

*A Fish to Feed All Hunger* by Sandra Alcosser. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1986. 63 pages. \$10.95, cloth.

*The Beds We Lie In: Selected and New Poems* by Kathleen Spivack. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986. 176 pages. \$13.50, cloth.

Kathleen Spivack's *The Beds We Lie In* provides a good sample of her poetry from the past twenty years, plus fifteen new poems, grouped in the section "The Moments-of-Past-Happiness Quilt." This section focuses, as much of her poetry does, on the often painful love relationships we bind ourselves to in "the beds we lie in." Sandra Alcosser's *A Fish to Feed All Hunger*, winner of the Associated Writing Programs Award for 1984, finally appeared in 1986 and demonstrates her acute ability to develop a precise sense of place and to write strong narrative poetry.

Spivack's poetry has moved away from the speaker as observer of the world in early poems such as "A Child's Visit to the Biology Lab" and "The Snapping Turtle," where the speaker watches the snapper feed in an aquarium, tossing it "gobbets of girls. / In the fishfood fall the shapes / of shaved women, twisted, imploring." In later poems the speaker becomes a more active participant and at times becomes the woman as victim. One of her best poems about painful love relationships is "The Peregrine," which describes a love affair through the imagery of falconry: "Desperate now, / I am breaking myself against glass, / . . . you enter the airless room softly, cover / my eyes with a glove of black leather, hood / the fierce questions, and bandage my mind."

The final section of Spivack's book develops an extended comparison between patchwork quilting and the memories of various stages in a relationship. Though this comparison seems forced in "Rocking-The-Baby," it works very well in many of the poems, particularly in "The Moments-of-Past-Happiness Quilt" and in "The Quilt of Stay and Go," in which "The pattern is made up of / torn scraps and rags; how / he held you once gently, / . . . The baby's nappy / towel, your mother's / shroud, one corner, / a lock of hair."

What is so striking about Alcosser's work is her ability to provide a specific sense of place in dramatic narrative poetry, with the observant eye of a naturalist. The first section of *A Fish to Feed All Hunger* is mostly set in Montana, where Alcosser lived for some time, and the poems are filled with startling images of that wilderness. In "Fox Fire," the speaker comes to realize that "All I will ever know is right here / in the wash and till of my own ten acres. / . . . There will never be more than twilight, a valley, / receding to glass. In this tiny paradise / of common flowers, the waist-high marigolds / blaze up like golden dowagers."

Her most dramatic narrative, "The Journey," about a couple suffering "cabin fever" in an Alaskan winter and attempting the dangerous river trip to town, demonstrates the potential she has to switch to novel-writing if she so desires. Their canoe soon lost to the river, and the wife seriously injured in trying to hike

out, the couple is forced to build an ice cave and, in desperation, eat their own dog. When her husband has left in search of help, the wife finally crawls out of the cave to find "everywhere my husband's confused tracks, / his fragmented crosses. / Staring into the blank sun, I am content / to lie alone, to call back days so precise / they are like the red patches of a kestrel / in dark flight."

In describing male/female relationships, Alcosser's "The Trap," from the last section of her book, is similar to Spivack's "The Peregrine," but in "The Trap" the victim, the wife's formerly estranged husband, sleeps calmly with his back to his wife as she admits to us,

All night I wanted to turn, open  
my arms, but I remembered last summer,  
alone in the new place, how I watched  
a mouse lick soft brie from a trap  
I'd set. The spring was rusty. It took  
a long time to snap.

Images such as the mouse licking brie from a trap and "the red patches of a kestrel / in dark flight" have drawn me back to Alcosser's poetry again and again and lead me to highly recommend reading her work, as well as that of Kathleen Spivack.

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