

The Ways of Mortality

The Single Heart, by Robert Drake,
Nashville and London: Aurora Publishers, Inc., 1971. 171 pp. \$4.95.

ROBERT DRAKE is gifted with a memory for conversations. He hears voices, and in his second collection of short stories, *The Single Heart*, we are privileged to hear them too, thanks to the accuracy of his recording. Most of the voices belong to women, older women eager to talk of their youthful past. All are Southerners, from either West Tennessee or East Tennessee. Some are city-fied and have been all the way to Memphis or Chattanooga; some are countrified ladies who used to have malaria every summer as a matter of course, and who kept open house for trouble. To them all Robert Drake has bent a sympathetic ear.

In his first fine book, *Amazing Grace*, the author, with wit and compassion, introduced us to the people of his small hometown. In this new book the fun and compassion are still there, but some bitterness has been added. Illness, death, hospitals, bowels, undertakers, loneliness are recurring themes. Religion—or ir-religion—almost always pops up somewhere. Big Baptists, as opposed to devout Catholics, prominent Methodists and staunch Presbyterians, abound. Trained nurses “who probably knew too much, and certainly saw too much” are in conflict with practical nurses who could “do more with the patient than anybody else.” “The Stark Naked Baptist” is not only of that persuasion (a Baptist who went all the way) but is also a practical nurse “cut on the bias and with the appearance of an aging jaybird.”

Nearly every story has its disease: sprung pizzums (strictly a male affliction), terminal cancer (“They Cut Her Open and Then Just Sewed Her Back Up”), ruptured appendices (“She is not a well woman. No, not well at all”), tumors of required weight

(“. . . doctors wouldn't look at a tumor unless it weighed a certain number of pounds”). But there are no transplants here. Single or multiple-hearted, all of these stories (of which thirteen have not been previously published) belong to Robert Drake and to Ripley, Tennessee.

Drake has such a distinct facility for the appropriate title and phrase that the temptation to quote him is irresistible. “Don't They Look Natural?” is an exposé of the funeral parlor set. “There were two things she never expected to see in her lifetime: her name on a tombstone and her diamond ring on another woman's hand.” “Deep in the Interior and Everything and All” reveals the sad and confused loneliness of a mother newly placed in a nursing home. “Oh, daughter, I am deep in the interior. It's all darkest Africa and wooden legs everywhere I turn. And my heart is broken and everything and all, but I can't get out. And there's nobody anywhere that can help me.” “She Was Strangely Affected” tells of lonely, sick old women “who can't seem to die to save their souls.”

Though told through the voices of women many of the stories are naturally about men. “The Fifth Wheel” is one of these. “Papa died standing straight up in bed, fighting like a wildcat and cussing a blue streak. We were well out of *that*.” “The Ring-Tail Tooter” is another and funny. (A real pistol!) The title story, “The Single Heart,” is serious. A doctor, afraid of love, has in death the appearance of a man “who had frozen to death in front of a roaring fire.” “The Music Lover” has not “gone on” with either music or love. Arrived at his middle years, lonely, joyless, he fears to become another “two-edged geriatric miracle . . . the old man waiting for the end that would not come, querulous in sickness, crotchety in loneliness, not really despised but—what could be worse—patronized, then neglected, forgotten.”

Some of the stories in this collection are too naïve for this reader's taste, and some tend to be too much alike in their insularity. It would appear to this reviewer that

Drake is really at his best not when he is mouthing the voices of old women but when speaking in his own voice, wittily and urbanely. In four of the stories he has done this. "The Music Lover" has already been mentioned. "Will the Merchant Prince's Son Come Down the Sawdust Trail?" is a funny story about a tent evangelist who gets his fair comeuppance. "You Scoundrel of a Beast" evokes a tender and touching picture of the author's childhood relationship with his father. "The Tower and the Pear Tree," published originally in *The Georgia Review*, is a tale of going home to the South. It is beautiful and it is Robert Drake's *own* voice. I hope we hear it again soon.

Reviewed by ALMA STONE