



Echolocations

Diane Thiel

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Thiel's ear for meter is astute, and her skill at forms is attested to by prize after prize, not to mention two chapbooks from the formalist small press Aralia; her mainstream narrative voice is a natural for the aptly named Story Line Press. Still, one wonders about her ability to contextualize her major topic, her family's history in Germany during World War II. In *Echolocations*, World War II is about the bombing of Dresden, and civilian children killed crossing a minefield while looking for food, and children who go from Silesia to Prague for schooling: "When you're a kid, you never think you can't go home again." The little boy, however, who loses his parents and becomes the speaker's father is also unable to talk about anything but the way life was before the war: "This might have been the house-and this, the farm. / This thin red line was the road I walked to town.' /...But if we ever asked a direct question / to get him, just for once, to finish a thought, / we'd watch the curtain drop...." Likewise, in "TrÄ¼mmerfrauen" ("Rubble Women"), "I spoke to an old couple nearby," she writes, "who said, 'we don't talk about it.'" The unspecified antecedent might mean the bombing of Dresden. It might also mean the war itself.

Only one time, in the poem "TrÄ¼me" ("Dreams"-the bilingual pun is undoubtedly intentional), does Thiel reference "the places we can never name again/ without the shame": Dachau, for example, and Buchenwald. How much does this speechlessness carry over into the lives of the speakers of the other poems? The twelve-year-old girl in "Memento Mori in Middle School" is urged by her mother to end her oral presentation on Dante's *Inferno* ("where Satan chewed the traitors' frozen heads") by passing out popsicles to her classmates. The poem's terza rima pays homage to its literary subject, but the children in the poem race out into the schoolyard, "The *Inferno* fast forgotten." In "At the Mailbox," the speaker carefully taps her mailbox before opening it so as to alert the lizard who lives inside, "a ritual we both appreciate." Thinking, "What would I do" were she to live in the lizard's circumstances, the speaker answers, "I'd move. At least, I'd like to think I would."

Using echolocation, bats navigate without the sense of sight, according to sounds returned to them by objects they don't directly encounter. The title is an apt choice for a book dealing with silences, evasions, loss, and omissions.

JANET HOLMES (November / December 2000)

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