

“Dubai,” Ram Pillai, an East Indian working in the Middle East, becomes ensnared in a system of surveillance that he has always thought his patron’s protection. Having witnessed an incidence of vehicular manslaughter that he helps a wealthy young sheikh conceal, Ram has received beneficial treatment throughout his career. But when something unknown happens to this patron, Ram suddenly realizes that he has been watched for thirty years and that punishment for his part in the illegal cover-up is due in the forms of confinement and torture. The short story delves layers of secrecy: the hidden crime exposes the hidden labor force and its inequalities in wealthy Dubai, which in turn reveals the hidden violence against the immigrant population, whose full force is unknown even to its victims. In “Repatriation,” characters are caught in a futuristic “middle passage,” where cultural apartheid keeps a ship at sea after an environmental apocalypse of unknown type. The fugitives on board are subjects of ethnic apartheid, and the possibility of landing is endlessly deferred. In the final story, “Tehran,” rationality, accommodation, and the politics of compromise produce a superficial social carelessness that pushes the real work of revolution and reform underground. Three figures—a cleric, a housewife-teacher, and a graduate student collide in their efforts to avoid the Iranian state systems that control emigration, religious freedom, and creative scholarship. The cleric accepts a bribe to launder money, the teacher maintains a network for women’s rights, and the student resorts to violence to escape his feelings of utter creative failure. His suicide bomb kills them all and seven others, all while the teacher’s husband extols the virtues of moderation. The story argues for continued political vigilance and warns against the danger of forgetting the potential for violence when freedom of expression is suppressed.

Anatolia & Other Stories sees the promise of the marginal to the processes of change. This valorization of the marginal brings me to one small quibble with the book: “homosexuality,” in this very formal designation, is mentioned again and again, over half the stories allude to it directly or indirectly. The term becomes like a worry bead, touched, but lacking direct relevance to the scenes in which it appears. However, even this odd verbal twitch might be read as a touchstone for marginality, itself. This aside, the volume interweaves, in demonstration and in statement, the lessons of becoming attuned to the processes of transition. Within existing systems, we must think and act pivotally, in ways that anticipate the new.

A CHAPBOOK PRIZE-WINNING POET

Rebecca Foust. *Dark Card*. Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 36. \$8.95. Paperback.

Rebecca Foust. *Mom’s Canoe*. Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 31. \$12.95. Paperback.

Reviewed by Wayne Chapman, Clemson University

A “chapbook” (or “cheap-book,” as “chaps” were originally pedlars’ goods) is, as I’ve said before, “the green salad, potatoes and beer of the poet’s profession” (“Chapbook Histories,” *SCR* 39.2 [Spring 2007]: 205). Ronald Moran provides a functional definition in his review, “Two Chapbooks,” published above in this issue. A chapbook, he says, is a collection of poems between fifteen and forty pages with the additional

criterion “that it be unified in some form, such as subject matter, motifs, or style” (197). Technically, these two remarkable specimens by Rebecca Foust are on the cusp of something more, being near the upper limit on length and for unity of form in all three aspects.

The first thing to be said in the way of introductions is that, respectively, *Dark Card* and *Mom’s Canoe* won the Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize for 2007 and 2008—that is, in two years running. More recently, Foust’s book *All That Gorgeous, Pitiless Song*, which is expected in April 2010, won the Many Mountains Moving Book Award. And her illustrated environmental poetry collection, *God, Seed* (Tebot Bach Press), is forthcoming in fall 2010. I would claim her as a “discovery,” probably, if the truth were not that she discovered *SCR*, beginning in 2008. Two of the four poems we published in volume 41 (“Lucky” and “Like Dostoevsky’s”) appear in *Dark Card*. One might ask, “Like Dostoevsky’s *what?*” And the answer would be “the dark card of the idiot savant” of the title poem, the autistic shy child, the gifted son of “Asperger Ecstasy” (“tying flies under a microscope, knot patterns / the size of this period”), the child whose gift is to be marked like a Nazi “mark of blood / on his door,” a difference that *normal* people fear because he cannot lie in the way that he is wired, “ineluctable logic” “telling / too much of a truth,” causing a mother to worry:

I fear he’ll be over blunt
or otherwise by accident
draw their attention,
their anger, their rage;
I fear how far they
might go to assuage
their discomfort
with difference;
I imagine him drugged
or locked down on a ward;
in my nightmares
he’s caged. (“He Never Lies”)

Even a mother who is a gifted poet has her own difficulties fathoming the bewildered boy “dumbed” by school teachers from his “shout-singing,” and his being left “dreaming alone on the rug / every recess”:

...It’s hard to protect you
when you’re not here, it’s hard
to know what to do, whether to try to make true

what may not be awry—is it disability
or just the difference in intensity
that makes turquoise not quite blue? (“Unreachable Child”)

As the parent of such a child, the reviewer has witnessed and felt much of what the poet gives to expression on “the acronym disorders— / ADHD, ODD, OCD,” railing at “so-called psychologists” who ineptly waste time. Foust’s railing against her obstetrician in “Palace Eunuch” and “Apologies to My Ob-Gyn” is pretty stiff invective for anyone to

bear, but it needs saying. The story that the assembly of 27 lyrics of *Dark Card* tells is really two intertwined stories, about a mother and her son, and both seem to turn out well. In “Homage to Teachers” and “Empathy,” there are four exemplary teachers in twelve years of school and a compassionate Dr. Temple Grandin, the “autistic veterinarian” to whom the latter poem is dedicated, seeing “what Aquinas saw, that cruelty to animals diminishes the human.” The son’s math gift is pretty amazing. We watch him mature, turn eighteen, “shave [his] luxurious beard,” get friends, and take council from adults such as Dr. Hart, the young man’s teacher “in high school Chem [who] confide[s] / that her brain worked exactly like / his brain worked, then made him her TA, / the job coveted by Honors Students / applying to Stanford” (“Homage to Teachers”).

The story of the mother is continued in *Mom’s Canoe*, which is dedicated to Foust’s parents: “Barbara Redline Braim (1929-1999) and Robert James Foust (1923-1990).” This book of 24 poems, spread over 30 pages, rarely exceeds a page per poem, or a few lines beyond the typeset page. As a chapbook, it presents a vivid portrait of the Allegheny mountain country in *vignette*. The poems present psychologically telling factoids about family and friends with a decorum suited to the subject: usually understative, occasionally violent but subdued, bearing evidence of some of her poetic fathers (such as Yeats), a sort of undercurrent of “greenroofed houses / built solid with field stone, / outlasting the people / willing to live there” (“Allegheny County Winter Day”)—a place of

...Dreams, cookbook
notes, the dress a mother wore

to a father’s wake, or would
have worn—had she gone?
The shards meet to make

a pot you haven’t seen before.
The walls are half-effaced,
but Zeus is raping some girl

somewhere, you know that.... (“Archeological Record”)

And dreams are associated with a father’s decline and death, in “The Dream,” although “dream[ing] all his life of a cruise.” “He tried to hang on, / but lost ground, returned in his dreams to shivering / at Bastogne, shoveling lyme into Kauffering cattle cars.” Eventually, “his dream-cruise diffused into the mere idea / of a voyage,” until

he began to dream in earnest.

Light. Warmth. Food. Breath. Until he dreamed
himself dreaming a dream, then nothing.

In “Things Burn Down,” in the terza rima stanzas favored by Seamus Heaney (though his are usually unrhymed), Rebecca Faust performs a virtuoso feat in the craft of poetry on her way to defining the word “damask,” which when used is always the last word in

the lines employing it (in 6 out of 30 lines). This word for twilled table linen suggests Gramma's "white trash damask, / yesterday's newspaper" but brings us in due course to "Dad's damask," which is "a gray square he hacked on to clear ash / from his throat" after breathing smoke for years in a paper mill: "No one asked in those days if that shit could kill you." The revelation is reminiscent of that adhering to Heaney's personal regard for "slub silk," in "La Toilette," slub silk being a kind of twisted fiber associated with a lover's bathrobe, a priest's chasuble, and "the little, fitted, deep-slit drapes / on and off the holy vessels." Today, the poet still makes meaning from the events of her father's life, as I gather from the sonnet "The Truth," on p. 193 (see above). But in *Mom's Canoe*, several poems thereafter carry on the poet's story matrilineally.

In the 4-stress, unrhymed, 13-line poem "Family Story," a sort of arrested sonnet, we learn that Barbara Redline Braim was a silently suffering mother: "She wept / like she lived; when tears dripped and bloomed / on the gray wool of her dress, she looked up / at the changing room ceiling, expecting to find rain." We learn in the next poem, "Backwoods," that her "swaggering full-bird / second husband" was abusive, that he had "blackened / your eye, / dumb-bitched you / and wrecked your canoe." The book's title poem is therefore a tribute to a woman's resilience and her "birdsong" while communing with nature. Like the "birdsong" associated with the weekly mailing of books from the Library of Congress to Gramma, Foust's mother's mother in "Books for the Blind," the hull of the canoe is "ribbed delicately, wing of bird, / skimming the water more glider than boat." Prized, the canoe had been cared for with loving hands:

Remember how it glowed like honey in summer
 rubbed with beeswax and turpentine
 against leaks, cracks, weather and time.
 All your housekeeping went into that canoe....

...

I still see you rising from water to sky,
 paddle held high,
 river drops limning its edge.
 Brown diamonds catch the light as you lift, then dip.
 Parting the current, you slip
 silently through the evening shadows.
 You, birdsong, watersong, slanting light,
 following river bend, swallowed from sight.

From that point on, the nine remaining poems of the chapbook have nothing quite to compare with this poem's richness except great promise for the book that is to come this spring, *All That Gorgeous, Pitiless Song*, and, next fall, the environmentalist *God, Seed*, illustrated with watercolor art. Foust's exploration of the female psyche, to some degree the subject of both books under review here, is also in evidence in this issue of *SCR*, in "Black Arts in Catemaco" (193), where the landscape has shifted to another place. So we wish for Rebecca Foust that every good will come with her move to California.