

BLACK LOAM, Maxine Scates. Cherry Grove Collections, PO Box 541106, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1106, 2005, 120 pages, \$17 paper.

Maxine Scates published her first collection of poetry, *Toluca Street*, in 1989. Her second book, appearing sixteen years later, was worth the wait. The poems in *Black Loam* have gestated into a powerful fullness, and as demonstrated in "Forgiveness," are ready now to rise...like the herons from the fields / with unencumbered grace. In *Toluca Street* Scates wrote compassionately of growing up in the working class neighborhoods of Los Angeles, of the silences that imprisoned her family, and of her own struggle to make sense of those silences. In *Black Loam*, winner of the 2004 Lyre Prize, Scates burrows further into the folds of these narratives with their accumulating complexities, confronting the unspoken even more intimately. Scates' work illustrates the ways in which class identity shapes one's existence and how family wounds perpetually haunt one's psychic landscape.

In "The Making of a Medieval Book," Scates beautifully suffuses science, history, art, literature, and religion. Her precise description of the bookmaking process starts with the parchment, made of a still-born goat, its skin scraped and stretched to its taut limit. We begin to glimpse what is to come in this poet's book. The act of writing is painful, but without confronting violence there would be no illumination, no book born. Scates asks the unanswerable questions, becoming one of the medieval scribes she describes: and if / the

wounds closed, what did the wounding / give birth to? In order to contemplate the echo of that silence, Scates creates a tapestry of personal mythology by weaving history and art into family narratives.

As in *Toluca Street*, Scates continues to make metaphor of her childhood landscape through recurring images of animals and the natural world. Still imminent is the need to return to "The Roses" that climbed the chain link fence, that withstood the parade of dogs, / dust and drying shit, / the years when no one watered. Through poetry she is able to retrieve the roses, cradling their misshapen intricacy, creating art from symbols of poverty, shame, and neglect.

This poet is not only attuned to her own pain. In this compassionate collection, the poet's body becomes a vessel of the world's pain. In "Wounded," Scates describes the surreal experience of awaking from surgery after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the seal broken, the world rent. In "Pain Comes Back," Scates expresses a touching vulnerability:

When I can't pull the covers up
and wake him to do it for me
I begin to wonder
why I stopped taking the pills...
...I wanted to see how much I hurt...

More painful than this experience, however, is seeing another woman, knees twisting from the same disease, holding a sign, *Disabled, Homeless, God Bless You*. The poet powerfully uses personal suffering to speak to the pain of greater cultural circumstances, giving voice to those who might otherwise remain voiceless.

Whether the subject is a homeless woman or her dying father, the poet ruminates on the fear of recognizing one's self in others. These poems confront family silences as they attempt to make sense of strained relationships. In "Wildness" Scates recalls a photograph taken in an unprotected moment, / the lip curled, almost a snarl: / my father's face. In "The Mothers" an important moment of recognition is intimately uncovered:

...Your mother, old now
one breast bandaged one unbound
blossoming suddenly, surprisingly
like your own, breast you both know
you've never seen, and she tells you
how she'd seen her own mother's breasts
only once, how they'd hung, pendulous
to her waist after nursing six children,
how she'd wanted to protect her own
daughter
from seeing the same.

The emotional journey toward uttering the unspoken converges in "Forgiveness" where Scates reveals the intense emotions wrought by family stories and struggles:

And even as I heard the voice say
Poor sad human being,
the hardest thing to give up was the hatred
when I stood over my father's body.
I still fall into the well of the house,
its sunroom, its stairs, its dirty kitchen.
I still fall into its redness
where those who were hurt
in turn hurt each other.

Black Loam is an important illumination of narratives too often excluded from the poetic tradition. Maxine Scates trans-

forms silence into a language of empowerment as she uncovers the profound ways that the consequences of social injustice are deeply embedded in women's lives. In this new collection, Scates complicates the stories already presented in *Toluca Street*, demonstrating the perpetual presence of the shame associated with her class background and the pain inflicted by domestic abuse.

The poet attempts to pinpoint the moment when the wounds can begin to mend in "Forgiveness":

Or maybe it was summer again
when I saw the women lifting clumps of
irises,
staking them, tying
the heavy blooms, those imperfect flowers
so full of beauty they broke their own
stalks.

The use of such rich imagery allows the poet to capture the unspoken. Like the irises, the poems in *Black Loam*, layered with their lush language, have been carefully nourished and tended. The poet writes not only to escape the pain of the past but also to embrace the beauty of the present. Scates calls on us all to ask difficult questions of ourselves, to question our fears, anger, and sorrow, to question our own willingness to forgive and heal.

Sarah Seybold

Editor's note: Maxine Scate's *Black Loam* was a finalist for the 2005 Oregon Literary Arts Stafford/Hall Award for Poetry.