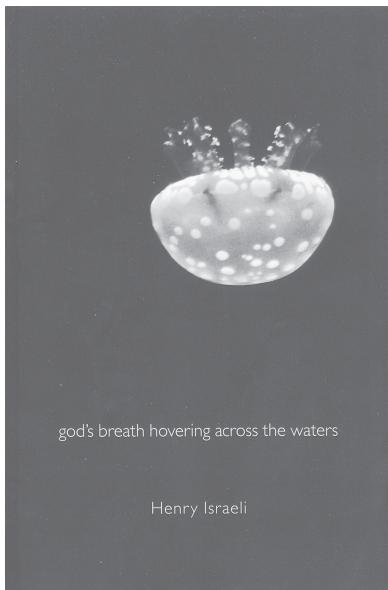


GOD'S BREATH HOVERING ACROSS THE WATERS

Henry Israeli

Four Way Books (\$15.95)



As if to ensure we do not become comfortable while reading, the poems pull us in and out of many such startling moments. The collection achieves similar velocity with the weaving of its various threads, creating surprising relationships between so many unlikely things. For example, Arno Penzias appears first as the scientist responsible for “an ultra- / sensitive cryogenic microwave receiver” that captures aural “remnants of the Big Bang,” and later, as a Jewish child taken by the Kindertransport. This fact then establishes a relationship between Penzias and the recurring mother figure, who “was smuggled— / along with her parents—across the river that divided / Nazi-occupied Poland from Soviet-occupied Poland.” “Theory of Evolution” is an evocative intertwining of Hitler, the Volkswagen, and the mother’s death. This poem fashions a tremendous irony between the Jewish mother’s narrow escape from the Nazis at a young age, and her encounter with Hitler at the end of her life: “Hitler was a Volkswagen, // small and compact, full of / simple ideas everyone could grasp.”

Israeli does not hesitate to remind us that while “the odds of being born / are so slim—of dying, well, it’s 1:1.” The poems in *god’s breath hovering across the waters* achieve a gentle balance between frankness and tenderness, and explore the complications of survival: of trying to forget the inevitable while insisting on remembering who and what deserves to be remembered.

—Hannah Dow

Henry Israeli’s *god’s breath hovering across the waters* is a wry, elegiac, and masterful blend of public and personal histories and losses. A titular twelve-section poem opens the collection with an unconventional origin story of the Big Bang, followed by the abrupt announcement that “Today my mother was run over by a Volkswagen SUV / while delivering Rosh Hashanah presents to her doctors.” With such jolting juxtapositions, Israeli shows how time moves and unravels quickly when tragedy occurs. In one moment, everything is fine—in the next, nothing is fine at all.

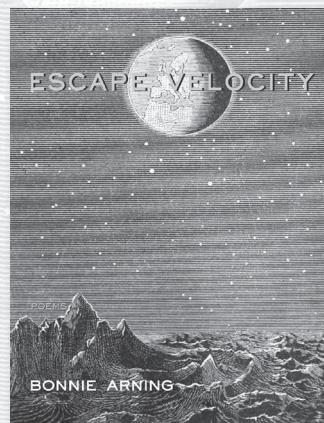
Israeli’s choice to move between prose poetry and lineated verse captures this same chaotic, world-upended feeling. The prose poems appear inviting and unassuming; for example, “Death drives a foreign car. He brings reusable bags when he goes to the / grocery store. He wants everyone to know he cares.” Death, like prose, seems normal, mundane. In contrast, lineated poems like “Dark Matter” wield jarring formal breaks:

Matter exists between everything
we see, even if we don’t see it.

My mother was not dark matter
the day the young man killed her.
But she is today.

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“The intersection of the astral and domestic
—the ineffable and the witnessed—
and the relentlessness and invention of
Bonnie Arning’s writing give us the best
of what lyric poetry has to offer.” —Michael McGriff



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