The North American Review

The NAR is honored to celebrate Black History Month with reviews of books by African Americans.

Against Which by Ross Gay, Cavankerry, 2006, xvi + 72p, paper $16.00 • When the NAR published Ross Gay’s poem “Alzheimer’s” I didn’t know the rest of his oeuvre… and now, having read Against Which, I tell you this is the most awesome collection I have read in years, and I mean that overused word in its most profound sense I am in awe. Gay takes on death: “art grid” poems that note violence, love, terror, rage, beauty, and art in our lives à la Ralph Ellison’s “blues impulse”; “a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.” In Gay’s “It Starts at Birth” a “newborn rail[s] against the thing behind / the sting of air and light; / against which” are posed all of human endeavor. This “thing” death, forces us to be what we “are impossible, / golden, / long, gone.” Gutsy, glorious poems.

Outlandish Blues by Hononee Fanonne Jeffers, Wesleyan, 2003, 62p, paper $12.95 • Two aspects of Jeffers’s book are both elemental and electric: blues + the Bible / blues + history. The book’s central section features thirteen persona poems spoken by biblical patriarchs —Sarai/Sarah, Hagar, Lot’s wife, Lot’s daughters—exploring the human and feminist ramifications of the sacred power plays: Sarai giving her handmaid Hagar to her husband Abram/Abraham to bear his firstborn; Lot offering the Sodomite mob his virgin daughters; those same daughters bearing their own father’s children. Jeffers also explores the strangenesses of historical agency: James Brown pleading on stage and at home; a lynched man saying his final words; “Confederate Pride Day at ‘Bama”; “fraternity boys dressed in gray uniforms, […] coming home to black / maids, their heads tied up in bright handkerchiefs.” Jeffers’s poems are unfinchishing in facing hard realities: how to TCB as a woman within/against ancient misogyny; how to deal as a black person with/against the dregs of racists history still painfully alive. Jeffers vividly combines these two hard-knock worlds.

Synecdoche
BRIEF POETRY REVIEWS

VINCE GOTERA

Teahouse of the Almighty by Patricia Smith, Coffee House, 2006, 92p, paper $15.00 • Patricia Smith, a four-time National Poetry Slam champion, invests these poems with charisma and raw grit. She opens the book with a visit to a 6th grade class: the kids “shout me raw”; the poet knows the kids “have all seen / The Reaper […] cocking wildly in the back pew of the Baptist church.” Story after story: “9-year old Tiko Jefferson […] fired a bullet / into his own throat after Mama bented his back / with a lead pipe.” These 6th graders, so conversant with violence in their everyday lives, are hungry for art, “Stitching on the lost flesh” of their dead friends and relatives. Many poems deal with Smith’s own father, with many fathers. “wide wing felt hats to dip low over one eye, pimp walkin’” Mamas “delta sponge me down with pan water dah cheap smellgood on my shattered shoulders.” Smith says the unsayable—“draw the pictures no one can voice”—in a muscular language celebrating the “glorious bullshit” of streets and bedsheets, anger and transcendence.

Otherhood by Reginald Shepherd, Pittsburgh, 2003, xii + 100p, paper $12.95 • In a poem about butterflies, Reginald Shepherd writes, “Linneus loves the names of things.” Well, so does Shepherd—a contemporary Adam naming confluences of myth, landscape, mind, heart, sex. Also confluences of etymology: “wanish cedlon” (Anglo + Greek); “mingre, cavaranserat” (Latin + Persian). And confluences of music—paraphrasing in “weckled a word to wood.” Look: “dead fish dusted with dirt sand / (a second set of scales, no use / to it at all)… beside the lake, intact, but / siphoned out, the life.” A series of 6’s are joined by 5’s then 4’s and 3’s, culminating in all those consonants appearing in the last five words. Bravura. Get this book.

The Body’s Question by Tracy K. Smith, Graywolf, 2003, xiv + 96p, paper $14.00 • Tracy Smith defamiliarizes the everyday real with easygoing language: “a dog scuttles past, like a wig / Drawn by an invisible cord.” On the street, “small fists rattle, spilling dice / Onto the pavement like teeth.” These occasional quirky gems anchor her deep introspection, striving to answer quandaries hinted at by the book’s title. For example, the death of a loved one in the long elegy “Joy” addressed to an older woman (mother?), the speaker wishes for a phone call “telling me how to bake a salmon” but knows “you are far, infinitely far.” The consolation is that “memory does death one better.” Memory, art, poetry. Lovely.

Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans, ed. Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, Alabama, 2006, xix + 306p, cloth $40.00, paper $27.95 • Not much room left, so I’ll just note this experimental-poetry sampler of poets less known in lit-crit circles: Russell Atkins, Helen Quijless, Gloria Tropp, and others. Definitely an important canoon-buster and -maker.

When Angels Speak of Love by bell hooks, Atria Books, 2006, 96p, cloth $16.95 • Even less room left. You think you know hooks? These short lyrics will both challenge and enlighten how you view her.

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