Dancing, with Mirrors
by George Amabile

Reviewed by Tom Schmidt

Aldous Huxley said, “Every man’s memory is his private literature.” In choosing to share his life, George Amabile has crafted beautifully detailed settings in which characters and conflicts are brought to life through rich imagery. He has woven the moments of everyday life into a rich tapestry of observation and deep emotion, highlighting both the fallibility and purity of memory.

... releasing
these fragmentary histories,
a shadow dance

between what happens in the world
and what goes on
inside. (9)

The book is composed of 11 cantos organized in basic chronological order ranging from his childhood to the birth of his last child. At 189 pages it challenges the reader to follow the intricate meanders through time.

Some memories are so vivid they glow like red-hot embers, such as his father stalking him in his dreams after a spanking. “... his eyes are white / as ice when he smiles / and his teeth are set / in rows like the teeth of a shark.” (21) Others simply smolder as haunting apparitions, thoughts or feelings lost and re-imagined in the fog of the past and beautifully described.

In the tight box
of the skull, the brain
crackles with electric
preceptors; steel
corridors
of the cyclotron hum;
each magnum
energy burst lights
a brief
history of time (12)

“What We Take With Us, Going Away” is a powerful canto focusing on the death of the poet’s brother in an accident, interlaced with memories of his father and a trip to Mexico. Powerful emotions emerge as Amabile shares, warts and all. There is pain, guilt, pleasure, weakness, betrayal, fear, selfishness, rationalization, and beauty.
Consider this juxtaposition of hitting a motorcyclist in Italy with the accident that killed his brother. The emotions range from total relief:

\[
\text{... confused} \\
\text{by the scent} \\
\text{of wine} \\
\text{in the air, and my breath} \\
\text{explodes} \\
\text{when I understand,} \\
\text{he’s dead} \\
\text{drunk and snoring. (43)}
\]

to total anguish:

\[
\text{... I was in the air} \\
\text{when his body slammed on the grass} \\
\text{shoulder, rolled up in a heap.} \\
\text{I landed running, tearing} \\
\text{his name loose} \\
\text{from my throat. (42)}
\]

In “Bachelor Suite,” the poet clinically examines his bad behaviour, the always present memories lurking in the shadows: “I know it’s time to change / my underwear, my behaviour / before tomorrow changes / into today, and today / fills with the rose light of nostalgia.” (56) The guilt is palpable, as is his quest for redemption and purpose. Sitting in the bar thinking of Hemingway’s suicide, he is alone, his marriage ended, his life empty.

Amabile’s style ranges from prosaic descriptions of Mexico and his new son: “When I turn to see if he’s ready / to start for home, he’s leaning / back, his head cradled between the seat / and the door, asleep, and smiling.” (170) through beautifully descriptive passages, such as: “The phone ripped into thick sleep / like a chainsaw.” (82) and “A whisky jack sits on a branch, cowlicked / by the wind.” (86) to rare instances of extravagant imagery; for example:

\[
\text{Desultory highlights forecast} \\
\text{flawed permutations we can’t resist} \\
\text{or ignore, as the seasons, like huge sails,} \\
\text{adjust the thousand shades of desire} \\
\text{that have led us to this climate} \\
\text{in which all surfaces dissolve} \\
\text{and the wind goes on} \\
\text{refusing to tell us our names. (19)}
\]

The words almost threaten to smother the poem, the meaning lost in a vortex of images. What prevails most though are beautifully crafted existential snapshots.

“Dancing, with Mirrors,” the longest canto, is about the poet’s relationship with a younger woman. Amabile’s honesty cuts like a knife: “High water never lasts. / And when it’s gone, bones / bleach in the sun” (130). On other occasions he morphs a worn-out cliché into a clever bit of self-deprecation: “I was twenty-two when she was born / and I’ve already failed at most of what she believes in” (130).
At times, the narrator is weak and emotionally detached, but readers, especially male, would be hard pressed not to identify with him in some way.

George Amabile has unabashedly poeticized his life, baring his soul. In the end, it is the innocence and love of a child that brings him full circle. The purity of existence is manifest day to day by savoring each moment, good and bad. In *Dancing, with Mirrors*, he has sieved through the ashes of life’s mediocrity to find the embers that glow brilliantly in memory’s breath. He abides.

Tom Schmidt is a poet and freelance writer. His poetry book, *The Best Lack All*, was published by Broken Jaw Press in 1995. His work has also appeared in many journals and magazines, as well as on CBC Radio.

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