

SHELBY GODDARD

Stitching across Time and Memory: On Jill Magi's *Threads*

Threads, by Jill Magi. New York: Futurepoem, 2007.

In *Threads*, a hybrid work that blends prose and verse with augmented texts from outside sources—journals, official documents, and maps, among other things—Jill Magi sews up the tears in her narrator's (and presumably her own) personal history. There is a rupture in the narrator's family line, a break started with her father's exile from his home country, Estonia, that has lengthened and spread outward, back to her grandparents and forward to herself, spanning the space between Estonia and the United States. This literal distance—geographic and generational—manifests itself in the innumerable smaller ruptures of communication across languages, generations, countries, and time.

The narrator cannot read Estonian; she has only a tourist's knowledge of the land and its language, but seeks to decipher her place in the landscape of her ancestors by sifting through an assortment of texts relating to her family and their country. Difficulty in this process comes not only from the language barrier, but the disintegration of the texts themselves—they are torn, lost, written over, revised, corrected, and translated. What is lost in the processes of translation and repair of texts is a major theme of the work. In any attempt to repair a torn text, to heal the ruptures in communication, Magi asserts, "Some loss is inevitable." This loss is made manifest in images of the texts themselves, imperfectly repaired with a needle and thread, or otherwise altered, and displayed not as something found, but something in the process of being created. The stitching in these repairs often appears willfully uneven, with stitches of different sizes and varying angles skewering the page. The words are frequently readable, but difficulty with comprehension is imposed as much by the stitching as by the initial rupture.

The invention of displaying the stitched-up pages of books and other documents makes a space for hitherto unknown connections pulled together by the loose threads that spread out from each of these pictures. Never is a page fully sewn, fully connected. There are always

loose ends that extend out from the page as though searching for new links. These loose ends serve as reminders of the activity of repair as well as its incompleteness. The job of healing the ruptures symbolized by torn texts, often deeply personal histories recounting the traumas in family members' lives, can never be finished. Reconnecting two fragments of a story leaves a thick scar of black thread as a reminder of the wound it covers.

Magi takes the theme of repairing ruptures to another level by layering texts—fragments overlay fragments to create a new kind of whole. English words cover unintelligible (to the narrator) Estonian texts; sometimes strips of English text cover portions of Estonian writing, and sometimes holes are cut out of the paper on which the English words are written to reveal Estonian text flowing beneath the overlay. These organizational patterns suggest new possibilities for structuring texts that don't or can't follow a traditional linear pattern. Time and history, in human experience, are not so simple: a linear progression through time does nothing to make sense of ruptured family stories, to heal the wounds of exile opened in one location and unable to close in another. In layering texts, Magi displays the past and the present at once, as part of a single, complex document. At times, fragments are simply covering portions of other texts, making clear what came first and what is added, but when these added texts are cut up so the original can be seen between the lines, this relationship is made more complex. One can only make sense of the present, *Threads* suggests, by integrating layers of past experience—not privileging one time over the other, but viewing the layers of history as pieces of the same puzzle.

Magi's book ends with a change in the narrator, seeming proof that this method of grappling with history is useful and valid. Her journey through Estonia, through language, and through her family history has wrought a physical as well as a psychological alteration. She "can now say 'ma olen opilane' fluently, which is 'I am a student' though no one asks." This statement raises the question of whether no one asks who and/or what she is because she has not impacted the place and no one is interested in her, or because she has moved beyond her tourist identity into a new relationship with the place. The final lines suggest the latter: "my borders vanishing and breaking / to make that sound my lips / are now rounded without changing the position of the tongue." Learning this new language has altered her body, her experience of language, and her understanding of Estonia and its history. What is lost in translation, in the repair of texts and fragmented histories, is juxtaposed, at the end of the book, with what is gained.