

*A Secret Room in Fall* by Maria Terrone. Ashland: Ashland Poetry Press, 2006. 78pp. and *American Gothic, Take 2* by Maria Terrone. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2009. 29pp.

With the publication of her second and third collections Maria Terrone confirms her growing reputation as an inspired singer of the complexities of contemporary life. Observant of our postmodern ironies, she renders them compellingly in her finer poems in which alienation combines with illumination, and tragedy with humor. As Gerry LaFemina comments in the introduction to *A Secret Room in Fall*, Terrone's poetic style is marked by a distinctive coalescence of quietude and violence: "Time and again, Terrone speaks softly, while her poems carry a punch" (xi). Strong and intense, sympathetic and never sentimental, her language captures the contradictions of a world that wavers between appearance and essence, belonging and disconnection.

*A Secret Room in Fall* offers parodies of what Barthes defined as the new mythologies of our times. In "How Dolls Are Made," for example, Terrone juxtaposes crude images of corporeality to condemn the contemporary craze for plastic surgery. "At 18, partly formed, confident/in the possibility of my own perfection," announces the poetic voice, before evoking scary pictures of body manipulation in a gothic game of mirror reflections: "like bargain-basement doctors busy at/liposuction. I watch the tiny figure/of myself watch, in fascination, men/who didn't know they spoke to me,/carving arms still warm from molds" (44).

With a similar strategy Terrone questions the American myth of the melting pot in "The Fruited Plain." Consisting of quatrains linked by enjambments and sound parallels, this poem pivots on a sustained metaphor of belonging that is ruthlessly dismantled. The first six lines attest to Terrone's wish to sketch a desirable map of America through fruit images, some of which are borrowed from the anthem "America the Beautiful": "The purple mountains are so high,/our hands must climb to reach/the top, the plum at its peak/of perfection. Once there, we strive/for more. No surprise□ desire is why we came,/and this fruited plain knows no fence" (75). The mountains of plums become a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes in the following stanzas, where the vegetable products are associated with American immigrants of various ethnicities. In the poem's conclusion, however, the multicolored beauty of the scene is permeated by anxiousness. Washed down by nationalistic aspirations to homogeneity, the heaps of fruit are turned into a flat society dominated by empty ideals and slogans. It is a society which, as suggested by the intertextual references to Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," sacrifices its cultural richness to the laws of the marketplace: "Proud to be American from sea/to shining sea of blueberries, blood oranges, kiwi,/yams, yucca, mangoes, guavas, pumpkins/that teachers at PS. 69 will buy and soon carve/for the children, their grinning faces also lit/from within. They'll dress like goblins, learn the Holy Writ:/United We Stand. This is America. No one starves" (75-76).

Self-critical in her representation of the *hic et nunc*, Terrone betrays a curiosity about the past, which she unearths by reviving disquieting ancient figures ("The Egyptian Queen Gives Death the Slip") and family memories ("Blood Oranges"). A recurrent strategy in *Secret Room*, the evocation of different segments of history is supported by multiple literary echoes that amplify her discourse on human fallibility.

Less focused on history than the previous collection, *American Gothic, Take 2* lays more stress on the large and small tragedies of everyday life. Wryly humorous in some poems, Terrone becomes grimly ironic in others which unveil the illusory nature of the human wish for perfection. The collection opens, significantly, with a self-parody poem, "Scraps," in which Terrone laughs at her own presumption of creating lasting verse in a highly metamorphic society. "Scraps to snacks to scraps again,/I offer America my own/ moveable feast" (1). The provocative idea of recycling *useless* art into *useful* "takeout cups" and boxes is a good introduction to the irreverent attitude with which she challenges established models of Americanness, such as the zombie-like family in "summer pastels" ("American Gothic. Take 2"), or the "spotless" supermarket in which displayed foods attract customers with greedy fantasies of consumption ("The Ice Floe"). Highlighted by gothic paraphernalia, the tragic banalities of contemporary life are made more risible by the occasional incursions of the past, which always takes surrealistic forms.

But what messages are conveyed by such ghostly manifestations? An interpretive clue is offered by the generic choice anticipated in the volume's title. As in most gothic works, this collection dramatizes the perversions of a society that is imaginatively recreated by the author's writing. Although some specters inspire thoughts of transcendence, such as the phantom of Einstein crossing in front of a skeptic's car ("Einstein on Queens Boulevard"), most revenants featured in the poems reinforce the negativity of the high-tech, cynical world in which they are brought back to life. The witty language used to describe this process of assimilation is best exemplified in the closing lyric of the collection, "Their Dominion," a strange poem that narrates the resurgence of an Egyptian scarab in the computer age. By providing physical and environmental details, the poetic voice illustrates the route followed by the insect that "penetrates/the circuitry, the microchips,/the RAM the ROM" of a Mac computer (28). Apparently neutral, the descriptive idiom adopted by Terrone proves to be biting ironic if we consider the way she juxtaposes referential with abstract words. While the initial line introduces a realistic, disgusting "roach" that lacks the fascination of the desert scarab, the closing lines illustrate the improbable transference of Egypt's ancient mysteries into our prosaic age. "Burrowing/out of pharaohs' tombs/over deserts across time/he lives on in midtown, in memory,/in the Apple's core everlasting" (28). Here no creatures, not even plain cockroaches, seem destined to last long.