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Leaving Brooklyn

By Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Houghton Mifflin. 146 pp.

"This is the story of an eye, and how it came into its own," Audrey, the narrator of Lynne Sharon Schwartz's reflective novel/memoir, begins. But trusting the tale rather than its teller, we soon learn that this short, powerful novel is much more than that. It is the story of how we grow up in the insular warmth of our parents' home, alternately secure and stifled, until events ripen us enough to try our wings. The Brooklyn Audrey eventually leaves is the metaphor for the childhood world she steps out of into the larger adult one with all its anxiety and excitement of the unfamiliar.

Yet, this is also the story of an eye. Immediately after her birth, a mysterious accident renders Audrey's eye damaged and different, strange to look into--small of iris, drifting, milky-scarred--and unique to look out of--legally blind but "its world was a Seurat painting, with the bonds hooking the molecules all severed, so that no object really cohered . . . a tenuous place where the common, reasonable laws of physics did not apply . . . I had secret vision and knowledge of the components of things, of the volatile nature of things . . . the tenuousness and vulnerability of all things. . . . My right eye removed the skin of the visible world."

Recollected in adult tranquility, the novel addresses Audrey's life from toddlerhood to age 15 and revolves around her double vision, her seeing surface and depth simultaneously as she gropes toward understanding the surfaces and depths of herself. In love from ages four through 12 with a neighborhood boy a dozen years older than she, a boy who will ultimately choose to never leave Brooklyn, Audrey swears off love as she enters adolescence and tries instead to contend with her difference and isolation, a territory Schwartz has explored effectively before in her underrated novel, *Balancing Acts*.

But history, which frequently intrudes into the novel in the forms of World War II, television, and Joe McCarthy, steps in decisively when Audrey reaches 15. The new ophthalmic breakthrough, contact lenses, can make Audrey's right eye, if not see normally, at least appear normal. Ophthalmology does not change Audrey's life, however. The ophthalmologist does.

Wearing grown-up clothes and the forbidden make-up, necessary preparation for leaving Brooklyn for a Park Avenue medical office, Audrey sits in the examining chair where her life will be changed. "He examined my bad eye in a new way, more inquisitively. . . . He must have found something--not the vision he was seeking, I didn't have that--but possibly my rampant longing to peer beneath the surface of things. He put his hand on my leg. I didn't move." At this crossroads in her life, Audrey follows her right eye, the one that wanders and wonders, and touches the doctor the most erotic way she can imagine, and the scene lengthens into a teasingly slow transformation of Audrey from girl to seductress who will continue for many visits this affair with the married doctor more than twice her age. Like her eye itself, she begins to peer around the edges of the visible world, learning what was hidden both outside her and within.

By novel's end, though still 15, she has come of age, ends the bittersweet adventure with the eye doctor, and knows what she must do: strike out on her own, leave Brooklyn even if it will never leave her, and become either an actor or teller of tales, like the one she has told here at great price: "Memory is revision. I have just destroyed another piece of my past, to tell a story."

As she has done before, Schwartz writes a moving story that rises above its flaws. The eye condition does perhaps make too neatly contrived a symbol for how Audrey sees. The early exposition feels murky until we discover where it leads. Schwartz's prose has a density that is both its strength and weakness. She describes objects, actions, feelings in a microscopic, prismatic way that risks tedium until the events begin to engage us, but at that point the engagement becomes all the more intense as Schwartz harvests the earlier seeds of description she had sown. The writing is expansive even when things would be better left unexpanded--something Schwartz was guilty of when she expanded her compelling short story "Rough Strife" into a less than compelling novel. Early in the book, Audrey goes on at irritating length about mundanities like how her mother opens milk containers, how to outline school papers, how a woman spoke with a cleft palate, and how lazy eye could be a metaphor for evolution and homeostasis.

More often, though, Schwartz employs her rich prose as the superb vehicle for her depth and understanding, as in the conflict Audrey feels after she has flushed her contact lens down the toilet to announce to herself that she is finished with both the eye doctor and other people's attempts to perfect her in their image: "Sometimes during spells of pain you can wake in the morning drenched with freedom and light and well-being, and this lasts a few glorious seconds while your life waits, like a resplendent party, a gala, for you to make your entrance. Eager to rise and put on our finery, you linger just an instant on the threshold, anticipating--when the pain comes up from behind like a sneak and grabs you. Back in its familiar embrace, you know that all along it was lurking in the folds of the sheets and you were only toying with freedom, allowing yourself to be deceived, and the light and well feeling that a moment ago filled the room evaporates like dew."

Flashes of insight into the heart of human nature appear throughout the book: Audrey, at 12, swearing off unrequited love--"How foolish to love so much, give so much in secret, and get nothing real in return. Love was not a condition of life, but an artificial corrective to the truly inherent condition of being alone"; Audrey, confessing to her mother being fondled on the subway, unraveling a knot in that most complex of family relationships, mother-daughter; " 'You can tell me these things, Audrey. I'm a married woman. I know what men are like. Don't worry that I'll be shocked.' She had my anguish, which always threatened to become her own, under control now. Like a potter, she would twist the raw, earthy material around in her hands, taming it until it grew manageable. Soon she would have this so small and shapely that she could tell her mah jongg friends about it."

Schwartz may tell us more than we wish to know at times, but when her writing is this consistently perceptive and skillfully textured we know we have picked up a book whose reverberations we will feel for a long time.