

Undone

New Pages



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- Poetry
- Maxine Scates
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- Renee Emerson

Undone aptly describes the poems in this collection; they are poems of depth and density, stories told by a master storyteller, connecting the incidentals in life to the more profound. As a storyteller, Scates includes dialogue in many of her poems—"Friday Night Fights" recounts a conversation with friends during a game of Scrabble, which becomes more significant to the speaker, as he finds himself "doing my father imitation" with "everyone laughing / because I'm good at it though maybe feeling guilty / because no one knows it's the anniversary of his death." The imitation, something done as a joke during a Scrabble game, reveals deeper memories and pain in the speaker's life, as he remembers his father as a "clown of a drunk."

"Vice" tells the story of a recovered alcoholic who is tempted at a restaurant when a waiter brings almond liquor to the table, gratis, and the unnamed "you" in the poem who shows their love for the speaker by drinking the liquor for him. The poem covers the million thoughts that would go through the speaker's mind during the time he is tempted—his comparison of himself to Augustine, who "[stole] pears fit only for pigs, yet ate them / anyway. He wanted to taste forbidden fruit / and so did I." He remembers the hurt he caused others and the mixed and uncertain advice he's gotten on the subject:

this one hates me because I'm a drunk,
this one forgives and says I sought the spiritual
in the spirit's clear distillation, and this one
suggests the timing is right—I knew enough
to know they all could be wrong.

Though he knows this, still "almost sin lived" until his unnamed companion drinks the liquor for him. This small act is another everyday gesture that meant more to the speaker of the poem than the outside world would know.

These stories, though they seem commonplace, carry emotional weight because of the truth in them—it's during a casual Scrabble game, imagining a trip you never took, or waiting for a waiter when memories and feelings that have been suppressed come back unexpectedly. They are the secret trials that close friends and family go through every day, while nothing seemingly significant is happening...this "nothing" revealing their thoughts and feelings, as Scates's poems have done in this collection.

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