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Book Review: Ex-Lovers and More Important Losses

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Ex-Lovers and More Important Losses. By Lisa Haynes. 2003. Warwickshire, UK: Comrades Press. 140 pp. \$30.99 hardback. Reviewed by Jeffrey C. Alfier

What is the use of poets in a mean-spirited age?
Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Bread and Wine'

Though Comrades Press editor Verian Thomas' encomium may appear to some a bit florid, its spirit is no less warranted for this outstanding book of verse that has already earned redoubled praise from the literary community. Such praise is well deserved, for imagistic and visceral strength is the artistic salience of Lisa Haynes' poetry as she lures the reader with refreshingly intense language and endings that offer the subtle and veridical power of rhetorical restraint.

One of her fortes is enhancing imagery through a skillful play of metaphors. In "The Body That Used To Be My Father," we find the magnificent lines "eyes tightly swollen like port-holes / on a sinking ship." In "What You Didn't Know, N'ser," we find this complex metaphor:

*What you didn't know, N'ser
is how it was all like a storybook
to a homebound child
with polio of the heart and soul.*

Later, in the same poem, we find this pleasing use of an absolute (paralogical) metaphor:

*...she had grown accustomed
to the loneliness of her mouth.*

This shows that one needn't venture far into her poems to be captivated by her expressive talents. Consider, in another example, how the title of "Loneliness" performs an immediate and intense melding with the first line of the poem:

It's all about drowning.

Furthermore, metaphors (as well as similes) neatly undergird her psychological complexities as in "Lover in the Other Room," and are as haunting as they are bracing, exemplified in four poems about a mentally troubled visionary named Walter, and in "For My Father The Artist, This Once," a poignant search for her biological father:

*in honor of your seed having sailed
through the canals of
my mother's womb
nine months before I made
the return journey*

Haynes' poetry is not for the faint of heart. In "Lessons From Lebanon, 1983" – a brutally lucid poem – "Two Boys Deep In The Woods," and "March 3, 1975" – a

magnificent elegy, Haynes starkly speaks to terror, child abuse, and murder. With this keen style she carries her readers along the sharp edge of supreme contrasts, often in complex and unsettling ways. In "Afraid of the Dying," she writes:

*We, who are afraid of the dying
make excuses so we might visit
less and less
.....
your breathing labored
holds a warm cloth to your head
while you spit phlegm into a plastic tub*

She handles ontological issues just as perceptively through an even-handed austerity such as we find in "Dr. Baugher's Class on Life & Death":

*He said the human mind
cannot bear to contemplate
its own non-existence*

*.....
the best we can be
is one long-scented breath
remembered well.*

Though Haynes exhibits an intense self-scrutiny, her poems always speak to the frailty and delimitations of humanity at large, such as "Shadow Angels," a poem that takes on the pandemic human fear of rejection, and "Continents," which ardently addresses the lives of the dispossessed. Her own profession as a police dispatcher provides further grist for some of her work, exemplified in "Foot Pursuit" and "Adam Henry Harcourt Is Still A Missing Person."

The fact that rhyme is sparse makes it welcome. In "Orison," the a,b,a,b, rhyme scheme serves a mock-hymn against the perceived stasis of a Judeo-Christian hereafter:

*I fear Your heaven of deathless flowers
and boundless pastures to while the hours*

*.....
I dread the path that has no stone
no worries for the flesh and bone –*

Indeed, it is much better to have:

Pain and passion darkly wed

That is why in poems like “Rendezvous,” she can accept the momentary but exhilarating flare of passion, or vicariously implant the visions of others across a broad spectrum, including lesbians: “If I Were A Lesbian,” wields an erotic rejoinder against homophobia.

Another key characteristic of Haynes’ poetry is a lyrical honesty as she maps-out the vast landscape of human loss, not forgetting that she herself is woven into its scenery. In this sense, “Departures” could serve as metonymy for the theme of the entire book:

*I am consumed with departures
rising like morning
on the eastern slope of my life*

.

and always we move forward into loss

Even life’s victories, when they occur, are often pyric, as in “Expatriate.”

Throughout the volume, there are several poems of distinctly Native American themes: “Addictions,” “Littleboy’s Last Stand.” “Jews and Indians,” “Akaohkiimiiksi (Mormons),” “The New Warriors,” and “The Hole in Penny TalksAbout.” In these Haynes speaks to community responsibility to avoid the often self-inflicted maladies of alcoholism and diabetes, compounded by the infliction of poverty by the reservation system, and how – like Jews – Native Americans are ready targets of prejudice by the majority white culture. There are also dualities that run the span of societal failure, where, for instance we see the uninvited proselytizers from a white culture’s home-baked religion confronting the malaise of reservation alcoholics. Still, Haynes’ Native American poems are not fatalistic, and, like her other themes, are never artistically or syntactically crude.

Finally, Haynes’ work evokes that of many other poets. The descriptive details of “She Dreams His Torso” are redolent of the late Richard Hugo’s “The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir,” while “Two Boys, Deep in the Woods” is, through its difficult theme of child abuse, reminiscent of Bruce Weigl’s, “The Impossible.” Robinson Jeffers once said that what makes words powerful is not mere association, but permanence. This is why Lisa Haynes’ verse makes the reader feel like the man in the Dostoyevsky story who ponders the choice of living forever, but at the price of being eternally suspended on the precipice of a cliff. Her poetry asserts that through the pain it is much more enriching to risk perching oneself over solitude, storm, and darkness than to endure a timid and gray existence. In Lisa Haynes, Comrades press has produced an astonishing writer who knows intimately the power of human language.