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Review: Marge Saiser's Losing the Ring in the River (University of New Mexico Press)

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I opened up Marge Saiser’s latest book of poetry, Losing the Ring in the River, with great anticipation. Familiar with her other books, Lost in Seward County and Bones of a Very Fine Hand, I expected exquisitely etched images and finely tuned phrases, and I wasn’t disappointed. In Losing the Ring in the River, Saiser depicts three generations of women, Clara, Emma, and Liz, in moments that clarified or defined their lives: Clara’s astute reading of domestic life, especially her sharp divisions with her husband; Emma’s chase of marital happiness and coping with disappointment; and finally, Liz’s spark and break from her mother and grandmother’s narratives. These sixty-seven poems teem with diamond lines, such as: “That’s how it was, a wave / a windless wind // flowing over my body, / telling me how much I would love (“My Firstborn, My Eddie, Asks What I Remember” 21-24) and “I lie crosswise on the bed / so the length of the river / will lie / along the length of my sleeping self” (“Length of the River” 1-4). Still, after closing the book, the collection raised a question: Why tell these women’s stories in poetry? I contemplated the answer as a writer who has taken up similar writing tasks and found that Saiser’s newest book is excellent evidence for the strength and importance of storytelling in poetry. Saiser makes the best use of poetry’s constraints—precise image and line composition—to distill character, story, and tension into packages of bright poems that shimmer with intensity.

Like an herbalist selecting the most tender leaves and stems for a tincture, Saiser crafts the characters of Clara, Emma, and Liz by drawing out the healing powers of image and sound to capture, in concentrated form, their narratives on the page. For example, in “Luke Says It’s Another Silly Idea,” Saiser introduces
Clara as a woman who seeks to define herself against her husband’s opinions, even if it just concerns showing chickens at the fair. She depicts the tension between the couple when Clara aligns herself with the hen: “But I think/ maybe there’s a place for feathers and strut” (16-17), lifting the meaning with metaphor in the next two lines: “Even a tin can, from the right angle, / glints blue like a diamond in the road” (18-19). With the move to simile amidst straightforward description, Saiser frames the tension of Clara’s inner thoughts, her relationship with Luke, and the book’s dramatic arc.

Saiser’s sophisticated deployment of conflict makes Losing the Ring in the River a more dramatically intense read than other books of narratively linked poems. It’s a vibrating, sly kind of drama similar to the snake-like moves Clara makes in “Playing My Cards,” Emma’s untouched fish and potatoes in “The Meal You Bought Me,” and the fishhooks Liz describes in “Like Everyone.” In “Playing My Cards,” Clara kills a rattlesnake with a garden hoe, a calculated move for safety, but then the poem turns to a scene of her playing cards with Luke, whom she skillfully—and swiftly—tricks into losing. We see another couple around a table in “The Meal You Bought Me,” where nothing much is happening overtly, and yet the silence is stifling:

I couldn’t decide

where I wanted to look:
   trucks the window held and let go of,
   held and let go of;

square heavy glass of the ashtray;
   your fingers taking the cigarette
   up to and away from your lips. (15-21)

The artful repetition of “held and let go of, / held and let go of” (17-18) attributes Emma’s longing to the trucks in the window, a distancing that makes her yearning more poignant. And Saiser juxtaposes that motion with the only other movement, smoking, which in this context strips the lips from their romantic potential.
Saiser also uses a poem’s embodiment on the page to its fullest potential. Her careful lineation utilizes white space to draw readers’ attention into intense diction and syntactical choices. The second poem spoken by Liz, “Let Me Be the First Snake of Spring,” indicates her “break” from the trajectories of Clara and Emma’s lives with its praise of the snake and what it represents. By double-spacing between lines, Saiser emphasizes each of Liz’s declarations:

Let me writhe, immodest
Let me be a long white underbelly
Against the warm wrist of the garden
Circle what can be circled (1-4)

... Let me flick my tongue into the air of
The world which does not love me (11-12)

Like the alcohol or oil of a tincture, the space around these lines allows readers to hold the assertion in our mouths and in our minds a second longer, underscoring its importance.

As a collection, Losing the Ring in the River is exceptionally crafted. Not only in individual poems—strong tension and line composition as I’ve described—but also in the way the poems accrete into stories. Themes of home-tending and child-rearing, established in Clara’s section, are developed in Emma and Liz’s; further, insight about each woman is revealed when they speak of each other. The final poem, “Take, Eat; This is My Body,” hints at the fourth generation “now when you are forming / cell by cell,” (2-3) but also speaks to the union of these three women, bound by blood, and always influencing each other, as Liz states unequivocally to end the book: “I will be a shadow on a building, / the low sun casting a shape / behind me as I go on” (13-15). The ring may be lost in the river, but the essence of Saiser’s poetry permeates the skin and stays with us.