Review: Everything by Andrea Cohen

written by Guest Contributor | June 28, 2021

Everything by Andrea Cohen
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It’s a word we use so often, everything, that we ought to know it well. But its common dress is a masquerade, and something remarkable passes by unnoticed. Andrea Cohen’s new collection, Everything, shines a searchlight and captures the extraordinary.

And so, in that startling light, what do we glimpse? A fleeting orange bird. Broken chair. Twig of forsythia in a jar of water. Drill bits and an old spirit level. Tattoo of a torn orchid petal cascading down a body. A frenzied bee hive in the corner of a room. A riderless horse — no, a horse ridden hard by absence. A wrecking ball. These things come close, then disappear, because that’s what everything does, as in the poem “Dust”: 

In Adirondacks

we can’t fix, in a twilight beyond

repair, we recline, and an orange tanager — which you asked
someone to come back
as — lights and vanishes.

In these poems, things shatter — mirrors, chairs, orchids, buildings, peace. We start to think that the fragments that are left might be the opposite of “everything,” even though everything breaks. Perhaps our brains are primed for wholeness, which we believe gets us closer to the totality that is everything — and wholeness is beautiful, right? Meanwhile, the many facets of loss — separation, departure, death — bring us closer to the horror that is nothing. We encounter these lines in the poem “Everything”:

Everything was beautiful and
nothing hurt, Kurt Vonnegut said.

Everything was beautiful
and nothing hurt, the girl

slurred to the artist
at the tattoo parlor.

Maybe fragility is the point. Wholeness needs its opposite; everything needs nothing to “rub up against it” every once in a while (“Self Portrait with Eraser”). “Nothing” might be just a threat, or perhaps “everything” is an illusion. Cohen doesn’t pretend to have answers, but she poses the questions beautifully.

The poems here are needle sharp, but don’t call them small. Even though some have twenty lines and some have two, they contain multitudes, the way an origami scorpion enfolds a much larger sheet of paper and fascinates us with the complexity and ingenuity of its construction. Transformation looms large in this collection. Loss transforms us, but so does its opposite, the enlargement that comes from welcoming the new and the other into our lives. In “Alchemy,” there’s the desire for the transfiguration that love brings:

I don’t want

gold per se. I

want change.
Take my bright

ingots — dim

them. Gaze

day —

rearrange me.

Indeed, reading Everything one gets the sense that life is like a long alchemical equation, with each addition, subtraction, and division changing us. Sometimes we’re fractions, sometimes whole; sometimes even, sometimes (most of the time) odd, as in “Dusk”:

There was, as we walked

the salt flats at dusk,

an invisible thread

between us —

and then I felt

her invisible scissors.

Cohen colludes with the reader. She knows that we know, and that what we don’t know we can conjure. Good riddance to over-exposition and over-earnestness. It’s refreshing to spend time with a poet who honors the reader’s — and the poem’s — intelligence, wit, and desire to be surprised. Despite a casual frankness, the language is carefully curated not only for precision, but for possibility — added layers of meaning and association. It’s what gives these poems such verve and reverberation. Indeed, intrinsic to the work these poems do is their sound. Crafting experience and ideas into poems of such vitality means being aware not only of what the words say, but the textures their saying creates.

Everything is a rich mosaic of a collection. Cohen brings us in close to view the fissures and fragments, then swings back out every now and again for the wide view. What we take in is a landscape of devastation and loss, but there’s enough evidence of new growth and restoration to give us hope.
Karina Borowicz is the author of Rosetta (Ex Ophidia, 2021), Proof (Codhill Press, 2014), and The Bees Are Waiting (Marick Press, 2011). A French bilingual volume of new and selected works, Tomates de septembre, was published by Cheyne-éditeur in 2020. Her work has appeared widely in journals, anthologies, and other media, including Ted Kooser’s American Life in Poetry and National Public Radio’s Writer’s Almanac and The Slowdown. For more information, visit karinaborowicz.com.