

Review: New Blues, Old Photos

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The Afflicted Girls

Some said it was Unnatural
Rebellion against God and Man,
sprung from a Stubbornness
of Mind or unmaidenly Pride,

but this Affliction had no Natural
Cause, hence no Earthly remedy,
the fault that of the Father of Lies,
who improved our tongues

to speak of things we knew not of,
for we Christened the Minister
"Damnable Rogue," "Blackguard,"
and "Whoremasterly Hellhound."

We cast the Bible aside, crying,
"Sir, these are goblin stories!
Why, the Prince of this World offers
more than sin and misery!"

After we collapsed into his hands,
we told our tale: how the Tempter
of Souls had promised us yellow Canaries
or ribbons if we dined with him,

that he enchanted the pudding,
and we grew faint close to Falling,
as he pressed us to add our marks
to his Book, below the names

of His Handmaidens, the fallen
women who called us in dreams
to come dance with the Black Man,
whom they said we must marry.

Since we resisted these entreaties,
we were called upon to Testify,
providing the Spectral Evidence
of who let Demons into her body.

At the first Sentencing, one claimed,
"I have no skill in Witchery."
Then she tried, "I will unwitch the girls,
just let me speak," meaning *Lie*.

We looked to the truth of her body,
hunting for the hidden teat:
if pricked, she would feel nothing;
it would be cold, the Devil's own.

Unwholesome Mother, she succored
Night Creatures that suck blood
from lower lips and milk from ring fingers;
we envisioned her Familiars:

one like a bald Cat with bat wings,
another after a manner of Monkey,
eyes in the back of its head gaping
as it drank its secret Elixir.

Unable to unearth the hag's pap,
we loosened our own clothing
to reveal fever blisters from the Hell-Fire
this night-flier fed in us,

writhing in a Strange Manner until
our Tormenter was made to claim
the pain she had inflicted, her frozen
palms soothing our burned skin.

Scold, Troublemaker, Quarrelsome Shrew!
They led her away, and she was hanged
at our word. Afterwards, they gave us brandy.
We swore before God and Man

that we would become Good Wives,
not discontent with our condition,
and we would live Righteous Lives,
our thoughts turned up to Heaven.

—Cathleen Calbert

New blues, old photos

by Adrian Oktenberg

Outlandish Blues by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. Middletown, CT:

Wesleyan University Press, 2003, 50 pp., \$12.95 paper.

Bellocq's Ophelia: Poems by Natasha Trethewey. St. Paul, MN:

Graywolf Press, 2002, 48 pp., \$14.00 paper.



Honorée Fanonne Jeffers takes Langston Hughes, "poet laureate of the blues," as her model in her second book, *Outlandish Blues*. The model has naturally been updated a bit to include such contemporary phenomena as women's shelters, gay-bashing, and Aretha, but Jeffers has retained Hughes' eloquence and elegance in her own voice, as well as his social and historical sense. You cannot write the blues, lacking music, without an ear to die for and immense control in the language; otherwise it just sounds boring and repetitious on the page. Jeffers succeeds admirably on both counts and produces a book that is lively, witty, sly, and passionate, like the blues itself.

The first section of the book begins with "Fast Skirt Blues" and ends with "Think of James Brown Pleading," so we are given the sexy, raw, desperate blues, the kind we think of right away, right away. This is part of "James Brown":

I think of James Brown pleading
to a closing door. So pretty
in his do-rag tied on straight
through the day and into the night
and right now, you are prettier
than James. The brothers in the
room
wink and nod at your raw weeping...
This is the truth
I need: your crying and holding
fast to one woman at the same time.
What else is left if I can ignore your
tears or James, shoulders
draped with female screams
and royal purple, begging with all
the sweat he was capable of?

(p. 15)

Jeffers can write sexy poems full of love, lust, violence, and compassion, viewing relations between men and women now with a lustful, then with an unsentimental, eye, but if that were all, the book might seem to rest too much on one note. Jeffers expands her vision in the second, central section of the book, and here we find a poet writing deep from the heart.

Jeffers takes the stories of Sarah and Abraham and their issue from the Bible and, in a series of dramatic monologues, takes a tale of patriarchy and patriarchy's God and turns it first into questioning, then argument, then redemption on female terms. It's a most remarkable story in Jeffers' hands, and echoes, in some respects but from an entirely different perspective, Alicia Ostriker's recent the volcano sequence. This is the core of the book, this argument with God's arrangements, and, while the subject matter is as old as time, the voice in which it is expressed is new, original, important, and equal to the task.

Here is the voice of Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, who bears Abraham's child because Sarah is barren. The poem is "Hagar to Sarai."

Don't give me nothing in
exchange for a beating

in my belly, sore nipples
way after the sucking is gone.
Don't thank me for my body...
Don't thank me for the back
that don't break from Abram's
weight.
I know what you need—a baby's
wail in the morning,
smile on your man's face...
I know what you need;
don't give me your grief
to help this thing along.
I know how emptiness feels.
Woman, I know how
to make my own tears. (p. 22)

Abraham is the uncle of Lot, and so the story moves to Lot and his wife, who was turned to a pillar of salt. The four-poem "Wife of Lot" sequence, more original still, explains just why she looked back—"He didn't warn me what the angels told him"—and challenges an unjust God in feminist terms. This is from "The Wife of Lot After the Fire":

The angels only saved my girls to
bear their father's sons.
No forgiveness, nothing in the
hovering sky.
What kind of God condemns girls
to carry their father's blood?
No mercy for me when I found
out the truth.

No forgiveness in God's hovering
sky,
and someone's to blame for making
me look back.
If there was a chance for me and
so much mercy above,
why wasn't I warned of the salt
clinging to my skin? (p. 30)

These poems encompass blues vernacular and also reference literature much farther back, to the laments so common in ancient women's poetry.

The third and final section of the book at last brings us to the "outlandish" blues, which Jeffers explains in a quotation from the scholar Michael A. Gomez: "[N]ewly arrived Africans [in the slave trade] were classified in the North American lexicon as 'outlandish' in that they were 'strangers to the English language' and had yet to learn their new roles." This section's angry, pointed poems address slavery, lynching during Reconstruction and after, and contemporary slights and injustices in language that recalls June Jordan in her capacity as seer and righteous truth-teller.

Nod.
At the very least, write a letter. Some
kinds of anger
need screaming.
(From "Confederate Pride Day at
Bama [Tuscaloosa, 1994]," p. 48)

All of which shows that Honorée Fanonne
Jeffers' is a voice to be reckoned with.

E. J. Bellocq's Storyville portraits of prostitutes, named after the red-light district in New Orleans where the photographs were taken around 1910-1912, were never intended for showing but are by now well known. It has fallen to Natasha Trethewey, in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, to use them as inspiration and blueprint for a book of poems. This is a brilliant conception for a woman writer from the South, and for the most part, it is brilliantly executed. The book takes the form of a series of letters home, as well as diary entries, by the subjects of Bellocq's portraits. Trethewey subverts the male gaze by not allowing Bellocq himself to speak—what we hear in this book are the voices of the women.

Trethewey manages the transformation from abused country girl alone in the big city to "fallen woman" with admirable economy and calm—"I do now have plenty to eat," the subject reports. We soon learn how she earns her keep: "I was auctioned as a newcomer / to the house...."

And then, in my borrowed gown
I went upstairs with the highest
bidder.

He did not know to call me

Ophelia

(From "Letters from
Storyville," p. 14)

Trapped between bad memories of the work and abuse at home and her dreadful present, Ophelia is at first "as mute" as her namesake. Then, a transformation begins.

One of the things that is striking about Bellocq's pictures of women in their off hours is how relaxed the women



Storyville Portrait, one of E. J. Bellocq's photographs of New Orleans prostitutes, ca. 1912. From Bellocq's Ophelia.

are. The women in the pictures are talking, drinking, playing with animals; some appear to be sharing a joke with the photographer. It is not merely that they have nothing left to lose. They look like women in full possession of themselves, so unlike most portraits of women in this era. Wittily, Trethewey imagines how this transformation comes about by having her Ophelia buy a camera. So equipped, she literally begins to see for herself, to shape her own world:

September 1911

This past week I splurged, spent a little
of my savings on a Kodak, and at once

I became both model and
apprentice—
posing first, then going with
Bellocq

to his other work—photographing
the shipyard....

I see,
too, the way the camera can dissect

the body, render it reflecting light
or gathering darkness....

I find myself drawn to what
shines—
iridescent scales of fish on ice

at the market, gold letters on the
window....

In them, the glittering hope of
alchemy—

like the camera's way of capturing
the sparkle of plain dust floating
on air. (p. 27)

She begins to change, and as she does, the book evolves into an extended meditation on present, past, and future; being bound and unbound; secrets and disclosure; making and unmaking. This is the best section of the book, called "Storyville Diary," and it includes such fine poems as "Bellocq," "Blue Book," "Portrait #1 and #2," "Disclosure," "Spectrum," and "(Self)Portrait." Here is "Photography":

— October 1911

Bellocq talks to me about light,
shows me
how to use shadow, how to fill the
frame

with objects—their intricate
positions.

I thrill to the magic of it—silver
crystals like constellations of stars
arranging on film. In the negative
the whole world reverses, my black
dress turned
white, my skin blackened to pitch.

Inside out,

I said, thinking of what I've tried
to hide.

I follow him now, watch him take
pictures.

I look at what he can see through
his lens

and what he cannot—silverfish
behind

the walls, the yellow tint of a faded
bruise—

other things here, what the camera
misses. (p. 43)

As in the poem above, Trethewey's language throughout is calm, fluid, one line moving into the next as a fish moves through water, language borne in its natural element. There is nothing easy about this, however—it was shaped so that no word is extraneous, no tone jars, and when our expectations are subverted, an explanation is given and appears plausible. In all, the book is finely crafted, elegantly played out—but not finished! It ends rather suddenly, with the portrait sitter "after the flash"—"stepping out / of the frame, wide-eyed, into her life." Looking back, I see that the entire collection is only 29 poems, and that there are gaps in the stories where I would have liked to know more. But what better compliment could be given a book than that it's too short?



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