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***River at Wolf* by Jean Valentine**

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The River at Wolf

Jean Valentine

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Alice James Books, 1992.

\$8.95; paper.

Reviewed by Lee Evans

Jean Valentine's poem "The Under Voice" begins with an almost Blakian image of the homeless: "I saw streaming up out of the sidewalk the homeless women and men/...the homeless men like dull knives gray-lipped the homeless women..." and ends, surprisingly enough, in the birthing room: "And the under voice said, Stars you are mine, you have always been mine, / I remember the minute on the birth table/ when you were born, I riding with my feet up in the wide silver-blue stirrups." How we get from one place to another in the poems that make up Jean Valentine's new book, *The River at Wolf*, we can never quite be sure, but once we unlatch ourselves from the expectation of linear travel, we can experience this journey for what it is: a dazzling rush to the center of our lives.

Just as Valentine learns to trust the power of the "under voice" that dictates her short lyrical poems—the mysterious voice that links all things: poverty and birth, ecstasy and danger, and, most poignantly, in Valentine's work, mother and lover—we too must trust Valentine to guide us through the undercurrents of her own inexplicable life experience as a means of guiding us into our own. In these poems, more often than not, we see ourselves as though from under water, through "watery car lights across the child's white quilt," to borrow one of Valentine's exquisitely wrought images of this world always in flux. And yet, strangely, we emerge from these poems with the clarity we sometimes glean from dreams, even the dreams we can't quite remember upon waking.

In some ways, Valentine's book is an elegy for her mother. Chronicling the progress of a daughter's grief, these poems are strikingly self-reflexive, the speaker seeking identity through the mother, even in death. There is always the impulse to recreate the mother in

these poems, to retrieve the irretrievable, even though resurrecting the mother inevitably means resurrecting pain. Showing us, step by step, her own peculiar associational path back to her mother, Valentine writes in "Wish-Mother":

I love glass because of water,
water because of blood,
blood because of your heart,
lapping against the birth door to my ear,
over and over, my darling, my familiar. And my good.
All the way home to New York my heart hurt.
(The Second time you died this year.)

Strangely transformed by death into a "fish mother" in "Skate," the mother now wears an "other-worldly face/ not saying anything/ face I can never meet/ inside the inside face." Transformed, and yet desperately important to the daughter's vision of the world, of herself:

...under all the pieces of light,
how could I get to you?
Never leave you. Please you!
Teacher, spine in my spine:
the spelling of the world
kneels down before the skate.

Valentine moves with deceptive ease through the fluid world of the mother-daughter relationship, especially when she reveals the felt, but seldom-described connection between our first love for our mothers and subsequent love relationships. Most explicitly described in "Seeing You"—a poem in two parts, appropriately enough: "Mother" and "Lover" respectively—this connection is subtly evoked through the repetition of earthly images. Mudbank, finger-spaces, garden are cast in the first section to portray the fear and longing of an unquenchable love for the mother and then recast in the second to show the long-awaited fulfillment of desire, complete with the

suggestion of the child's journey to this earth through the mother's body:

I dove down my mental lake fear and love:
first fear then under it love:

I could see you,
Brilliance, at the bottom. Trust you

stillness in the last red inside place.
Then past the middle of the earth it got light again.

Your tree. Its heavy green sway. The bright male city.
Oh that was the garden of abundance, seeing you.

Valentine can also be very gritty and direct in her treatment of this mother/lover connection. In "Second Mother," she writes of a brush with the sexual she had with a seventeen year old "half-girl, half-mother" when she was only four years old:

Then, by the river,
Ha! Ha! I could have touched
your bright white circles,
your nipples' little red mouths,
redder than my mother's.

The River at Wolf is a garden, challenging and rich, full of surprises, sensuality and promise—in short, well worth our attention.