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Little Boat

Jean Valentine
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Serious poets seldom write loud jokes, but the self-mocking disingenuous note of *Little Boat*'s title poem nicely captures the tact of this collection of occasional poems, many reprinted from *The Columbia Poetry Review* and *The New Yorker*. It is Valentine's tenth book, and her second after *Door in the Mountain: New and Selected Poems 1965-2 003* won the National Book Award in 2004. (She won the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1965 for *Dream Barker*.)

The joke—a precocious pun, really—is the opening poem, "*La Chalupa*, the Boat," in which she sees herself at age twenty adrift in a Mexican water taxi, often called "floating gardens" for their stylized painted flowers. "—No, not drifting, I am poling / my way into my life." Her blue vessel with rose garlands, her little craft, will no more keep to the shallow shore than Valentine herself would ever hew to a more conversational, open style. She foresees "cliffs of the mind" and "seven deaths"—mere showy phrases here, but emblematic of the death haunted imagery throughout. Indeed, the poet, with awards from the Guggenheim Foundation as well the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters to her credit, has painstakingly evolved a style more like haikus wrapped in oil-cloth; distinct small parcels of honed vision, indelible and deft.

Death's scaffolding is everywhere, and the poet has befriended it, almost courting intimations of mortality, be they in stark hospital rooms or faceless New York house fronts, "the grave window-eyes across the street … half open, or gone asleep." But then, so too is life found, with a lightness and spiritual in-folding of what she beholds: "It was euphoria / little veins of it sent / burst to the brain / three little fireworks / white on the gray MRI." The leanness brings these short poems to a breath-taking point.

In the last work, "The Rose," her small craft achieves a dexterity impossible in longer poems: to bring the known world to the edge of the unknown, in a transcendence both monosyllabic and majestic:

> *Then god the mother said to Jim, in a dream, Never mind / you, Jim / come rest again*
> *on the country porch of my knees.*

LEETA TAYLOR (October 9, 2007)

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