METAMORPHOSIS

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For Father and Many Other Things
By Matthew Diomede
Finishing Line Press, 2021
47 pp.
Paperback (978-1-64662-495-9): USD $19.99

THE MOST EFFECTIVE POEMS IN MATTHEW DIOMEDE'S first poetry collection, *For Father and Many Other Things*, are those that convey tension through the grotesque and unexpected. As the reader progresses through Diomede's collection of poignant image-rich poems, major themes become apparent: parents, Italian heritage, religion, nature. This collection speaks to those that find comfort in nature and family ties, those that find themselves faced with uncertainty during their growth. In poems like, "In Search of a Past," "Mother Images," and "Father," on page thirteen, Diomede evokes emotion through surreal imagery and narration guided by a central tension. A great example of this is the first four lines of, "Mother Images," "I have come out of the ground/ and what I see is my mother's scalp/ hanging from the sunrise/ while my father plays the banjo." Immediately, the reader is thrown into a scene full of tension and the surreal.

The title of Dr. Matthew Diomede's poetry collection, *For Father and Many Other Things* gives the reader the impression that the father is a central but not solitary focus. Father and mother are both vital to the collection; they are often depicted through opposing images. In his poem, "Splitting," Diomede presents "night father" and "day mother." Night and day tend to be overused to display contrast. However, Diomede varies the way night and day are mentioned: "mother sunset," "the darkness of Hades," "night's storm," "warm sun open." The alteration of night and day in each poem turns what

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 15, NO. 1, FALL 2021. Copyright © 2021. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

could be cliché into something more intriguing. These are guiding figures showing paths to life and death, through happiness and grief, acting as guides for their son, like Virgil for Dante. In *Inferno*, Canto 2 Virgil relays the following message from Beatrice to Dante, "Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare," roughly, "love moves me and makes me speak" (*Inferno* 2.72). Love is a force that drives this collection, the love of family, a love for nature, and of life—fond remembrance of a mother's kindness, a father's hands, a winter day. Still, fear is also present. I admire Diomede's ability to create a scene in so few words yet find the poems that lack tension and original imagery to be a bit lackluster. To try and stay outside the realm of cliché in his poems, Diomede uses imagery, metaphor, and personification to convey the emotions of fear and confusion in unexpected ways. In his poem "Seasonal Question:" "The trees, / why do they stand still/ in autumn rain, / gazing out like/ hypnotized dogs/ whose eyes look into fire?" the image in the first four lines is calm depicting a pleasant scene, then the scene becomes violent and filled with uncertainty, a welcome shift.

In his poem, "Mother Images," Diomede mentions Beatrice; this aligns with the religious nature of some of the poems and Diomede's Italian heritage and family. In the acknowledgements, Diomede attributes the book in part to his "Italian father and mother" and his "whole Italian-American family." Referencing Dante pays tribute to one of history's most well-known Italian poets. This poem discusses the memory of the mother and the fight to retain those memories amidst struggles of growing older and preserving memories through time. Line seven states, "I will crawl into the thirty-third sphere." Because of the mention of Beatrice and the number thirty-three, the "thirty-third sphere" likely refers to Canto 33 of *Paradiso*, which primarily discusses "The Virgin Mother." This phrase could also refer to the three conjoined circles Dante looks into representing the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Canto ends on the line "by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Paradiso* 33.145). The mother is a source of love and light in this poem, yet the speaker is not safe. The speaker, the son, is searching for their mother through the words of Beatrice but cannot continue his search in peace and ends up in "the darkness of Hades" by the poem's conclusion. In the collection, the speaker holds onto the images of their parents, specifically their mother, that are sources of love and comfort but are impacted by the cruelties of nature, the outside world, and forgetfulness, clinging to memories overshadowed by age and doubt. Referencing Dante is a logical

choice for Diomede as a poet interested in themes of love, transformation, and discovery. However, it is not easy to reference Dante in a piece of writing in a way that is original and exciting. Diomede's subtle use of Beatrice's name and reference to a "thirty-third sphere" alludes to themes in Dante's Comedia that align with the poem, relying on the reader's knowledge instead of providing an explanation.

Beginnings and endings frequently appear in Diomede's collection, whether in life and death, creation, and evolution/transformation, or aging and memory. Diomede's opening poem of *For Father and Many Other Things*, "Stabbing," begins "in the cave/ of primitive/ thought." In this piece, the speaker transforms dark into light, symbolizing a birth through evolution and transformation, the word "primitive" here signifying something new coming into creation. The word "primitive" sticks out in such terse poems, being dactylic, with three syllables that are sharp on the tongue and a term that appears multiple times throughout the collection. In his poem "Transformation-Enclosure," Diomede presents us with a "primitive past," and in "Inner Structure," there is a "primitive hammer." The primitive hammer, for example, conjures the idea of a roughhewn tool. The hammer echoes an old house's past, its creation long ago lively in memory but deteriorating in the present. "Transformation-Enclosure" discusses the transformation through birth and into death, "primitive past" showing a return to a stage of infancy.

Diomede's poems do not take up much space on the page. In poems so brief, each word, line, and line break are amplified. Through the repetition of words and themes, Diomede makes the poems shine as a collective unit. Each poem is strengthened and reveals new meaning based on information from the others. This is how they are best read, not in solidarity but in succession. The poems are a looking glass through the past, present, and future showcasing the speakers' attempts to understand how their life has evolved. With short poems, challenges that plague every poem become more apparent: attention to word choice, the strength of each line as an individual, the impact of line breaks and form. Diomede tells entire stories and describes captivating scenes in such few words, but despite interesting content, the forms of the poems are sometimes lacking refinement. In his poem, "Death," the poem starts with a lovely image of a "brown skeleton/of a painted leaf/" and tells a tension-packed story of the death and burial of the father. These first two lines embody tension, cutting the first line off at skeleton causes

the reader to pause and wonder, whose skeleton, before the personification of the leaf is revealed in the second line. However, as the poem continues, the individual lines become less impactful, "on a/ white garage door/ you tried to/," interspersed with function words such as "on," "and," "to," and "in," ending lines in these words as well. Careful attention to these aspects of the poems could heighten their effect sonically, emotionally.

Along with the "many other things," what is the father's role in this piece? In what way does the father influence the collection? Three poems in the collection share the title of "Father" on pages five, thirteen, and forty-six, and others use father as part of their title, "Poem after Kafka's "Letter To His Father," and "A Father's Message." The second poem of the collection, "Morning Prayer," is dedicated to the father's laughter, temper, hope, and love. This poem is next to "Prayer to Mother," where the contrast between the mother and father figures first emerges. Unlike the prayer to the mother, the prayer to the father has an unpleasant descriptor, "temper." Yet, the temper is something the speaker, the son, still loves. "Father" discusses the cuts on the father's laboring hands that the speaker knows nothing about, just like the father's past. The son admires his father despite struggling with a lack of understanding of who he is. In, "At the Beach," the anger of the mother is explored as well with both parents being displayed as flawed beings, as humans, "I have found my mother's anger and my father's carelessness, /." Seeing these praised figures, particularly the idolized mother shown in such an imperfect way is relatable and tangible for the reader. This tangibility is furthered by the speaker's emotional reaction to their discovery, "laid them like clams on a hard, heavy/ white-capped sea rock and smashed them, /." This reaction is visceral, raw, and presented with a beautifuly juxtaposed image. The relationship dynamic Diomede portrays in these poems is not unflawed; it is complicated, messy, real, and relatable.

The father often shows traits of mystery and strength, admirable in his imperfection. The mother, in contrast, is always represented as a figure of compassion and support. In "Father," on page thirteen, the son has a wife and they come to save the father, tension rising, "shivering in the water . . . skin blue," likely drowning. The son recounts the father argued with the mother the week prior, hence his suffering. Despite the son's recognition of his father's fault, he still comes to help, acknowledging his efforts, "I will not forget how far you went." The last line suggests the father passed away and the speaker is promising not to forget everything the father did. The collection's

final poem is also titled "Father," "This person I call father/ I keep casting off. / The older I get/ the closer we become." This four-line poem expresses the sentiments of the speaker cultivated through time. In attempting to understand himself better, the speaker realizes that it is night father's shadow he resembles most. Anger, darkness, working in silence, disappointment—the father's characteristics cause the son to keep "casting [him] off," but he resolves he has evolved to be like him all the same. The son accepts there is no strict boundary between the day and night—the anger of his loving mother, and the love of his angered father—but that the boundaries evolve, metamorphosizing, like nature and individuals through life. It is up to the reader what they take from the collection; if they take the time to chisel away the connections between the terse poems that speak to them, many other things materialize.