

THE MAP THAT LEADS TO SALVATION

a review by Annie Woodford

Kelley Shinn. *The Wounds That Bind Us*. West Virginia University Press, 2023.

ANNIE WOODFORD holds an MA in creative writing from Hollins University. She received the Graybeal-Gowen Prize for Virginia Poets and now lives in Deep Gap, NC. She is the author of *Bootleg* (Groundhog Poetry Press, 2019), which was reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021. Her second book, *Where You Come from Is Gone* (Mercer UP, 2022), is the winner of Mercer University's 2020 Adrienne Bond Prize and the 2022 Weatherford Award for Appalachian Poetry. She was awarded the Jean Ritchie Fellowship in 2019, and her work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Prairie Schooner* and *Southern Review*.

The Wounds That Bind Us is KELLEY SHINN'S first book. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Fourth Genre*, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, and elsewhere. She is a board member of the Friends of The Outer Banks History Center.

Kelley Shinn lives on Ocracoke Island, NC, where she drives out to the beach and swims in the ocean most days. After Hurricane Dorian, she lost one of her prosthetic legs in the sea and had the sea return it to her a few days later. She lives in a house built from shipwrecks by locals with names that can be traced back to the oldest families on the Outer Banks, families with a talent for carpentry work and "making do," making beauty out of the salvaged materials that washed up on Ocracoke's shores. Shinn can recite the names of those carpenters and knows the architectural and cultural lineage of her house, where water has washed through the bottom floors more than once. Like those creative and fiercely independent island carpenters, Shinn has taken what could have been a wreck of a life and through sheer force of will, imagination, and an innate gift for joy and jokes, made it into something beautiful. She's written about that will, that joy, in her memoir, *The Wounds That Bind Us*, a profoundly lyrical, often humorous, always moving testament to the healing power of storytelling.

When Shinn was a high school runner with college offers in Akron, OH, she lost both of her legs to bacterial meningitis. This book recounts how Shinn struggled to survive this incredible loss and persisted to find beauty and love in the world as an adventurer, artist, and mother. Specifically, it recounts how her passion for off-roading in amped-up four-wheel drive vehicles led her to journey into Bosnia-Herzegovina to bring attention to the victims

of landmines, survivors like herself. There Shinn came to the realization that "amputation has a language of its own, a shared knowledge of such trauma and resiliency requires no translation" (175). Shinn's narrative is structured around allusions to Greek mythology, which is appropriate given the epic proportions of Shinn's life. Her memoir demonstrates she has suffered mightily, but she has also lived deeply, ecstatically even. The precise poeticism of her prose is a testament to that ecstasy, that laborious dedication to creating something good out of the mess of life where often "the agony is so severe that to fold back into stardust is freedom" (253).

Shinn's examination of the imperfect manifestation of love is one of the most powerful aspects of this memoir, beyond just the facts of her story itself. Take, for instance, this description of her father's flawed, but transformative love for her:

My father, who cleaned up the blood and vomit on the porch when I crawled into the house after being raped, even though I hadn't lived at home for several months. My father, who never asked any questions, despite the laceration under my eye, the shiner. My earthly, but heavenly father, who always wanted me to spare the details that would break him, who would sweep me up after the ravaged world left me for dead. (123)

In a heart-breaking scene where her father gives a teenage Shinn – bedraggled by grief and substance abuse shortly after the loss of her legs – his last few dollars, Shinn writes, "There was no more confusion as to what love is – it's the act of the wounded extending mercy to the wounded" (138).



COURTESY OF KELLEY SHINN

Shinn's memoir is a testament to this mercy, as well as the magic she felt in witnessing her daughter's early life. She became a mother despite being handicapped and found in her daughter the blood relative she so yearned for as an adopted child. In this sense, Shinn's book is also an important addition to recent conversations about the questionable ethics of adoption practices.** Shinn writes that the many scars on her body from where gangrenous flesh was cut out to save her life are a "map [that] leads to salvation, and it's all I have to offer my daughter that matters – living proof that there is abiding joy in resisting the whims of cruelty" (46).

Shinn's "abiding joy" is part of this book's warp and woof, especially in the tonal richness of Shinn's travels in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Shinn captures the threads of absurdity and humanity that run through any tragedy. For example, she states that she felt "like an asshole"

during a meet-and-greet with a group of amputees and speaks through her translator:

"You gentlemen must think it is crazy for a woman with no legs to try to drive around the world." Salko [an amputee she has befriended] is unable to conceal his mirth. He bursts out with laughter, everyone does. . . . Then Salko says, "We are all crazy! Welcome to Bosnia-Herzegovina!" The room bursts with laughter, and we spill out into the lobby where someone wants to take photos. (172)

Later, Shinn weeps as she ends a long night of drinking by witnessing Salko, a Muslim, praying at dawn on a little knoll above the war-torn city of Tuzla: "I hear the tremble in Salko's voice and know that I am not alone" (178).

In another scene, Shinn recalls partying with

the kids in the nightclub in Tuzla, children who survived the war, smoking and drinking and carousing in a sorrowful haze. When I asked one of them what it was like there during the war, he blew a plume of smoke in my face and when it cleared, he declared that they'd all seen the dead there, the corpses of their loved ones strewn along the roads where they once played ball games. And when I asked him what it was like to survive the war, he nodded toward my legs and said, "You ought to know. You're here where the music is aren't you?" (248–49)

It is this unerring impulse toward "the music" that drives Shinn's memoir. One of the many scenes embodying both "abiding joy" and Shinn's fierce drive to "repurpose the anger into intent" (2) take place in

hot springs "at the base of a mountain in Thermopylae" (148) where she and her traveling companion, an archaeologist named Tina, stop to soak on their way into Bosnia-Herzegovina. There they encounter an old man who asks them,

"Tell me, how old do you think I am?" It sounds like the beginning of a riddle. Tina tells him he doesn't look a day over sixty.

"I know," he says, standing out of the water, buck naked. "Lucky for you I am ninety-four. I've been swimming in these springs my whole life, preserves most things, but not all," he says, cupping his genitals with a feigned modesty.

Tina starts laughing. I'm not totally sure what's funny. Then she raises her fist out of the water. Steam is coming off of it as she shouts at the man in Greek, "*Molon Labe! Molon Labe!*" (149)

Molon Labe – "Come and take (me)!" – was the Greek king Leonidas's defiant response to the invading Persians during the Battle of Thermopylae and encapsulates Shinn's heroic response to a world where "you begin learning that loss is loss is loss" (257). "They took my legs," Shinn writes, "and I got up and walked away" (46).

More than anything, this memoir is a testament to Shinn's love of life and storytelling. She is, first and foremost, a spinner of yarns, a raconteur, a talker, holding the reader in delighted suspense. She will make you laugh, she will make you cry, but most of all she will leave you with an indelible sense of her unique voice as a human and a writer. ■

* See Larissa MacFarquhar, "Living in Adoption's Emotional Aftermath," *The New Yorker* Apr. 2023: [web](#).

ABOVE Kelly Shinn at her memoir's book launch at Books to be Red, Ocracoke, NC, 1 Jun. 2023