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# Gail Hosking's *Retrieval*: A Review

Less than a year ago, the United States ended its longest-ever conflict. The country left Afghanistan without grace, hiding highly-publicized videos of departure behind policy and promises. For many, it was an all too familiar scene. Forty-six years earlier, the United States ended its then-longest war in much the same way: carelessly and without poise. Even now, the U.S. government clings to technicalities in order to avoid officially calling what transpired in Vietnam a “war” at all. But its legacy endures. In her book, *Retrieval*, poet Gail Hosking demands that readers wrestle with the discomfort of a war many would rather forget: one that took her father from her. Through her skillful writing, deft descriptions, and immense vulnerability, Hosking takes the reader on a tour of her memory—a tour that’s fundamental to understanding the enduring history the Vietnam War era leaves behind on a human level.

While the book is split into three sections, Hosking makes the conscious choice to shy away from distinctly ordered memory. The poems do not follow the chronological order of the speaker’s life. Rather, they feel spontaneous and disjointed, attacking and retreating like soldiers without commands. The opening poem, “Chance and Hope,” sets the stage for the ensuing exploration into memory with the observations of a child. Hosking writes, “[m]y father put together survival kits...concentrating like a character / with his script of danger, his story of men.” By comparing the narrator’s father to a character with a script from the onset of the collection, Hosking explores the falsehood of eager duty that much of the country was lulled into during the war.

She repeats this assertion in the second section of the book in the poem “Notes From the Underground,” writing that the soldiers “knew the war was run by politicians / but went anyway because that’s what soldiers do.” The speaker carries more cynicism here, well aware of the politicized nature of the war, but that doesn’t change the fact that soldiers do what they’re told. In the very next line, she imagines that the soldiers are the “ones who help paint a picture—a case of hand grenades / under my dad’s cot...” Once again, these soldiers are not mere men; they are painters setting a scene like the character with a “script of danger” that Hosking imagines the speaker’s father to be in the opening poem. It’s with this expert reimagining and returning that Hosking lets the speaker explore the same experiences and memories more than once, each with new heartbreaking observations and declarations.

Hosking’s poem, “Personal Effects,” is emblematic of the expert skill present throughout *Retrieval*. Bare-bones and practical, “Personal Effects” is a list that goes through each of her soldier father’s belongings. Alliteration threads the seemingly simple poem from start to end, opening with the line “six short-sleeve shirts / four wash-and-wear trousers.” While the opening is innocuous enough—who among us hasn’t packed T-shirts and simple shorts in our travel bags?—each consecutive line ups the ante. The final several lines pack a punch:

six month’s gratuity pay

one signed statement

*I fully recognize the hazards involved*

one black body bag.

Phrases like “signed statement” and “black body bag” invite the reader to enjoy delicate, alliterative language even as the implication of these words leaves a hole in one’s heart. As one reads, the practicality gives way to tragic truth in the form of a life signed away. Hosking knows to leave her readers gasping; she doesn’t have to spell out what that black body bag means for the speaker’s loved one. It’s clear enough after a simple four-word line. The restraint of this poem paired with the more exploratory nature of “Hope and Chance” and “Notes from the Underground” demonstrate the dichotomy between the truth of the fact at hand—that men are packing up their bags and going to war—and how it feels to witness this as a daughter of one of those men.

Throughout *Retrieval*, Hosking’s voice never falters. While “Personal Effects” might end with a plain yet foreboding “black body bag,” it’s “A Life” that says plainly, “[t]he week he is killed she cooks / black-eyed peas and ham hocks,” as if the death of one’s father is no bigger an event than a rainstorm or

grocery trip. By choosing to go small when exploring huge wells of emotion, in this case grief, Hosking hooks the reader with an understated, restrained tone.

Visiting her memories through *Retrieval* is a journey the reader is lucky to go on; an experience that leaves one changed. Through each poem, Hosking picks apart a sliver of history on two levels, one personal and one wrestling with the legacy the Vietnam war era has left behind. From “think[ing] about what your father / goes through over there / in the jungle...” to newer memories that invite “a calm settling inside me, my heart / opening from rusted chambers,” the clarity and contemplation of *Retrieval* leaves one mournful yet serene and, surprisingly, full of hope.