Book Review


In First Photographs of Heaven Jack Coulehan has put together a collection of poems as extraordinary as the phenomenon promised in its title. What removes the work from the ordinary is primarily its subject matter, which arises out of the experience of one physician for whom the doctor-patient relationship is a major factor in the art of healing. Jack Coulehan is an epidemiologist and teacher of medical ethics. A member of the Health Sciences faculty of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, he has published epidemiological studies of illness as well as essays on doctor-patient communication and symbolic healing. His poems have appeared widely in literary arts journals. The poems in the current collection depict in artistic form the personal, social, and cultural ethos of patients, a reality which must be conveyed and understood before clinical empathy can occur. One presupposes, of course, that such empathy is a value in any significant doctor-patient encounter. The beings who appear in Coulehan's verse tell tales of suffering and loss, inviting us into their world so that we may come to know them in their altered state of illness. Ever at our side is the compassionate physician, sometimes actually present, sometimes perceived only as a narrative voice, but always entreating us by the incantation of his verse to share the suffering so that we may gain awareness. The collection is divided into five sections: Sweet Medicine, Our Fathers, The Dynamizer, Lillian's Vision and The Rule of Thirds. Not all poems fit neatly into all sections, but many relate to one another, creating a unity of effect. The introductory poems of Sweet Medicine reveal a variety of cultural contexts. We are transported in "Shall Inherit" to the Redbird Mission School in Kentucky where barefoot, gaunt children come for medical attention, and then move on to the Elderslie Clinic of "The Worm," where we hear the sounds of other children, of "de pickanee, him grindin his teet." Background music is provided by Mexican guitars singing of fellowship in the lonely desert town of "Los Locos." And we end our tour in Pittsburgh on
an afternoon when Sister Concepta Najjemba in "My Uganda" recreates the violence of an African midnight. Throughout, images of blood-letting, disease, and death are conveyed in staccato rhythms. At the end of our travels we discover that prayers and kindness are sweet medicine, sweeter than scientific truth.

The poems of Our Fathers invite the reader to ponder filial connections as the significant links in the advancement of life: the past seeds the future. The carpenter-father of "Building Beds" initiates his son in the art so that he may immerse himself in the eternal flow.

The Dynamizer introduces us to the world of medical technology. The specialist in "Magnetic Resonance" is Dick Tracy. His pronouncement that "magnetism controls the world" earns him the respect of the radiologist of the poem. The latter uses the machine to reveal to patients the name of their pain. Dick's "magnetic fist" outperforms tender feelings which, in a darkened universe, are unequal to the task.

The next grouping of poems under the title Lillian's Vision parades before the reader an astonishing company of patients—fragile beings whose reality is confined to the spaces of illness—ambulance, bed, morgue. This section contains some of the most stunning works of the collection. We glimpse private worlds struggling to resist the invasion of dehumanizing forces as the self is reconstructed amid trophies of a former, whole existence. In "Where's Roosevelt?" an elderly woman evokes the image of the beloved powerful leader to infuse her as she yields to the authority of the medic who straps her to a stretcher. In "Poison" the patient dutifully marshals his pills to their prescribed functions, taking each one in ritualistic order, while yearning to grasp the hand of his fearful son. The gesture fails and he retreats to his pills. The ritual of his fathers brings good medicine to "the six hundred pound man" in the poem of the same name and makes him beautiful in death. In "The Man With A Shirt In His Throat" a patient interposes a familiar shirt between him and the medics who have taken over his will. He believes that they have stuffed the sleeves of his shirt down his throat, preventing his breathing. Healing, for him, will occur when the physician kindly removes the object to its customary place outside his throat. A touching tribute from patient to physician occurs in "The Act of Love" when Celia bears testimony to the healing power of Christian love with the gift of an Easter blossom to the physician whose worldly powers have failed her.

The final section of the collection, "The Rule of Thirds," invites us to meet teachers and students of medicine. In the title poem, the medical student learns the odds of success and failure. The law of averages knows no compassion, only genetics. More valuable lessons occur in "My Poetry Teacher Sells Used Cars," where a master points the way to the transmis-