

Washing the Stones, Linda Larson



Washing the Stones, Linda Larson, Ibbetson Street Press, September 2007, Reviewed by Lauren Byrne \$10.

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This collection begins in the South, where “Cypresses take on the shapes of native women/Surrounding the black water like an extended family...” and where, after hard rains, “the red clay dirt turns into gumbo.” The American South is part of the geography of Linda Larson’s past that she mines to reveal a life lived with a poet’s intensity. Even when the subject is death, her words dance with life, as in “Sweet Chariot,” recounting the funeral of a 16-year-old cousin, where:

“A canopy of roses covered the casket/like the winning colt at the Derby,” or “Catfish Catch,” where a gutted catfish reveals “in the dull gray lining” of its belly, “ruby-colored, wet roe,/a handful of bright beads.”

Before I go any further let me divulge the fact that I’m a friend of Linda’s. She’s even been kind enough to mention my name in her book. I remember the day I read some of these poems for the first time when she was putting the collection together. The short poems, in particular, seemed like gunshots of clarity—little explosions of comprehension that lit up the beauty of so much in life that we take for granted.

One of her shortest poems, "Daily Bread," is also one of my favorites, suggesting as it does that only by its absence is the luxury of the ordinary revealed:

"How glad Isolde/Would have been/To rise at six/And put the coffee on."

Isolde of Ireland in the Arthurian legends was betrothed to King Mark of Cornwall, who sent his nephew Tristan to escort her to his kingdom. The pair fell in love, and as doomed lovers never knew those routine times couples often don't recognize are contented until they end. Linda's moving long poem, "Schizophrenia with Features of Unrequited Love," allows us a glimpse into the mental illness that has claimed stretches of her life, but which has also contributed to her heightened appreciation of the ordinary and the everyday. Her experiences have helped her shape poetry that imparts a lasting sense of what a privilege it is to simply live simply.

- Lauren Byrne