

REVIEWS

Janet McCann. *Like that: New and Selected Poems* by Sybil Pittman Estess. Austin: Alamo Bay Press. 2014. 155 pp. \$14.95.

Sybil Pittman Estess's new collection speaks with her unique and distinctive voice, in tones that do not fade over the decades. Her poems provide variations on a theme: what it is to be a woman in current and recent eras, from the second half of the twentieth century up until now. Reading the book is listening to a wise woman, even a kind of healer, as she meditates on her world. The reader gets to know the speaker, feel with her, for her. And yet the poetry is layered, dressed in surprising images and insightful metaphors.

While the voice is a constant and a delight, there is a great range to the poems in content and image. The details of the scenes are so vividly described that the reader feels pulled backward through the poet's life—the book starts with new work and then goes through her earlier books in reverse order of composition, ending with her first collection, *Seeing the Desert Green*, followed by an epilogue poem.

Estess's poems represent a constant vision in a chaotic world, and despite the tragedies they often chronicle, the ultimate effect is enlightening. The typical Estess poem is compassionate, understanding, and image-rich with vignettes of a Southern life. These are poems that don't turn their glance away from national and personal tragedy, and yet a strain of transcendence lightens even the most grievous losses and deepest sorrows. Another form of light sprinkled throughout is humor--irony, wordplay, even laughter.

Estess uses both formal and free verse in poems which are mostly narrative, providing glimpses of myriad lives—women real and imagined, the poet, her friends and family, biblical women, fictional women, mythic women. The poems reveal a life at a moment of

tension or transformation—when something happens that provides the soul’s mirror.

Her poetry is about love and healing, union and parting. The poems center on every sort of love—marital, parental, compassion engendered by catastrophe, friendship, love of place, love of literature, love of God. Her diction is allusive, evocative. As the collection moves backward from recent personal losses and national tragedies to those of the 1970s when her first book came out, the reader is pulled into her or his own memories. Within the narratives, the poet also playfully and/or seriously explores the lengths to which people go to find a way to survive the losses they have sustained—the strategies that help heal and those that don’t.

The opening poem “Parting” is about the unexpected loss of her brother-in-law from bee-stings, due to an allergy. The poem is filled with details of the funeral which somehow intensify the ache of loss through their lack of sensitivity—even those trained to deal with death don’t realize what the bereaved experience. It is a Mississippi funeral filled with Southern traditions, but the bereaved are not comforted, there is always something not quite right.

Troy in life always moved
fast. His blood ran swift and parched. His hair was
parted for us and everyone at the sweltering church
to notice not the way he wore it, but on the wrong side.

The third poem, “Edge,” is about at another kind of attempt at healing, new age instead of tradition—and it is funny. It describes Esalen with its surroundings, courses offered to pilgrims, like “The Neuro Dharma of Love,” “The Transformational Enneagram,” “Spirit Medicine: Vision-Seeker II,” “Don’t Look for a Job, Create a Role,” and direct healing via the clean air:

...and if you ditch your clothes,

lie on these decks buck naked, butts or
breasts and bush up, after you have descended
the dusty hill to bathe, whether you are dirty,

divorced, unemployed, disabled, uneducated,
have just spent your life uptight, have or
have not smoked pot, you will be whole.

The reader thinks at the same time “How ridiculous,” and “What fun!” I think the ambivalence is invited.

Sonnets, sestinas, and blank verse appear between poems in free verse, but the effect is always of poetry—as though the free verse was a quarter-breath away from a pattern. Various forms of repetition, visual stanzas, and sound-echoes contribute to the poetry. It would be impossible to chase the emotional subtleties of the various relationships described, but one tends to be hidden or enfolded in all the others—that is the spiritual, the apprehension of God. All the other failed and semi-successful attempts at healing pale next to approaching the divinity.

The religion is hard yet transformative. “Talons of the Holy Ghost” begins with Thomas Merton’s claim that “When the Holy Spirit lifts us up, it’s by//His claws. His talons.” The brief poem ponders the need for this painful delivery, the mingled desire and fear of it, and ends by asking, “Do you really yearn// To fly with Him, bleeding?” (13) Of course, there is no choice—and nevertheless, the suffering is redemptive.

Birds and the Christian are associated throughout the collection. *Like That* has a very attractive cover—a peacock with a glorious spread tail. The cover illustrates the title poem, which begins with an epigraph about Flannery O’Connor’s story “The Displaced Person,”

in which a priest says “Christ will come like that,” upon seeing “a peacock strut and display his colors.” Estess’s poem ends:

That’s Christ, all right, returning
to us: unexpectedly, with serendipity,
wonder, and brilliant struts. His never relenting
grace.

The spirituality often signifies a mysterious quest, a revelation of things still mostly hidden. One of my favorites is “Pretending You Were Joseph,” addressed to a friend who died young.

You could consider your seven fat losses.
You could ponder the long lean years left.

You could count the rest of your exiled life
not double-crossed but an Egyptian style feast

to be ceremoniously eaten. Too soon past.
You could discover that in any parched season

siblings, nearly forgotten and foreign, might knock
for the food of forgiveness. You could ask:

“In a famine of mercy must everyone fast?”

Trouble, the need for mercy, the wonder of compassion are evoked by a Bible story, a friend’s life, and the desire for understanding. This never-ending cycle of yearning, seeking, finding, and questioning is central to these luminous poems.

Alamo Bay Press is a new independent press out of Austin; the high quality of this publication will make the reader eager to read more of their books.