

# Guinevere in Baltimore

Shelley Puhak

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## Foreword

What always surprises foreign readers who happen to come across an anthology of American poetry is the variety of styles. While poets in older cultures know they are working within a tradition and de facto bear the weight of that tradition, what may be the most attractive and interesting characteristic of American poetry is that its practitioners have never been able to agree what it is, which has freed each poet to pretty much start from scratch, treating the past as of little use when confronting the present. Our best poets, beginning with Whitman and Dickinson, have little in common with one another and often give the impression that they come from some other country, one which, for reasons that are unclear, is also called the United States. If there's anything that unites our poets and distinguishes them from those in other countries, it is an obsession with private experience at the expense of experience they might share with others. In a huge country with a short history, more faith in religion than in culture, and no firm sense of its own identity as a nation, what our poets have left to lean on, for better or worse, are their own selves. In the last hundred years this has resulted in a lot of fine and original poetry, despite the always-present dangers of solipsism and narcissism that tend to accompany any disproportionate focus on the self.

It is refreshing, therefore, to come across a poet like Shelley Puhak, who shows more curiosity about the lives of other people than she does about her own. Dramatic monologue is her preferred mode. In her first book, *Stalin in Aruba*, there are poems written from the points of view of the women in the dictator's family, some of whom he later had arrested and shot; the unfaithful wife of the secret police chief who comes home too tired from torturing people to make love; and the five girlfriends of Hitler who committed suicide. Another group of poems is based on gravestone inscriptions, imagining the lives of the schoolmistress, the young wife dying in childbirth, and the parish priest who are buried under them. For Puhak, the ignored past continues to haunt us. In the wonderfully ironic and funny title poem of that first book, she pastes the face of Stalin onto an American photo of the famous vacation island in the Caribbean, using the technique the dictator himself was in the habit of employing. Puhak has a mischievous streak in her poems and delights in startling juxtapositions. Of course, when her subject is some dark chapter of history, the intent



## Foreword

is not just to sweep the readers off their feet, but to remind them of an essential truth: that the banal and the horrific often coexist side by side, even in the midst of tragedy.

Her marvelous and far more accomplished new book returns to that theme, though in an entirely different setting. In place of real people one could read about in history books, we find ourselves in the world of legendary King Arthur and his court, except, as we quickly discover, this is a story of adultery among contemporary well-to-do Americans. What we have in *Guinevere in Baltimore* is a delightful blend of stock characters, and a style that combines the lofty manner of courtly romance with a tough vernacular mixing words and phrases from banking, medicine, biology, popular culture and fashion, to depict worldly ambitions and sex. King Arthur is a powerful CEO in high finance, neither wise nor very dignified. Guinevere is his unfaithful, bored wife, and the aging playboy Lancelot, who sits on the board of the same company, is her lover. They address one another in separate poems and explain themselves. The master of ceremonies for this thoroughly entertaining series of comic and erotic poems is someone called The Speaker, who, as in classic theater, addresses the audience and comments on the other characters. Puhak enjoys wearing masks in her poems, yet there can be no doubt that what are being described here are the lives of real people.

What makes *Guinevere in Baltimore* work as a whole is the sheer brilliance of the individual poems. The finest poetry, the kind one wants to keep re-reading, mostly comes down to memorable turns of phrase and vivid detail, and that is what one finds here. Of course, for a language to come alive for the reader one has to hear the voice of whoever is speaking in the poem, which requires verbal imagination and an exquisite ear for how different types of people talk. *Guinevere in Baltimore* is masterfully crafted, a veritable feast for any lover of words. Being a story about marital infidelity, its poems are full of things both intimate and scandalous. And juicy gossip, as the old Greek and Roman poets knew well, and made sure to record, will outlast empires and even gods.

– Charles Simic