

Wake. By Laura Madeline Wiseman. Hemet, CA: Aldrich P, 2015. 72 pp. \$14.00, paper. ISBN: 978-0692364388.

For many poets, death is a fellow traveler. In Goethe's "Erlkonig," death as an elf floats alongside a horse and two riders. In her latest collection, *Wake*, Laura Madeline Wiseman takes the reader on a wild gallop with the ladies of death in her exploration of the impermeable through a dark, splintered, and comedic labyrinth to the underworld and beyond.

In the initial poem, "Before Death," Wiseman introduces the leitmotif of the cart, the vehicle of transport, but the protagonist immediately faces a decision about which cart to take, "the one like a cage or the one like a circus bumper car." This may amount to a humorous allusion to Frost's "A Road Not Taken." Outside the confinement of worldly limits, this hell houses an empty museum with "the same man who is always at the desk." A solitary crow lingers outside. The protagonist reports a ringing in her ears. A surrealist image communicates the inevitability of death: "for the street to fill with bodies I need to collect."

In a spiraling downward spiral, the protagonist of "To Approach Death, I Take a Ride," careens through a devastated landscape with "grass of toxic spray" and "traffic screams in six lanes of concrete and lights." In "Riding Shotgun with Death," the death lady reveals that she had been on the "death march, at Hiroshima, on 9/11," "she'd been on the ninth ward as levees split."

In "Befriending Death," the lady of death attempts to become one with the protagonist by becoming her twin. In a stunning allegory, the main character notes, "The calling magpies gather in the golden trees. The sweet stink of skunk lifts in the setting sun's breeze as I walk the potholes." Rejecting death's offer to become a sister, she concludes, "*I want a friend, death's bright angel, you.*"

Many of these poems, such as "La Petite Mort," unfold with a fairy tale timelessness set in a modern world. The protagonist drives a car for the first time, and the death lady rides shotgun. They drive past "two-story jersey cows, beyond the Last Stop that sells booze and cigarettes to teens, farther still watching the funnel cakes, the duplexes, the cemetery vanish in the rearview mirror." Unable to resist death's sexual advances because her hands are glued to the wheel, "there is only the cool white tongue of the road purring beneath us and her jaw at my throat." Death permeates the universe with the final statement, "I will be here when you let go."

In one of the final poems, "Death's Cameras," the protagonist is trapped in a windowless set like the Metropolitan Opera's recently per-

formed *Bluebeard's Castle*, with rooms mirroring the mind's interior. Instead of the doors of the castle, the main character faces cameras and mirrors. "The camera zooms in on my running nose. It's late summer, the time for vertigo, sinus pain, and the thick fog of the brain on fever."

A dream-like stream of consciousness expresses the helplessness of the protagonist, as well as her inchoate sadness. "The mirrors double us exponentially, until there are hundreds of us in the room with wallpaper runners repeating death's carts." A rapist enters and rapes all in a repetitive tale of the demonic husband and endangered wife, of dominance and subjugation. The protagonist notes that "behind him, are more of him."

Laura Madeline Wiseman's *Wake* is devoid of nurturing or soothing imagery: "carpet stained by beer, ash, and vomit, a collapsing fiberboard entertainment center, dilapidated couches, and black garbage sacks. They need to be taken out, but no one ever will." This is Poe on steroids, with poems full of demon lovers and monsters, echoes of nursery rhymes with the troubling force of folklore, dances of death driven by desire and depravity.

Reviewed by *Margo Taft Stever*