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Review of Depta's "The Helen Poems"

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Victor Depta’s *The Helen Poems* is a sequence of lyrics in the confessional mode that, taken as a unit, form an extended, unified narrative. The story is that of a father rearing his daughter alone—a situation that is increasingly common, seldom written about, and, therefore, all the more
engaging. With a narrative strength sufficient to carry the reader through occasional lapses in lyrical technique, Depta's poetry does justice to this emotionally rich and troubling vein of human experience.

This book begins with "Amtrak Song," which presents the departure of the mother-wife by train, leaving husband Victor standing "on the platform/in the January wind," and daughter Helen weeping, clutching at [her mother's] sleeve." The final poem, "Not Only Daughter," ends with an image of the speaker and his prayer for the girl, who has grown up and flown west to college. In between, Depta profiles the emotional challenges of single-parenting, the endless duties and responsibilities made all the more demanding by one essential difference between father and daughter: the separate experiences of the genders.

The strength of this story is centered in the appeal of this most deeply human theme: the parent-child relationship. The book is made no less appealing by the development of certain predictable strains. We anticipate how Victor will handle the commonplaces of parenthood. Dominant among these is worry: worry grounded in the inherent dangers of being-in-the-world and ungrounded in his own perceived inadequacy, worry that is reasonable and worry that is not. In "The Siege of Twilight," for example, the sunset becomes "The distant armament/on the horizon where the clouds are trenched/explodes through trees/and strikes my daughter . . ."

Still more poignant are the speaker's concerns based on the fact that he is responsible for leading Helen through adolescence into young womanhood—an experience which he has not lived. The poems trace the tentative, unfamiliar steps, and as Helen develops through her junior high years, he wisely suppresses his comments when she "wears huge blouses/sweaters like sackcloth/giant coats/harassed as she is by thin-clumsy/inchoate boys."

Possibly the most subtle and compelling theme that Depta develops, though, is that of the occasional reversal of the roles of parent and child—particularly, the transformation of the dependent daughter into a concerned and nurturing mother. After all, the divorce that separated Helen from her mother also separated Victor from his wife, and her absence is the fourth note that colors the poem's every chord. He is hurt when he reads in Helen's English class journal, "My dad teaches college./He didn't marry again and seems really sad/a lot of the time . . ." but admits that she is writing the truth.

There is emotional intensity, subtle truth, and hard-won insight in Depta's writing, and that weighty content is the strength of The Helen Poems. For while the narrative elements are consistently compelling, the
lyrical and technical are somewhat less so. A good story can cover a multitude of sins, and there are here, though not a multitude, at least a few sins that need covering. The prosody is relatively undistinguished free verse, and occasionally the syntax offers more challenge than reward. More problematic, though, is a failure of tone which occasionally breaks the reader's comfortable identification with the speaker. One such lapse is evident, for example, in "The Grown-Up Miracle." In that poem, Victor has embarrassed Helen with a drunken telephone conversation which she and her friends overhear. Unfortunately, his repeated "I won't apologize for my anger"—though probably a healthy morning-after sentiment—sounds a little too much like talk-show psychobabble. Of course in working with such highly charged subject matter, Depta continually walks the narrow ledge that divides broadly appealing pathos and the pathetic. When his craft is up to the challenge, as it usually is, the result is compelling and satisfying reading. But when craft does break down, the result is self-pity without an undercutting irony to make it bearable. This is, it seems, a risk inherent in the confessional mode, and when Depta fails he is in good company. But the fact that even Snodgrass and Lowell have occasionally made the same misstep does not make it any easier to read. Fortunately, Depta seldom loses control, and the momentum of the narrative usually carries the reader over the weakness of certain individual poems.

In the end, The Helen Poems is not a workshop study in poetic technique—as evident as Depta's craftsmanship may be. The book's force is rooted in the poet's ability, through a deftly controlled narrative, to bring the pain and bliss of parenting before us and to make us feel his experience as our own. It is hard to imagine any parent not finding a mirror of troubled waters in the book, and to the degree that the trader's experience may parallel Depta's, The Helen Poems is compelling reading indeed.

—William Jolliff