

Reflections on Margaret Hasse's *Stars Above, Stars Below*, first published in 1984 by New Rivers Press, reissued by Nodin Press in 2018.

by Margot Galt

These are the poems of a young woman with a spirit as fresh as a prairie morning. But she also has the hot prairie noon to contend with. Hasse writes about issues of the day—the Vietnam War, friends lost to alcohol, a young woman's sudden awareness of a bumbling farmer's sexual predation.

Such poems add shadows to her joy as a warbling meadow lark in dew-fresh grass, but it's her personal grief that moves us most. One of the most beautiful poems in the collection describes her mother's slow decline: "My Mother's Lullaby." Here are its first and last stanzas:

When my mother
smelling of milk and bread
brushes the long rope of my hair,
the vines spring roses.
We wake in a white bed
floating with feather pillows.
Morning patterns her face.
She curls me in her arms;
she is a seashell,
white and full of song.

...
Soon there will be no one
to tell me what I was like
when I was a child.

Hasse's poetic persona sometimes reminds me of Tolstoy's character Levin in *Anna Karenina*. Levin, a farmer, would rather

scythe hay with his peasant workers than sit on district councils, considering matters of rural education or public health. This is a odd comparison because Hasse, after leaving South Dakota for college on the West Coast, returned to Minnesota to become one of the state's most valued arts administrators.

Hasse's four later books of poetry proclaim a deepening and elaboration of themes she strikes in this first book. This first book also includes poems from even more youthful efforts. Though they indicate her early interest in poetry as a joyful means of making present what is truthful and vivid, they don't live up to the gallant charm of the fully fledged poet, whose first publication we enjoy and praise again.

Here is one of my favorite "portrait poems" from this first, wonderfully rich collection:

"The Milk Comes Down"

In the grid of her stanchion, the oldest cow chews at a regular rhythm as if she were listening privately to a tune she liked. She turns slowly to look at him, whiskers of hay drip from her mouth. Her nostrils are mossy black; her eyes sleepy and wet. She turns away. Her puffed udder is pink with a tracing of the whitest albino hairs. The ancient-looking teats, stretched long as fingers. The pain of a full bag won't budge her into accepting the new milking machine. So he sits on a tri-legged stool and strokes milk into the crown of an aluminum pail. His cheek against the broad flank where a whirlpool of hair begins its soft reversal. His ear to that clock, his hands about the business of pulling sweet, necessary milk into use.