

Undone (Front Porch Journal)

Maxine Scates, Undone

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I'm going to preface this with a disclaimer: prior to picking up this book, I had never come across Maxine Scates's work before. And thus, I got to partake in something rare these days for all of us living in the digital era of blogs, online journals, and downloadable books, or for those of us in the academic world of reading lists and recommendations: I simply opened a book and entered the dream of a writer previously unknown to me.

The result was that I got taken on one of the most emotional rides I've experienced in some time.

Undone is organized into four sections. The first (while often dealing with memories of a complex upbringing) has a heavier weight in tone and feel. In the first poem of the first section, "What I Wanted To Say," even the title evokes a sense of irreparable loss that continues in the body of the piece:

growing groggier when I reached Paradise
in the long poem, its perfections so much less
interesting than the fall, thinking of our living room
on 97th, so small and even smaller when my father
and brother fought and fell into the furniture.

There is a hint that Scates is addressing the weight of her history and the faults that have been committed. Unconscious faults perhaps, faults that may not be easily attributed to any one person or place or thing, but faults nonetheless.

But as the book evolves, the tone shifts. Though this is not to say that anything changes in the magnitude of what is being studied. Every section is as severe and as unflinching as the first. Yet still, by the third section, we arrive at these lines from "Residence":

The pond is filling, just yesterday
I saw a white haired woman standing on the corner.
I saw the slender girl she was
the way we see Daphne in the willowy trunk of a tree
and I thought, Once I was a girl,
liking so much the idea of what that might mean,
a little surprised I had forgotten.

And we become aware of something that has been creeping through the poems all along, growing in power and abandoning its hesitation. That something is hope. And it is a hope that we begin to understand as the driving force behind the dissection of Scates's life and world, a hope that grants bravery to her lines and exploration.

More often than not, Maxine Scates's poems take on a narrative feel. Most are written in long blocks with few, if any, space breaks, and they read like brilliant paragraphs from the pages of being human. As such, the poems engulf the reader like individual novels. I felt surrounded by her world as she moved across time and space (her worlds involve towns, farms, mountains, trees, and water). But along with the prose effect of many of her poems, her lines often reveal certain surprises when she chooses to break them in places that don't fall in line with the natural pauses of speech. Every line is individually interesting, even apart from its larger product.

Undone is a serious and tender book of important poems in which Scates navigates the history of herself and her region in an effortless series of memories. She knows how to hold an image and examine it in a way that is a testament to her survival as a person and a poet. She also knows how to leave an image before it's been gutted, letting one part of a meaning lead toward and weave into another. These poems skirt on unconsciousness while remaining grounded in every important detail—every tractor, every dead relative, every drink taken or not taken. As such, she is able to paint on an extremely wide canvas, which is necessary because her subject matter is the vast concept of what makes us who we are and how we can only gain privy into who we are by starting everywhere at once—beginning, middle, and end—and unraveling everything we know and don't know until at last we stand in the truth of having been ... undone.

—Michael Rosenbaum