

Sara Rath, the Poet in Her Own Right

The Cosmic Virgin

Poems by Sara Rath. Wisconsin House, Ltd., 47 pages.

Sara Rath's first collection of poems, **Whatever Happened to Fats Domino**, appeared in 1971 and was one of the last books reviewed in this very column by the late August Derleth.

He would be pleased, I think, that Sara Rath's second collection of poems is dedicated to him. Her work does her friend and teacher honor.

One feels August's presence in many of these pages (how many poets these days speak of hawks and Joe Pye weed?), particularly in "Lesson," and you can almost hear his voice:

**Know this
is yarrow, when you see it
again. And Joe Pye weed
dusty rose in the fields
with a scent of carnation.
One flower
you did not identify I found
by the lakeshore to press
between your poems of love.
Forget-me-not.
I already knew its name.**

August would probably take great pride in the fact that supportive though he may have been in Sara Rath's development, her work now does indeed stand on its own merits.

Only a woman of maturity and talent could have written the following poems. An Edna Meudt could have done them. Or a Sylvia Plath. But that's pretty fast company. "For Jack" delineates what has come to be an American commonplace in the classic form of **Spoon River** or **Our Town**.



BOOKS of the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

**When I was nineteen and tanned
you took me to a sand bar
in the middle of the Mississippi
where we loved
naked on a warm island sun,
hidden by tall grass and turtles.
I rode the bus home,
crying, seated beside a silent nun
who fingered her beads all across
Wisconsin until she was replaced
by a wild haired woman on leave
from the State Hospital
who chattered nervously and offered
me a Baby Ruth.**

The very use of the word "Retribution" whispers softly of things not fully comprehended on this plane. Things not magical, but mystical. Or perhaps it speaks of things fully comprehended on this plane after all — but not understood in the least. And perhaps the only mystery is us.

**I have walked with you
leaving no footprints.
I have slept with you,
eyes, wide.
I have kissed your lips
invisibly.
I have borne your child,
dead.**

This sense of the mystical comes through very strongly in "Red Candle," part of a longer section titled "Reflections in Scarlet":

**"The old witch said / beware . . . they must be used with care
/ (primitive beyond sex, beyond life) / by those who are intensely
sure / and only then with caution. / Vibrations set in motion / can
hold a soul possessed. / But I / witch-novice so obsessed / with
magic secrets, touched the wick / and watched it burn. / There is
no return."**

(As an old son of Romany, I have always watched witches with interest. In yesteryear, my grandmother used to mark the door jambs with red crosses of chicken blood in the Easter season — and only yesterday, Sybil Leek of England predicted President Nixon would retire from office this July.)

In what could be the title poem, "For A.D. after death," we are permitted to overhear a gentle conversation, even as we are permitted to hear the wind rustling and the river running.

**The cosmic virgin loved you as a child
would love a poet's magic whispering
of earth and man and sorrow. Then you smiled
a patient smile and gave the days of spring
and autumn to her, laughing in the sun
of mushroom haunted woods or trestled slough
within the shadows, far from everyone
where secrets, like our friendship, slowly grew.
Now . . . rainbow prisms shattered, fireworks soar
kaleidoscopic, glass-reflecting tears.
The hour is dark with no hurt any more.
no hawks or owls or solitary fears.
But cosmic love defies both time and place;
our spirits shall commune, transcending space."**

Sara Rath is finding her own voice. She will do even finer things and be worth anyone's listening and hearing. August Derleth must be very pleased indeed.