

The American Book Review

Toluca Street

Maxine Scates

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paper, \$8.95

In Maxine Scates's first book, *Toluca Street*, winner of the 1988 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, "home" becomes the locus for all memory and energy, a magnetic center that draws to it the poet's elegantly phrased ruminations and elegies. The book grows out from this center in a circling of stories: the lives of three generations of a working-class family in Los Angeles before and after World War II, their struggles against the vagaries of hard luck and hard work, housing shortages, bigotry, and shortsightedness—their own as often as not—and what Scates calls "a dose of too much hope." Different from yet akin to Mary Crow's journey, this one points like a double-edged knifeblade toward the interior of personal history. Its intent is to reveal American family mythology as both the dream-terminus and the place one must attempt to escape from if love is ever to be put into action. "And there in dream / that long dead dog still beats / its hungry path," writes Scates, whose book works its way steadily from the hungers for prosperity and the American Dream circa 1940s and 50s, to the hungers for identity and self in the late 1980s.

My favorite poems in this strong volume are the poems of lyric memory poised at the brink of sentimentality, refocused by a hard, clear-eyed present where all memories must be judged. In these poems, Scates lets the tighter syntax she reserves for historical narrative loosen, and the language flows on under its own graceful pressure. Here are two passages, the first from "We Never Knew You," and the second from "The Border":

Late February
bougainvillaea, orange trees beginning to blossom,
eucalyptus rustling and scraping overhead
all claim their presence
in the stagnant air
and you are dead.
And I believe the body houses pain,
I see that now, I believe the body houses pain
until it is ready to give it up
and I don't know why it took so long.

"South of the City of Angels
lives my Aunt Juana,"
my grandmother used to say.
Her Anglo father kept their language
away from his children.
It was lost three generations back.

We want to make something beautiful
but we come to a border.

We fuck up.

The gaps in our language are as real
as the way we step out of it
into the world.

Here Scates's eye for detail is sharp, her imagery and phrase-turning potent, but these dualities alone do not distinguish a first book of poetry. These poems, like so many in *Toluca Street*, work because they have something to say about the way Americans live their lives or hope to live them. When I think about the people Scates depicts, the alcoholic father, the banished Hispanic grandmother, the embattled sons and daughters seeking their own salvation in the world, I think of my own life, and of my own family's battle with disillusionment and dream and even despair. In "Reconciling," a poem that accepts the hard terms of filial love, Scates allows grief to transcend its bodily form, into something like prayer, reaching forward and back through time:

In grief
the body and spirit
wander side by side
each aware of the other's lonely presence,
door after door opening
through the balance of love
that threshold
where you, grieving now,
once said *here lies with there*.

* * *

... all we know
is how we love,
each life lived twice in parent and child—
they named us
for awhile called us hope
and we call back to them.

Scates has the lyric power to heal in these poems, but she refrains from easy endings. Instead, *Toluca Street* offers a map of hard-won love, and a home we can neither fully return to, nor fully leave. **MBR**

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