Quentin Quail – you know,” he laughed, trying to jolly her out of it. (29)
In “My Little Mouse,” the sense of the inevitability of what happens is reinforced by the nursery-rhyme cadence of its language:

Now faraway at end of day sometimes, I look and look. Where did he go? The little mouse I shook and shook who loved me so, and does he too turn back to look? (35)

The sense of fate is also perpetuated by imagery of “rooms” that appear to “wait” for events to take place at a future date. In the opening paragraph, the female speaker is implicitly compared to a cat while she refers to her lover as “my mouse,” whom she would love even to death.

If the “room” is suggested to represent destiny in the following pages, the implication is that the house itself may be a kind of labyrinth through which the “mouse,” her lover, must find his way to escape the destructive force of her love for him. The unnamed catlike narrator apparently loves her lover in a perverse way that is ruled by her avaricious and capricious nature as a feline personality.

Similarly, in the story “Interior Design,” the lover appears to have been psychologically dispensed with when the narrator, Sara, redecorates her partner Dave’s scruffy grey den in cream-coloured paint. Having completed that job, she begins redecorating other rooms until the whole house is done. When Dave returns, he at first doesn’t realize that his status with her has altered along with the house decorations:

His face impossible to read as he went through the apartment taking in each room, its creamy calm beauty, everything in order, everything in place, with Sara following behind silently screaming – Idiot! Don’t you know decorating is autobiography and you just won’t do. (53)

As an indication of how interconnected the stories are and how measured their thematic resonances, consider how the title line is echoed throughout them all. From the initial suggestion in the first story, that “what we fear most has not yet happened,” the collection aptly ends with a micro-fiction that contains this seminal line turned upside-down:

On a day in summer, walking on the street I felt faint, and, passing a movie theatre, I went in to cool off. Someone in the movie said, “The things we fear most have already happened to us.” I went out feeling happy, but when I got home something terrible had happened. (139)

Here are stories that in their use of language and imagery border on poetry, and that in their changing angles and focus on images that arise out of the literal level of text resemble film clips. The Things We Fear Most provides a satisfying read with enough thought-provoking ironies to keep the reader perplexed and philosophically engaged. Dare I describe the writer as a postmodern and feminist (not to mention female) Camus? Nevertheless, her dramatization of the various couples’ cat/mouse/bird relationships may be described as more playful (though hardly less ruthless). A lightness of touch keeps these pieces lively no matter how sinister their final impression.

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