

a e POETRY

The Underwater Hospital

Enter the World of "Compassionate Conservatism"

REVIEW BY MERRY GANGEMI

To read *The Underwater Hospital* is to enter a world that many in America choose not to acknowledge, let alone read about. But for those who do want to know, *The Underwater Hospital* is an important addition to the landscape of protest against current American public policy.

The poems bear witness to the brutal consequences of every single administration since that B-movie cowboy Reagan slid into the White House. Steckel's work challenges the hypocrisy of "compassionate conservatism," an idiomatic smoke-screen for greed, indifference, and cruelty.

In "Three Little Sisters," the physician-poet struggles against a recurring nightmare:

*The three little Salazar sisters from Salinas
come crestfallen into my bedroom some
nights,
all crying with rotten teeth and gum abscesses.
The younger two are California-born.
I give them antibiotics and send them to a
Medicaid dentist
so the infections won't spread to their jaw
or brain.
For the eldest, eight years old, I can do
nothing,
because she was born in Mexico
so doesn't qualify for Medicaid.
I prescribe extra medicine,
knowing the mother will split it
between all three little girls.
I send them out crying.
Night after night, I curse and ask,
what kind of country
denies an eight-year-old girl
relief from pain like that
because she was born*

*on the wrong side of the border
from her sisters?*

In "Dios le bendiga," the narrator evokes the desperation of the mother's guilt and self-loathing because:

*I pretended to be sick
and stayed home from church....
My uncle came by drunk from a lost cock-
fight.
He raped me in the kitchen
where I had made cactus candy with my
mother and sisters.*

Here is a mother whose child was born with syphilis, a mother who is damned by Catholicism and its embedded misogyny, but a mother grateful for the care that, at the very least, cured her baby of syphilis. Here they are, woman to woman, doctor to patient, equals in the desperation of social and cultural systems that perpetuate pain.

Jan Steckel's exquisite honesty is what engages her soul in the task of poetry: an ability to not only remember and imagine, but to see and to hear her past, her family's history and its rich and fecund characteristics.

In "The Maiden Aunts," Steckel brings them to life:

*My grandmother was alive again,
the one who said to me on her deathbed,
"You must write!" and
"Don't waste your life cooking, honey,
it's all over in ten minutes."*

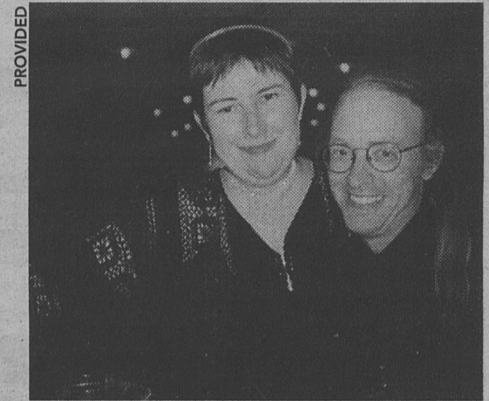
Her family is the bridge Steckel travels across to find the strong, colorful threads woven from her life to theirs. Through the memory of her grandmother, Jan meets those maiden aunts:

*who visited her in the squalor
of the Lower East Side.
Dressed in black, the maiden aunts
bent and kissed her eight-year-old head
saying, "Never forget, Selma,
you are one of the heher menschen."
you're one of the higher people,
a gentlewoman....What they meant was,
you come from a long line of ten chief
rabbis
of the city of Riga.
Your grandfather wrote a treatise on Mai-
monides
that is in the Library of Congress.
Your family, the Widow Romm and Sons,
is the largest publisher of Yiddish books
in Eastern Europe.... She dreamed of the
last Rabbi of Riga,
turning from the door of the gas chamber,
as he shepherded his congregation in.
Beyond him, her two old-maid aunts
clutched each others hands
and stared past the Rabbi's shoulder,
whispering "Never forget, Selma...."*

Clearly, Steckel has never forgotten and will never forget:

*...the elderly female patient with dementia
whose nephew had raped her
though we refused to recognize it....
Carmen with her box of chocolates
inviting me onto her bed to watch
Puerto Rican girls mud-wrestling
on late night black-and-white hospital TV.
...Old women with rose petals strewn
around their hospital beds die alone.
Whores giggle and crack babies keen.
A woman kisses her baby
to show me how much she loves him
after she has broken all his limbs...
If I open this door, the dead will rush in
like a thousand tons of water, filling me
up,*

Jan Steckel and husband Hew Wolff



The Underwater Hospital
by Jan Steckel
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*and I will never be able to shut that hatch
again.*

Maybe not, Jan Steckel, but that is why this book is so imperative: because you remember and you feel and you tell the truth about what it was you saw, and heard, and know. ▼

➔ Pushcart-nominated writer Jan Steckel, MD, is a bisexual activist and a Harvard- and Yale-trained former pediatrician. She served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic and cared for Spanish-speaking families in California at a county hospital and at a large HMO. In 2001, she left the practice of medicine to write full-time.

➔ A transplant from New Jersey, via San Francisco, Merry Gangemi is the host of Woman-Stirred Radio, a GLBTQ music/interview format show at Goddard College that airs every Thursday from 4-6 pm on WGDR 91.1 fm or www.wgdr.org. Merry lives in Woodbury with her partner and spouse, Elizabeth Hansen. They share four children and two grandchildren.

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