

JUDITH HERZBERG

Judith Herzberg (1934) is a celebrated poet and playwright. She made her debut in the 1960s as a poet and has been writing and translating drama and screenplays since the early 1970s.

For the volume *Botshol* (1981) she received the Jan Campert Prize; for her oeuvre she has been awarded the Joost van den Vondel Prize (1984), the Constantijn Huygens Prize (1994) and the highly prestigious P.C. Hooft Award for her poetry (1997).

A paperback anthology of her poems *Doen en laten*, published in 1994, sold over 100,000 copies.

She has a rare poetical voice, a characteristic and amazing vision, with comforting lines. Like no other she has the eye for everyday reality and a melodic language which is easily mistaken for everyday speech.

JURY'S REPORT P.C. HOOFT AWARD 1997

Her work, which is much-loved and well-known, consists of rich and complex poems. Everything is tied together: irony and sorrow, sweetness and bitterness, comment and charm, desparateness and protest, naivety and precise thinking, everyday experience and visions.

Rights enquiries:

De Harmonie Stand 8.0 - C 922

P.O. Box 3547

NL-1001 AH Amsterdam

The Netherlands

tel. (+31)-(0)20 624 51 81

fax: (+31)-(0)20 623 06 72

info@deharmonie.nl

www.deharmonie.nl

English, German and Italian translations available.

Published by:

Oberlin College Press, USA

Agora Verlag, Germany

Friendenaer Presse, Germany

Edition Korrespondenzen, Austria

Ellerstoms, Sweden

Széphalom, Hungary

Bingsha Shatabdi, India (Bengali)

Vani Prakashan, India (Hindi)

Cavallo de Ferro, Portugal





Although Herzberg's poems find their inspiration in nature or everyday life, the poetic transformation of that experience remains her essential concern. The poems' sophisticated form raises them above their immediate cause. '*Ultimately it comes down to language and emotion and sound*,' she explained in an interview. '*Writing is like a magic spell: you have to say it just like that or it will not work.*' The poet adjusts the ends of her lines and her spacing to obtain what she calls '*dancing poems*'.

The work is rooted in life itself, and the intensity of the perception in the poems heightens the experience. Especially because her view of the world is neither direct nor unambiguous. A title of a collection like *Strijklicht* (Skimming Light, 1971) indicates the kind of observations on offer. The object of perception is not in the floodlight; the poem only sheds light from one side to reveal textures. This gives the reader ample opportunity to apply his or her imagination to all that has been left in shadow. In the volume *Vliegen* (Flies, 1970) the poet seems to provide explicit guidelines: '*Fly, this is your way: / if you can't grasp it / circle. Nothing but / stopovers / no fixed itinerary / feeling and tasting / small conclusions / never digging.*' Herzberg thinks her biggest problem is to reduce the symbolic ballast. Whereas other poets seek metaphors, she tries to get rid of them.

Herzberg's poetry is no attempt at reconciling the intangibility of life. She is aware of the unavoidable inconstancy. At the same time poetry seems to offer a temporary solution by suggesting an inner consistency within a fragmentary world, by not evoking a harmonious world. But time and again a nostalgic return to the past proves to be in vain. With Herzberg we have to make do with the incomplete present.

What She Meant to Paint

She paints what she cannot swallow
cannot claim can't explain.
She paints what she can't stay put
doesn't follow stay
the same. She paints what she
cannot plant cannot tame
forget about. She paints
what she cannot guess or get
or figure out. What she can't
embrace or break can't
blame. Let slide
run wild. Chop down
or tear. Incinerate.
Repair. She paints
what makes her sleepless
what she can't recall
in colour, not at all. What she can't
sing of cannot praise.
The itch of blankness
blankly stays.

Translation © Shirley Kaufman

I tuoi baci sono più
dolci che il più dolce miele
e per me tu sei più bella e graziosa,
ancora più bella e gentile del re.
Andiamo a riposare
lontano da qui
costruiremo con rami
rami e piccole foglie
un pavimento e un tetto,
quella era la nostra casa,
o magari io ero il giardinetto
e tu la capanna
li prendemmo dimora
li ristammo li apparteniamo
o sbrigati amor mio
tanto ti desidero
andiamo a dormire
adesso o mai più
ché abbiamo solo oggi.



Tu sei veloce e maestosa
dolce e preziosa
come una cavalla,
come una cavalla della carrozza
del faraone. E il tuo collo
e le tue guance - incorniciate
tra i pendenti e l'oro.

Il mio adorato profuma
di frutti e spezie venuti
da terre lontane
e i suoi odori
rimangono sui miei seni.

I tuoi occhi sono più belli
che gli occhi delle altre
sembrano uccelli
colombi forse
i tuoi cigli sono le ali
che si muovono appena
e tu mi voli dentro
quando io ti guardo
e tu mi riguardi.

Lì costruiremo un palazzo
fatto d'alberi
di rami e frasche
di fichi e fiori
la nostra casa avrà
i fusti come travi
e un tetto di foglie.

I ragazzi pendono dalle tue labbra
e tu stai sempre nel giardino,
fa' sentire anche a me la tua voce!

Va' via
lontano
come i cervi veloci
sui monti!

È così bello guardarti
i tuoi occhi son passerotti
sulla spalla cascano i tuoi riccioli
come un gregge di pecore e capretti
che con calma discende il pendio
un gregge che si pasce
discendendo le pendici.

I tuoi labbri sono rossi
come coralli rossi
quando parli
usi parole dolci per i tuoi
dolci racconti.

Perfetto il tuo corpo
come le torri di Davide.

Quando arriverà il vento
della sera e sarà buio
allora me ne andrò
verso le colline dei profumi.

Voltati, ti prego,
bella fanciulla, girati.

Tu che danzi con sandali
ai piedi che salutano
con fianchi mobili
ignari di ogni stasi.

Vieni con me nei campi
lì è la nostra alcova
poi andremo a controllare
se tutto è in fiore
il germoglio dei boccioni
e se le foglie hanno
preso il loro verde, amore,

e lì ti bacerò
alla porta troveremo
frutti maturi
e freschi conservati apposta per te.