



A Wide and Intimate View

The Work of Hands

by Catherine Anderson

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[Miriam Goodman](#)

Catherine Anderson is a social activist who for at least fifteen years has been writing, teaching, and fund-raising for Asian and Hispanic organizations in Boston. Poems in her marvelous book *The Work of Hands* spring from her community work as well as her travels and her Missouri girlhood. There are many voices that speak in the first person in this book, but each "I" is different, a weaving together, a polyvocal music.

Anderson's speakers let you infer their predicaments, remind you of the immigrant's losses and hardships. A lawyer reads a manual on how to prepare the Haitian applicant for asylum as he or she imagines the country and dictatorship left behind ("How to Prepare the Applicant for Asylum"). Two Cambodian brothers clean tables at an American dog track while one compares the rich country's wastefulness ("Wonderland") to the tuberculin phlegm stuck in his brother's craw. An elite white high school fails a black student because her thesis subject is racism, not the canonical poets. *Look*, says the poet, *how rage against the dominant culture begets that culture's retaliatory violence*. ("What is Violence?")



There are poems depicting acts of tenderness to the damaged and dying — a daughter rubbing a moribund mother's back with lotion ("Emollient"), a younger brother helping the brain-damaged older one wash his hands ("Two Brothers"). A woman on a train platform looks down at Boston City Hospital, remembering a brother's seizure and the healing power of the nurse's hands ("The Rooms Above"). In these poems the physical exchange becomes an act of hope.

Other poems praise the spirit's triumph over particular misfortunes. In the marvelous poem "Before Sleep," for instance, the memory of a girl's sensual ecstasy wrestles with the adult woman's corrosive quotidian.

*I was in love with anatomy
the symmetry of my body
poised for flight,
the heights it would take
over parents, lovers, a keen
riding over truth and detail.
I thought growing up would be
this rising from everything
old and earthly,
not these faltering steps out the door
every day, then back again.*

Whatever misfortune life holds in store, the poet praises the human spirit's ability to endure. In the poem "Infinite Sky," her father and his friend, war veterans carved up physically and mentally, watch the moonwalk and, sharing vodka, celebrate friendship and survival.

This and other poetic occasions in Catherine Anderson's book are rooted in recent history. Memories of the poet's girlhood in the midwestern suburbs of the '50's and 60's, just before Vietnam, are rendered in a landscape of tract houses and breezeways. Set in the Eisenhower post-Korean-war prosperity, the poems are written in the retrospective awareness of trouble coming — to neighbors as well as to the poet's own family. They wonder at the first inklings of war, killing, death, and sex.

While many of the poems enact a present trouble, that's never the end of the poem or the end of the story. The characteristic Anderson poem does not close down, but stirs us and opens our hearts. In "Womanhood," the poet imagines a young girl's entry into factory life at fifteen as the force that will contain and restrain her, but doesn't omit to render the girl's enjoyment of becoming a woman. These poems remember to hope, to make a life out of whatever fortune gives us.

In "Name of a Tree" the poet teaches English to a Latina woman:

*Some days I am Ana's teacher, some days she is mine.
This morning, we look through her kitchen window,
the one she can't get clean, cobwebs massed
between sash and pane. The sky is blue-gold, almost
the color of home.
Ana, I say, each winter
I get more lonely. Both of us would like the sun
to linger as that round fruit in June, but Ana says
it's better to forget what you used to know...*

Catherine Anderson does not forget. Though she has her eye on certain abstractions — the injustice of power, the corruption of money, the boredom of repetitive work — her poems are not soapboxes. Though they begin in anger, they become avenues of recollection, spoken by and about people who come alive on the page. The voices of these people remind us, in the most personal way, how the terrible abstractions impose themselves on an individual life. Catherine Anderson is a poet of an era whose slogan was *The personal is political*. Her poetry personifies and personalizes our politics, not with the testimony of one individual talking about her own life, but with witness to the stories of many lives — a wide and intimate view of our multi-class, multi-ethnic society.

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