

Babel

Barbara Hamby

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This poet gets right to the point in her latest collection. The first poem begins, “I am translating the world,” an ambitious goal, to say the least, but also an *ars poetica* applicable to most poets. And lest any reader have the audacity to ask why, Hamby explains, “because this is our adventure, our calling, our do-or-die / mission, translating the world into the body’s bright lie.” This poem anticipates how fearlessly Hamby will tackle the subject of translation—from the language of a Bantu tribe in Gabon to the slang of movies. The book’s cover, a close-up of the goddess Flora, flowers tumbling from her mouth in Botticelli’s “Primavera,” foresees how Hamby will succeed.

Perhaps aspiring to the precision and color of Botticelli’s brush strokes, Hamby’s lines have a distinct cadence despite the abundance of foreign words and phrases. Emulating the chaos of vernaculars presumably present after the tower of Babel fell, Hamby writes in “The Mockingbird of Buddha”: “Have some peach cobbler, girl, / have some fried oysters, have some Pouligny / Montrachet, *ma chère*, for the night is coming, and you need meat / on your bones to ride that wild horse.” This combination of Southern dialect, antiquated English, and French might create a sense of commotion if not for the carefully maintained rhythm of Hamby’s long lines. Because of their steady rhythm, symmetry, and odd-sounding words, these lines possess an incantatory quality. Hamby’s poems resemble spells, words cascading like Flora’s flowers. The result is a break-necking pace, and it is almost miraculous that this collection does not spin out of control.

The poet avoids pandemonium (or babel) by focusing her attention on Paris in “13 Ways of Looking at Paris” and on America in “American Odes.” In these sections, Hamby embraces herself as a poetic subject, and the result is, appropriately, human. These poems are tender, humble, and often humorous. They paint a portrait of Hamby as a person rather than a poet. As a poet, she has accomplished much in her brief publishing history, following her prize-winning *Delirium* with *The Alphabet of Desire*, which was selected by the New York City Public Library as one of the twenty-five best books of 1999, among other accolades. *Babel* has already received the Donald Hall Prize in Poetry.

While addressing the Bantu tribe language in “Fang,” a poem from the section “The Mockingbird Blues,” Hamby writes, “I want words / like teeth that could tear the flesh / from the throat of my worst enemy.” Although it is unclear whether *Babel* includes such words, this collection does pack a punch.

ERICA WRIGHT (August 18, 2009)

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