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Review · Roger Jones

Aerial View of Louisiana. By Cleopatra Mathis. New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1979, \$4.95 paper.

CLEOPATRA MATHIS' first book of poems is an exciting indication of the directional turn poetic subject matter could and indeed might be about to take. Following almost twenty-five years of poetry that isolates the self and revels in its subjectivity (a legacy which includes just about every conceivable weary extrapolation on the waste land theme), certain younger poets such as Mathis, Tess Gallagher, and others, are writing poems which turn outside for the definition of self. Not that this is a revelatory new approach; but in an age in which poetry sometimes is so hermetically sealed that even the most astute reader comes away baffled, it is refreshing to see a poet who strives to allow the reader every possible avenue of access into her own discoveries, and whose belief in mutual communication goes beyond mere shared experience, onward to shared vision where we may actually believe in the future humans have together again, working alongside and teaching one another. God knows the individual ego has been celebrated and deified enough in modern poetry. Such celebration has gone to absurd lengths; it has rendered as highly suspicious virtually anything that intrudes on our own holy ground.

What I find particularly appealing about the poems in *Aerial View of Louisiana* is the slow, patient manner in which Mathis' belief in a shared vision opens up during the course of the book. The poems are strictly concerned with relationships: husband-wife, lover-lover, sibling-sibling, sibling-parent, friend-friend, and so forth. Most of the poems involve some sort of shy gesturing that, once the reader has finished the poem and has gone on, opens within him as an honest-to-god discovery. This creates a sense of enrichment that is one of the strongest effects of these poems, and it underscores Mathis' assertion in "Rearranging My Body," when she writes, "I have a woman's feel for time/ hands that know when to be innocent." A good example of the significance of gesture in Mathis' view can be seen in "The Gift." In this poem, the speaker is talking about a particular friend who is pregnant. The speaker's

gesturing begins as she says, “I have no child/but have placed the cat purring/against my stomach in the dark.” As the gesture grows, the speaker moves toward a point in which she shares the experience itself: “I am making your child/a horse of pine and oak, a mane/from my braided hair. . . .” At the onset, she has so completely absorbed the experience through her gesture that the sharing of experience reverberates with a timbre of profound clarity. Other poems record similar gestures. In “For Allison, on the Obscenity of Flowers,” the speaker fills the room with flowers that remind her of the features of a friend; in “Making Bread for the Dying in the Next House,” each step of the bread-making is a symbolic counterpart to the events in the life of the one for whom the bread is being made. Even when the poet comes to a point at which mutual communication is impossible, as in divorce, for example, she finds some shared ground to celebrate, rather than a massive void to lament:

I have the last unshredded pictures
of our matching eyes and hair. We’ve kept
to our separate sides of the map;
still, I’m startled by men who look like you.
And in the yearly letter, you’re sure to say
you’re happy now. Yet I think of the lawyer’s bewilderment
when we cried the last day. Taking hands
we walked apart, until our arms stretched
between us. We held on tight, and let go.

The most profound poems in the volume involve the speaker’s family relationships—particularly with her sister and a violent step-father who is the subject of several pieces. In these poems, Mathis hones her specific philosophy about personal relationships, and the profundity of insignificant things, as the poems draw a noteworthy contrast between the tranquility, saneness, and virtue of a loving relationship, and the irrationality and confusion that result when such a relationship is broken or interrupted. The step-father is guilty of an animal-like trickery, for example, in “Family Life,” and the speaker underscores the savagery of each siege:

Waiting by the kitchen door, shotgun
across your knees, you picked us off

one by one, as we came in from school.
Maria's big eyes and your own son
screaming. An hour of that, then mother
came home, fried some rabbit
and we all sat down to eat.

The step-father's violence is further described in "For Maria," as he engineers "the breaking of our mother/who couldn't come to us if we called." At the end of this poem, the speaker's sister, normally reserved, has surprised the other family members by standing defiant to the violent step-father. Afterwards, in bed, the speaker notices her as she fingers small flowers out the windows—yet another of the small gestures in which Mathis sees such significance.

In many ways, for all its liberal cries about the rights of others, the current generation has been one of the most selfish. We have insisted on our own individuality to the point that the things we share in common have been forgotten in the din, or have been called seriously into question. Mathis' verse represents the fluctuation back to a sense of community again. Her poetry, which augurs an important career ahead for her, is warm, feminine, and is best summed up in lines from "The Traveler," as she addresses the step-father:

Do you know
how long it outlasts hate,
love; do you know how long?