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Selected Poems Of Janet Lewis

Janet Lewis
R. L. Barth
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Lewis is best known as an historical novelist (The Wife of Martin Guerre), though her poetry has been highly esteemed by a later generation of twentieth century writers, most notably Philip Levine. Barth previously edited the poems of Lewis' husband, poet and critic Yvor Winters. Here, he has re-ordered some poems from Lewis' Poems Old and New 1918 - 1972, incorporated pieces from a later collection The Dear Past and Other Poems 1919 - 1994 and added uncollected late work to amass a retrospective of her strong and spare lyrics.

Lewis writes with a directness that in the best of her poems, and in her sharp epigrams, comes across as insight; at times, however, her plain style allows for some dated phrasings—elisions and inversions that impart an antique tone. It is poignant to see the solid early poems chronicling her observations of and obvious passion for Ojibway culture and the landscape of the Great Lakes echoed in the collection's final poem, "River," where the speaker revisits the sensory experiences of those days and entreats "Remember for me/ Who will not be able to remember."

With subject matter described as "domestic" by the editor—gardening, housekeeping and many occasional poems directed towards friends—Lewis' poetry may well have been passed over by a century fixated on the monumental. This volume preserves work that stands in delicate counterpoint to the intricate narratives which secured Lewis' literary reputation.

JANET HOLMES (May / June 2000)

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