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Review: Malden by David Surette

Jeri Theriault

none, theriova@yahoo.com

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REVIEW: Surette, David. *Malden*. Westbrook, ME: Moon Pie Press, 2018. 86 pages, paper, \$15.00. ISBN: 9780998192284.

David Surette's *Malden* is an album full of snapshots from a youth spent in Malden, Massachusetts. The album's cover aptly portrays a young and grinning hockey player, Surette himself, number 8 on the Malden hockey team. The eight hockey poems provide a framework for the collection's exploration of growing up in a working-class neighborhood.

Uncle Eddie, "a sensation at Malden High in those days / before Bobby Orr," inspired the young Surette to try the sport ("We Called My Father's Friends Uncle"). Even in the off-season the speaker and his friends play street hockey as the "Old Men" push lawn mowers or chase the boys away from the fronts of their houses. Surette creates the sounds of the boys' play ("thwack of our sticks / and shouts of *Shoot! I'm open!*") and the old men on the porch listening to "the soundtrack of our lives," the Red Sox game.

"Hockey" suggests the sport is something much larger than sliding "that puck / under the prone goalie." It becomes "a promise life can't take back." Often a part of the French-Canadian experience in New England mill towns, hockey demands toughness, as suggested when the narrator's brother gets stitched up between periods with "no anesthesia, no complaints / except *Hurry, I don't want to miss the whole period.*" The sport makes demands of parents too: "my dad watching warm-ups, checking the goalie's / weaknesses, my mother wishing we played a gentler game."

Surette's clipped diction sometimes mimics a sportswriter's as when he describes a teammate's slap shot, "hard and low / an inch inside the post" ("Dom the Bomb"). Such straightforward sentence structure and word choice also support the rich evocations of his working-class neighborhood. After the wrecking ball demolishes "The Old Red Brick Church," the narrator reveals his emotional connection to this childhood landmark; he wants to steal one of the "blood red bricks." Sister Maureen, his teacher ("The Immaculate Conception Grammar School") leaves a lasting impression as "just another girl in my class / innocent as anyone of them." Those "blood red bricks" and "just another girl in my class" are small epiphanies made all the more powerful by the plain-spoken diction.

In a similar way, the poet offers a succinct portrait of his father in "Our Basement." An inventory of the tools, books and old records, the fossils "of his life before he was my father" is rendered crisply by mostly one-syllable words in short declarative sentences. The description of the well-ordered workbench culminates in the man himself, the speaker's father, whose own curt words are neatly delivered as an aphorism:

Rows of jars, their covers nailed to boards

they hang handy: nuts, bolts, and screws.
On the shelves sit saws, planes, and bits,
The right tool for the right job.

Other depictions of people and places flesh out this neighborhood: a brother who dares the narrator to walk to the edge of the third floor roof (“Daredevil”); Sal, the barber who looks like Vic Morrow (“Covering the Spread”); and a grandfather who stares down bullies (“The Great Depression”). As he has done in earlier writings, Surette chooses his diction and sentence structure throughout *Malden* to enhance the subject of these poems. Indeed, the cadence of his crisp monosyllables evokes the young skater’s blades cutting up the ice from one end of an early morning arena to the other.

-Jeri Theriault