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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “this nameless, wide-open vocation.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

A NAMELESS VOCATION

In her memoir *The Winter Sun*, poet Fanny Howe explores the possibilities and impossibilities of a writer’s calling.

By Ange Mlinko

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The Winter Sun, by Fanny Howe. Graywolf Press, \$15.00.

At the outset of *The Winter Sun*, an apologia for the writing life, Fanny Howe confesses, “Since early adolescence I have wanted to live the life of a poet. What this meant to me was a life outside the law; it would include disobedience and uprootedness. I would be at liberty to observe, drift, read, travel, take notes, converse with friends, and struggle with form.” The outlaw poet has a long lineage, from the Beats and Rimbaud back to the troubadours, and it doesn’t accommodate the vulnerabilities of womankind. What it would mean for Howe, born in the United States in 1940, to pursue a life of poetry and self-definition—without sacrificing eros and motherhood—unfolds in a series of essays that might take as its motto “lower limit: memoir, upper limit: lyric.” *The Winter Sun* is an indispensable companion to Howe’s last book of nonfiction prose, *The Wedding Dress* (2003). Both collections circle around the theme of word and life, the *via negativa*, in an increasingly positivistic and cynical world. She subtitles *The Winter Sun* “Notes on a Vocation” but states at the outset that hers is “a vocation that has no name,” collapsing the mystical and the literary, Simone Weil and Samuel Beckett.

Fanny Howe has written young adult novels and experimental fiction, but she is best known as a lyric poet of fragmentary serial works that call to mind Hölderlin and Dickinson. She is a reluctant memoirist, circling and digressing around a subject she finds difficult: herself. As a child, she remarks, “I was often mute in the background, sucking my thumb and daydreaming.” Howe’s background would turn any *littérateur* green: her father was Mark DeWolfe Howe, a law professor at Harvard descended from

the illustrious Quincy family; her mother was Mary Manning, an Irish-born actress, writer, and general impresario of the arts in Cambridge. Life in that household was lively, sociable, and privileged, but it comes filtered through Howe's introversion. Her prose is condensed and cadenced to imply silence and shadow. Nameless fears persist around the edges; her earliest memories were marked by her father's absence while he served in World War II, then by the revelation of the concentration camps. "While we learned languages, poetry, science, and athletics, the prevailing social attitude was nihilist. Not officially so, not with reference to Nietzsche, but in the stirring cavities of decision making and imagination. Mass murder, global destruction, and genocide were idle topics."

The child sensitive to these intimations of cynicism and apocalypse would grow into a rebellious adult. *The Wedding Dress* opens with a powerful testimony of her youthful marriage and separation from her husband, Carl Senna. They were activists in Boston during the busing crisis (Jonathan Kozol introduced them). After four years of increasingly tense relations, mirrored too perfectly by the tensions outside their door, they were divorced and she, a white single mother, had three interracial children to support in a climate of fear and unrest. "There were many women like me—born into white privilege but with no financial security, given a good education but no training for survival." This crisis, and the example of her much-loved mother-in-law, a black woman from the South, precipitated Howe's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Howe is well aware of how highly her "invisible-faithful" Catholic values are esteemed by "materialist-skeptical" intellectuals. Bitingly she acknowledges that people like herself "annoy well-adjusted people because weakness is not meant to survive." In pitting herself against the evo-devo celebration of competition that permeates our culture, Howe's unorthodox Catholicism (she quotes liberation theologians) is just as countercultural today as her civil rights activism was in the 1960s.

Howe is fully comfortable neither with entertaining nor with instructing. Instead, her memoirs and meditations are driven by the revelation that "the future is only the past turned around to look at itself." Like her daydreaming child self, she is bewildered by the demands of time, and finally doesn't really acquiesce to them. She repeats the trope over and over again: "The future is only the past recognizing itself at another location." "We move forward into a past that will be censored." Her digressive, meditative form mirrors this conviction: meditations subvert the demands of linear narrative, modeling a life outside ordinary time.

So what are we, if we are indeed enlightened and well adjusted, supposed to make of a woman who holds incompetence as an exemplary value; who distrusts words but uses them specifically, in the age of Richard Dawkins, to trace experience back to God; who would rather "hide out" caring for children than "get to work!" à la Linda Hirshman?

I find that Howe's essays clarify two contemporary issues. One: "The atheist is no less an inquirer than a believer," she writes. "*In living at all*, she is no less a believer than an unbeliever" (emphasis mine). Hence Camus's opening sentence in *The Myth of Sisyphus*,

from 1942, is as pertinent as ever: “There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” We must determine for ourselves a *raison d’être*; in this, as in everything else about Darwinian capitalism, we are on our own. (Howe reminds us that the sign over the gate to Buchenwald reads *Jedem das Seine*—“to each his own,” or, as she clarifies, everyone gets what he deserves.) In rejecting suicide, we are all creatures of faith.

Determining for ourselves a *raison d’être* is also, of course, the chief prerogative of those who choose the writing life, and the second issue, which Howe’s “Notes on a Vocation” clarifies, is the role of the poet in an age of widespread scientism that preemptorily decides what questions are worth asking and how best to answer them. Quoting Johann Metz, Howe advocates “rebellion against being partially described—be it by a science or by another person.” A poet—just by persisting in that weak, useless, embarrassing role—contests authoritarian definitions of the self. Until the suave proponents of Darwinian fitness and success can solve the problem of “living at all”; until such time as they can make us—mothers, fathers, children, poets—happy to be partially described, governed by those descriptions, we cannot do without Fanny Howe and this nameless, wide-open vocation.

Ange Mlinko is the recipient of the 2009 Randall Jarrell Award in Poetry Criticism. Her latest book of poems is *Starred Wire*. This article first appeared in *The Nation*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Fanny Howe, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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