



## A Kind of Metaphysics

### Ordinary Words

by Ruth Stone

Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1999

74 pp., \$19.95

### [Elaine Terranova](#)

Despite the title — and it's a good one — Ruth Stone's words are anything but ordinary. They are charged with scientific theory, psychological insight, and a healthy preoccupation with human nature. What goes into a poem of hers? Well, dogs and snails and puppy dogs' tails. Stories. Keen observations of the natural world. Stories are what we make up about ourselves, Stone says; science is what we become. Bound by the hardrock of physical laws, we need to explain to ourselves what we're doing here.

Stone seems to prefer Mother Nature to Mother Goose. Mother Goose is what we tell our children, masking reality. The lessons of Mother Nature can't be glossed over. Consider the Job-like little tomato caterpillar begging Mother Nature (in the person of a wasp) to tell him why he is suffering.

Mother, said a small tomato caterpillar to a wasp,  
why are you kissing me so hard on my back?  
You'll see, said the industrious wasp, deftly inserting  
a package of her eggs under the small caterpillar's skin.

— "Yes, I think"

The sad irony, the whimsy of this poem...the careful observation...

The book opens with a poem called "Good Advice." And it is if we want to understand where Stone is going. The poem considers the theory of relativity and the fleeting quality of our attachment to life. From there it's essentially a direct path to the last poem, "Prayer of Descending Order," which describes the loss of the world we have come to love and our own evaporation, with the help of mites and microbes, from it into spirit. Maybe we are meant to think of this death as a kind of emancipation. That the world impregnates us with desire, that the tides and other natural phenomena also behave as if driven by longing, at least as that "fist in our skull" conjures it ("This Space"):

Though you call it  
longing, it is  
the same need

that clings  
in the tidal pool,  
that sucks

itself to this rock

In this and similar conceits, Stone reveals herself as a kind of metaphysical poet. She connects us to the universe and encourages us to feel dwarfed by it at the same time. She's certainly more metaphysical than, say, introspective, or confessional. At 83 (when the book was completed) she has outlived whole schools of twentieth-century poets. And why should she seem more up to date than Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke? Partly, that fresh, in-your-face diction. And also her world view, which has changed, well, with the world. Her subjects are a feminist's, an environmentalist's, a twenty-first century poet's.

When she writes about the past, she somehow compresses it and the present. Maybe what she's doing is laying a veneer over the past, a present-day perspective, her particular present. In "1941," a love poem, she says

I wore a large brim hat  
like the women in the ads.  
How thin I was: such skin.  
Yes. It was Indianapolis;  
a taste of sin.

You had a natural Afro;  
no money for a haircut

picking just the details we'd notice: the hat, the thinness, the skin. The Afro, if not current, at least closer to our time. It's hard to believe such love poems are set sixty or so years ago, so urgent are they, so present. In "Schmaltz" pain of that loss of love is reignited by a snatch of a Sinatra song, reminding us the song and Sinatra too survive with her memory. "Madison in the Mid-Sixties" describes a new job in a new town and what will happen within the next few years, the war protests, the dead rock star. She's not afraid of the surface detail because it's part of how she situates us. Her prosody is evident from the lines above too, the occasional or internal rhymes, the short line and loping rhythms that give the poems fullness and form.



The love poems are evocative and poignant, but they're few. They are written to her husband who died as a very young man. In the totem figure of an ermine, beautiful and valuable, rare to human company, he's introduced into other poems, "Then" and "With Love," poems of family life. Here and there are poems of local color, as well, folksy tales of Vermont life, but with an edge, the stories of dysfunction that show true damage, especially to the young.

Pregnancy is important, motherhood and giving birth, protecting the newly born, the innocent. Stone never lets the reader forget that these are the poems of a woman. "Words" begins with a quote from Wallace Stevens, "A poet looks at the world/as a man looks at a woman" and ends, "A poet looks at the world/as a woman looks at a man." When she writes a poem called, "The Trinity," you know almost immediately that the three are Maiden, Mother, Crone.

There are many stunning poems, "Patience," "So Be It," "When," "Ventriloquist," so many, one following another. Then a few that are clustered toward the end like "Sitcom on the Greyhound in Rutland, Vermont," "Bottled Water," and "Western Purdah, Inc." that are too insistent, less inspired. They are strongly environmentalist, message-y, in a way that nothing else here is. Odd, in such a carefully structured collection where poems all along seem paired on facing pages. Yet nothing can mar the brilliance of this quirky, extra-ordinary collection, the best of Stone, so far.

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Stone, Ruth, *Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected* . Yellow Moon Press, 1991 Paperback, 131 pp., \$10.95

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