

On Laura Kasischke's *Wild Brides* Tom Hansen

THE BACK COVER of Laura Kasischke's *Wild Brides*, 1991 poetry winner of the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award for Emerging Writers, contains the usual hype we expect to see on award-winning books: words like "extraordinary," "authentic," and "memorable." When the book happens to be, as it is in this case, a poet's first book-length publication, we ordinarily ignore the hype. Too bad. Because this time, it is true. *Wild Brides* is a remarkable and disturbing book—remarkable because it is so disturbingly honest.

The various personae Kasischke speaks through have endured much: booze, pills, incest, rape (or seduction) by the devil (or his duly authorized representative), the slow transformation of love into hate, wife beating, the massacre of the innocents, the agonizing death of a mother by cancer, and other equally devastating experiences. Kasischke's personae survive these experiences apparently intact but profoundly changed. What they have lived through has complicated them in ways hard to explain. They know that joy is more than counterbalanced by pain. They know that, given time, the worst will happen. One or two of them even look forward to it.

In her little tour de force, "Solomon Grundy," Kasischke gives us a brutal, but believable, modern version of the life of the well-known nursery rhyme character—a life in which, as in all lives, the worst indeed does happen, as can be seen in the opening one and closing two stanzas:

Born on Monday to mucous and blood
and the arms of a teenage mother
slippery with dread, under a moon that crept
with mushrooms in the dark
while the bloodsuckers sucked and clung
to the dead. The world
is as watery as a womb, he thought,
gurgling and murky with tears.

New York University Press, 1992, 108 pages, \$12.95 paper.

On Saturday Solomon Grundy died
and the priest buzzed around his corpse like a fly
and his mother picked maggots out of his eye
and his wife wiped the flower dry that wept
for another between her thighs.
And the slugs and the nothing clung and sucked.

Embalmed and gutted and buried on Sunday
and that is the end of Solomon Grundy.

Readers of a too-delicate sensibility may suspect that Kasischke brings to poetry that same taste for explicit violence and shock images that so many R-rated exploitation films pander to. But “Solomon Grundy” is atypical, even for Kasischke. Never mind that the poem preceding it is “Woman Kills Sweetheart with Bowling Ball” or that the third poem following it is “Candy, Stranger” or that in “After My Little Light, I Sat in the Dark” we are given semi-explicit images of sexual molestation, followed by these two concluding stanzas:

And I was quiet becoming
one of the devil’s many secrets one
of the devil’s many toys
so I slid down drowning in dark,
a perfect daughter, an eager student
who had learned to turn
the anguish to pleasure learned
that many things can exist quite pleasantly
in the dark, and when
I opened my eyes I could see:

a girl with no soul floating
in a flawless uniform playing
an impeccable clarinet. She
had invented her own self smiling
out of the dark, the dark as warm
and happy as a home in hell.

This image of victim as willing participant is psychologically valid but will not endear Kasischke to certain of her readers. The use of third person in the final stanza suggests that the speaker has undergone, probably without knowing it, a self-protective dissociation of sorts—as if unable or unwilling to claim this overwhelming experience as her own. Still, the tone of the last three lines is distressingly ambiguous; “smiling,” “warm,” and “happy” ordinarily have positive connotations. Are they positive here? Can a home in hell be happy?

Kasischke is not easy on her readers. Nor should she be. Her poems reflect extremes we daily see glaring at us from newspaper headlines and nightly hear spoken to us by unruffled evening newscasters. What makes her work so potent is that she opens up to us the experience of those who undergo these extremes. She enters the consciousness of these damaged souls who ask neither for our pity nor for our understanding.

As extreme as they seem, the deaths these poems explore are ordinary deaths: the death of innocence, the death of love, the death of loved ones—or of family members who are at times as hated as they are loved, but whose deaths nonetheless rob us of our own lives. These deaths are not mourned. They are not merely survived. They are lived.

Images of a young woman falling, as if in slow motion, toward middle age and beyond, as time imperceptibly withers her into incipient haggardness—if she is lucky (or unlucky?) enough to live that long—haunt the final half dozen or so poems of *Wild Brides*. “Twenty-Ninth Birthday” begins:

Suddenly I see that I
have been wearing my mother’s body
for a long time now. It all
belongs to her, here where the skin
is softest and here
where it puckers in disgust—each
inch. The very nails that pounded
her body to pieces
built me one just like it
and I have been wearing it
like a terrible house
and never noticed—all of it
hers, except this mole on my arm—that

belonged to my father's mother
and it was left to me
to remind me that I
am one of those
witches, too. . . .

These concluding poems specifically, and many earlier ones generally, seem to illustrate Jung's dictum, "From middle age on, only he remains alive who is willing to die with life." Twenty-nine and younger when she wrote these poems, Kasischke is hardly middle-aged. Nor are her various personae. But they are, all of them, celebrants in the pit, burningly alive. They have the scars that prove it.