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The Owl on the Aerial by Clarice Short (review)

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The Owl on the Aerial. By Clarice Short. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. 174 pages, \$14.95.)

This is a collection of forty-five poems with an Introduction by Emma Lou Thayne, the poet's literary executor, an Appreciation by poet Jim Elledge, and a Portrait of the poet drawn from her diaries by Barbara Duree, who selected the poems and produced the book. The graphic work is by Keith Montague, who designed Short's first book, *The Old One and the Wind* (1973). The book is a work of love, carefully done, and that care enables us to appreciate more fully what makes Clarice Short a poet of the first rank.

Everyone can find something to admire—some poem that strikes a chord. Elledge finds a mystic quality—a sense of the equality of very different things and the dualities in man, nature and artifact. I find in Short's nature poems something that reminds me of Thoreau and his far-fetched (but worth the fetching) correspondences and his ironic use of the pedestrian sentiment; in her portraits of the human condition there is kinship to the sadness of Keats and the sympathy of Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Her poetry is of such technical quality that it is a joy to study how she does what she does. There is a deceptive simplicity in her work. Her allusions, for instance, are mainly to the familiar, or if not, are identified within the poem. The impact of her poems comes through a reconsideration of what is alluded to. For instance, "Protestant Cemetery: Rome" begins "If one is half in love with easeful death," evoking the death and burial of Keats, in the second stanza gives an image of wild strawberries on the graves, and in the third stanza asks a question about the Persephone story—if six pomegranate seeds "ended summer" what is the price "for wild strawberries, blossom and fruit together?" Sometimes her method is to establish a simple vivid image, then "explain" its meaning with another vivid, but disparate image: a winter scene and a Japanese print or a sunburst of sunlight on a hill slope and the curtain going up on a stage.

She achieves poetic form in subtle ways: varying patterns of first line length; rhythmic couplets ("I have grown fond of gallinules/Affection has bloomed with acquaintance"); catalog and alliteration in the playful "By Their Right Names: Bird Groups, Circa 1250." Almost any set of lines, read aloud, has a musical flow.

The diary material is arranged to provide a portrait of Clarice Short in her five parts: rancher/farmer, sportswoman, scholar, teacher and traveler. The entries tell a good deal about times and places of her life. Included in the portrait are several (in addition to the forty-five) poems related to diary entries. These poems let us see what a good poet can do with what she saw, heard, read and felt.