

The Essential Dorothy Roberts

Dorothy Roberts

Brian Bartlett, Editor

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This is an excellent entry into the work of a respected poet.

The Essential Dorothy Roberts is a subtle and graceful poetry collection.

Roberts, who died in 1993, came from a family of poets and was encouraged to follow in their footsteps. Her own poems were originally published across a wide span of time, ranging from her first chapbook in 1927 to her final collection, *In the Flight of Stars*, from 1991. *The Essential Dorothy Roberts* is the first twenty-first-century publication to collect her work.

Roberts's poetry may at first seem staid or old-fashioned; her imagery is more plainly stated than that of many modern poets. Her poems' quality, however, is unquestionable. They turn an insightful gaze on a myriad of topics, their messages often revealing themselves fully only after careful consideration, like complex visions coalescing out of a seemingly bare background.

Editor Brian Bartlett's foreword outlines the common themes of Roberts's work. Hers is, he says, "poetry of exile" (Roberts lived much of her life in the US after her childhood in New Brunswick). Nature, people, and the home are observed with a sense of distance and nostalgia, as removed as impartial observations at times, but with an unmistakable undercurrent of passion. Explosions of passion are rare; reserved, slow builds toward emotion are no less impactful. Formality and repetition are used as highly effective tools:

*She was lost in the wood because a few leaves fell,
They fell and changed the pattern of the wood,
A wind rustled and a few leaves fell, yellow,
And she looked around and her heart thumped,
And there she stood.*

Such lines are deceptively simple but contain terrifying visions of everyday experiences, such as the easy disorientation that sometimes occurs when you're hiking. Sophisticated in a way that makes them look easy, these poems excel at delivering honest and innocent observations without a hint of irony. This is true also of the awestruck wonder of viewing a galaxy through a telescope in "A Marvel" and the brief sense of kinship that comes from observing a train car full of animals in "Travellers":

*Till I am here amidst the dirt and straw,
Having to peer out, press and moo and paw:
So unexpectedly I am with them
I lose the privilege from which I stem.*

End rhymes and refreshingly direct lines emphasize the poems' messages. Roberts doesn't shy away from ambitious

subjects, either, as evidenced in the moving, three-page poem “The Great Activity of Death.”

The forty-eight poems collected here are a representative selection, gathered from the canon of a respected poet; it is an excellent entry into her work.

PETER DABBENE (August 16, 2018)

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