

PORTLAND POET EXPLORES FINNISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

By Christopher Wicks

Kathleen Halme, a poet of Scandinavian heritage, now lives in Portland, but she hails from Michigan's upper peninsula and has lived and taught in North Carolina. It was there that she wrote her 1995 volume *Every Substance Clothed*, and the profuse vegetable growth and humid heat of the American South infuse the tone and content of some of its poems.

The title *Every Substance Clothed* I take to be ironic. The poet evokes both the repressions of her Scandinavian immigrant heritage (“...Lutheran coffee,/ And seven kinds of sweets,/ The only excess they allowed...”) and also its extravagances. The sauna in particular becomes a recurring motif, especially in the first of the book's five sections.

Moreover, Halme confesses to us daring youthful escapades, such as stealing consecrated bread from church to place in a mattress, or meeting a young man for a tryst in a cemetery and afterward “cleaning” herself in the Huron River, which is “so dirty dogs won't swim in it.” The “substance” of this book seems quite “unclothed,” as in the poem “Mary Magdalene's Ideal Christmas,” where Halme tells of a friend's Freudian interpretation of Jesus' writing on the ground with a stick before calling for the pardon of the woman caught in adultery.

The title poem of the collection takes the striking form of a double narrative, one in plain typeface and the other in italics. In the first, the poet attempts an impartial description of a working-class Finnish-American Everywoman, Signe Saari. In the italic text, our author ponders whether she understands Signe and her cultural community well enough to write about her. “*Have I turned her into an Other, exotic and alone?*” she worries.

I find Halme's portrayal of Signe deeply sympathetic. The poet admits that she herself is of the same community. Other poems in the collection suggest her ambivalent relation to that

community, mocking the pretensions of the “*I am not ethnic* aunt,” whose husband “drives a Chevrolet,” but who still participates in the “sauna ritual” with the ones not yet assimilated.

Halme’s collection *Every Substance Clothed* offers both exciting perspectives on personal experience and pungent reflection on American immigrant experience, especially the Finnish one, all couched in fresh and provocative language. She has published two subsequent collections, *Equipoise* from Sarabande Books and *Drift and Pulse* from Carnegie Mellon University Press.