Spring 1978

On Madeline DeFrees

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Recommended Citation
Runciman, Lex (1978) "On Madeline DeFrees," CutBank: Vol. 1 : Iss. 10 , Article 24. Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss10/24

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When Sky Lets Go
Madeline DeFrees
George Braziller, Inc.
New York
$6.95 hardbound, $3.95 paper

In a year that one must already consider remarkable in terms of new books, Madeline DeFrees' *When Sky Lets Go* stands out like a beacon. At once various and complex, its light is strong, unwavering. Under such light, the things of experience change in subtle metamorphosis, become charged with the imagination which seizes them as they are, enlightens them, and render them to us marvelous and whole. Hence, a poem like "Still Life with Lumbosacral Support" (more than a poem about back trouble), which even in its title begins to suggest something of the extraordinary intelligence and imagination of its maker:

STILL LIFE WITH LUMBOSACRAL SUPPORT

My monkeybar and traction geared me for this stretch. If I could write *Corsage with Corset* in a hand that didn't shake, raise the body in these words, and, growing wild unearth a shock of fireweed, I could take the simple cure prescribed, endure the nervous system. This wide-mouthed tumbler from a better year spills thistles on my black decor. I know that proud spine. Pain moves it. Extends the possible, slow exercise that brings me to my knees. I believe
things I drop will be picked up on time.  
Hairpin turns, knitting  
needles, the lumbar strain receding.  
Between steel tracks a complex  
cord articulates dependence.  I come to terms.  
Sisters of Charity welcome me home.  
Their bills have backbone.  I call my friendly  
witchdoctor to counteract  
the breakdown.  Trussed for the difficult routine  
I limp to bed, a laggard  
disc of moon  
abject sensations, high on codeine and coffee.

Night contracts its thin  
reflexive arc.  The switchboard signals  
every shade of risk.  I step out,  
cautious, into total dark.

In a book as rich as this one is, there are many things to be impressed by. Among them, DeFrees’ deft touch, her absolutely right mix of humor, of intelligence and belief, and of endurance. The elegies (“Moving in Time” and “Self Service Island: An Elegy from Landsend”) are a case in point. They are not only laments for the dead, they are celebrations, however colored by grief and doubt, celebrations of the life lost and the life that continues.

“Moving in Time” takes for its occasion the death of two nuns, drowned after their car veered into a river. It begins in an ironic, almost journalistic tone: “Even dead you were a good swimmer. They dragged/ the river four days to bring your body in.” But then it moves, at the end of section 1, closer to the rage and questioning which that early tone was meant to control:

What is He  
trying to tell us?  The question, formal, in the only  
rhetoric we know.  They’ve buried what you left.  
I scream across the party line, mad mourner  
in an intermittent wake, waves rocking me down deep.

By the poem’s end, the speaker has found herself fully involved, the death raged against, in some ways merged with, and finally moved beyond:

What if I’m half afraid of shifting edges?  
The violent river bed in sleep still moving?  
Where I drive a road will open—air or water—
past women grieving on the bank. My craft alive beyond dull cylinders, full as the slow plum of its own dark drift.

_When Sky Lets Go_ is woven of numerous threads, but they trace their origins to two main sources: Madeline DeFrees' life now, and her life then. Before, she was Sister Mary Gilbert, now she is Madeline DeFrees. Two names, yet the poems are unmistakably by one woman. And it is clear in these poems that the move out of the convent, however difficult it must have been, has been a personally positive one:

> It will not serve—today or any day on the green banks of forever—that up in the succulent garden, tall and tended, the gold-eyed glorious ones bear kingly witness.

> No. I will stay outside in the doomsday weather, the round of ruin that knows me and brought me here. Courting the wide lost lakes and the wind’s reverses. With the brimstone leaves struck down by a sigh or a silence.

> I shall go on falling in a subterranean autumn plunge through the echoing space with the petaled legions. Everything falls from grace: stars, empires, sparrows. I move in the swordlight play of that downward journey.

(from "Everything Starts with the Fall")

In a recent interview, Madeline DeFrees says, speaking of her time in the convent, “I have a lot of time to make up for”; yet one senses she has used that time to good effect, senses it in the compelling intensity of involvement and attention which has made these poems.

Some books seem colorless, almost voiceless; not this one. And some books, the rare ones, beg to be lived with, to be savored at the
careful pace which the poems themselves suggest—that is the kind of book Madeline DeFrees has written.

**Lex Runciman**

*In A Dusty Light*
John Haines
The Graywolf Press
P.O. Box 142
Port Townsend, WA 98368
$5, paper

It is frequently noted that poetry begins in silence. It is altogether too frequently noted, especially in Schools of Writing, that the silences between words and between lines in a poem become "luminous." In the poetry of John Haines, however, the silences are indeed luminous. If there is a mantle of "inhumanism" to be passed from the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, it must go to Haines. In his best poetry, there is not so much people, as evidence of people. His poetry chronicles geography, inner as well as outer.

**HOMESTEAD**

I.
It is nearly thirty years
since I came over Richardson Hill
to pitch a bundle of boards
in the dark, light my fire
and stir with a spoon
old beans in a blackened pot.

. . .

The land gave up its meaning slowly, . . .

The "I" of Haines's poetry is never intrusive. His poetry appears to be heard at a volume slightly below the murmur, and it is never himself to which he calls attention, but to the details of living, the ash, the spark, the small steady flame at the center of being. His poetry is a gentle prodding, reminding us of the balance of natural things, the futility of avarice, that "the land will not forgive us" our plundering.