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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “She has left us poems, each its own testament.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

THE POEM AS TESTAMENT

Sarah Hannah’s second, and final, poetry collection.

By Jason Guriel

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Inflorescence, by Sarah Hannah. Tupelo Press. \$16.95.

The author of this next book, a one-time nominee for Yale Younger Poet, committed suicide last year. Its poems are about flowers and mental health; they have titles like “Dried Flowers” and “Night Nurse,” and brandish sharp lines like

Don’t talk to me of Paris;
I have duties.
Don’t talk to me of loss;
I bury pills in applesauce.

Given those facts alone, it would be easy to write off Sarah Hannah through a single, obvious comparison. But the most amazing—and consequently tragic—fact about her second (and last) collection is that its poems (and they are poems, choppily well-separated and varnished with formal finish) are very, very good. Whatever the poet was going through, it didn’t hinder the production of small, complete masterpieces like “The Riddle of the Sphinx Moth”:

An enormous body kamikaze-dives
At me from behind the eaves of a summer
Shack: a sudden blow between the eyes,

A hybrid whirr—half bird, half bee—she hovers,
Helicopters to the grass, and sparks: Long-short-long,

Morse code in creature-speak for Get you gone.

I run inside. What was she? A pair of dragonflies
Combined to mate like biplanes in a blitz
Seem cordial in comparison to this—the eyes,

Two narrows, solid black, or should I say,
Twin Stygian pools of fixedness,
Her torso thick, a pattern throbbing in the fur,

And what was that prodding in front of her?
A stick, a thin proboscis, twice as long as she,
Insinuates itself in jimsonweed—

Sucks out all the juice. Twenty quiet minutes pass
Until I hear a rattle on the glass;
The window's shaken out of frame—she's in!

She fouls the bed—the whole room's a sty.
I should flee. I shudder in my chair instead.
She owns this house, not I.

A buzz and faint, and with a glare
She's out the door. She owns the house,
Not me. I've solved the riddle:

All skirmishes aren't fatal;
All metaphors don't fly.

Hannah has a knack for images, but she's careful not to overload the poem with too many, showcasing only the special ones. She's also careful—as Ariel-era Plath wasn't always—to unify them. The staggering description of a “pair of dragonflies / Combined to mate like biplanes in a blitz” is supported by references to kamikaze planes, helicopters, and Morse code, so that when the reader comes to “a pattern throbbing in the fur,” the sphinx moth has already been transformed, in the reader's mind, into furry fuselage, capable of rattling windows. The deft use of rhyme and alliteration further unifies this subtle, anti-war psychodrama, lending an aura of inevitability to words like “throbbing,” “prodding,” “proboscis,” “sucks,” “pass,” and “glass.” The poem can't afford the loss of any of them.

But while Hannah expertly moves the reader, word by word, to the poem's finish, she's careful not to craft too tidy an ending. She solves her riddle with a bit of folk wisdom—“All metaphors don't fly”—but in doing so subverts the very art, metaphor-making, that she has mastered, suggesting the limits of poetry. She completes a final rhyme, but also drops a line from what would have been the final tercet, introducing a note of anxiety. Indeed, many of Hannah's poems set up consistent patterns of stanzas only to deviate

from them at the last moment. Life, Hannah seems to have recognized, is closer to coherence than chaos, which makes it all the more troubling when it falls just short of gelling.

The pieces in *Inflorescence* add up to a memoir about Hannah's care for her terminal mother. But the best ones—"Greenbrier," "Common Creeping Thyme," "The Leaded Windows," "Night Nurse," and "Eternity, That Dumbwaiter"—are anthology-bound and easily transcend the collection's overall arc. Hannah has not left a body of work that, through sheer bulk, demands our grudging respect. She has left us poems, each its own testament.

Jason Guriel lives in Toronto, and his next collection of poems is forthcoming from Véhicule Press in 2009. This article originally appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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