



Desire Lines: New and Selected Poems

Lola Haskins

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Late at night, sitting in a greasy spoon, drinking bitter coffee, one eavesdrops on the conversation taking place in the next booth; the sardonic or exhausted tone expresses the sentiment far more than the words, which are more often than not commonplace, merely signposts to emotional complexity. So it is reading the poems in this collection; one overhears the most intimate thought of those so often in history not given voice: the spinster schoolteacher, the homesteading wife, the young slave woman. The poet's accomplishment is that she presents these women's voices with so little commentary; rather, she lets the women speak for themselves, and in their collective voices, one hears Haskins's own concerns and preoccupations: "Surely there must be others, other wives / whose men wear gray and have been long / from home, others who wake flushed as I."

Haskins, who teaches Computer Science at the University of Florida, has published seven previous collections of poetry and been widely anthologized and published in literary journals. *Desire Lines* compiles work from five of these previous editions in addition to thirty-one new poems. Throughout her oeuvre she examines the lives of the dispossessed, of those who find that history forces them to conform to roles they find uncomfortable, distasteful, destructive. Haskins's poetic power comes in her deft handling of images and tones that intimate pending disaster yet remain restrained: "Behind me white curtains blow, / though afterwards we said we could not remember / a day so still. Tornado weather, we said, / but no tornado came."

By working in series, compiling poem on poem, image on image, voice on voice, Haskins examines, from many perspectives, her central themes of isolation, attachment, disappointment, and the power of words to give meaning to events. The poems selected from *Forty-four Ambitions for the Piano* rely on the trope of musical terminology as the armature upon which to examine family and its inherent tensions. In the poem "Accidentals" a harried wife explains: "sometimes I slip, and cook for four. And sometimes, when I go to serve, I find the food has gone, and all my pots are full of tears."

In the poems from Jane Marshall (1835-1910), Haskins examines absence and longing; the narrator's words suggest her poetic methodology itself—narratives that finally suggest with echo and implications—"your voice trails off, like a dusk bird / vanishing into deeper woods."

The poems in *Desire Lines*, often understated yet filled with inflections, compel one to examine one's neighbors' lives, lives unremarked yet remarkable. Haskins's poems remind us that those with no voice burn to speak: "There is a line made of paper. If words touch it, / the line will spark from the end, and burn. / End. And burn."

DUNCAN SPRATTMORAN (September / October 2004)

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