

Reviews

Blue, Canded in January Sun by Sybil Pittman Estess. Cherry Grove Collections, 2005. 90 pp. \$17.00 paper.

Reading a book of poems by Sybil Pittman Estess is to enter into a conversation that precedes the book and carries on after the last poem. It's a story of life suspended in a network of other lives, of houses that belong as much to the past as they do now to the living, of deserts and mountains that are the stages on which a vast human history played out its comedies and tragedies before she arrived, took stock of things, felt the continuity with her fingertips, noted the relativity of her own life as the wind blows through before she leaves.

Her poems are plainspoken, but here is always that subtle darkness outlining her situations. A death looms over the room that now stands in twilight; memories haunt her as she picks up a cup or observes the burnt stumps of trees, as in "Clear Cut and Burn":

I am out here where trees had been rooted.
I am out here where black, death-smoke chokes.

I oversee slash gone now roots harshly
charred. I think of how hard it was for this

scarred trash to have grown. I see the distance
between our green lives and what's seared to sad

ashes.

These are not lamentations so much as reveries, questions put to the appearance of things. Most of these poems spring from a mundane situation, a visit to a convent, a moment of rest in a church, a walk, a car trip out west. The speaker is not talking to anyone, just thinking, probing the familiar world for its underlying contradictions. The ordinary days she describes in Houston are always turned inside out to reveal their peculiar threshold into a world of ghosts, whispering voices, spiritual visitors who hover just out of reach but who make themselves known to her.

She thinks that one lives
where one lives as we exist anywhere
(with a mate, a child or a friend)—a while in our old
mind-sets. Then one day, cold, something ends.
We happen, head-on, maybe by heat, to be
where they are and meet them.

The lilies in her poem "Ash Wednesday and the Houston Anglican Priest" could as easily be flowers on a sill in a Ray Bradbury story, with a mysterious past, and a hold upon those who take a few cuttings to grow their own. They transcend this world by a few degrees and find their humble blossomless shoots growing indestructibly in other people's lives. The old priest gives away his lilies to anyone interested, even the poet Denise Levertov. They grow out of some power of love the roots have found in their borrowed earth,

They are dry, have grown
long, winter fronds, rising high toward the sky.

"Years loom," she tells us at the end of the poem, but "Suddenly, patience pays / in white bloom." The miracles that Sybil Pittman Estess believes in are those of a skeptical American imagination rooted deep in Protestant theology of the Reformation and Enlightenment. I am reminded of Frost in some of these poems, and of that faith in the hard, blunt world of winter in Wallace Stevens' "Snowman," who "beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

The realist in Sybil Estess always starts the poem by noting the drab familiarity of a place or a moment, a woman entering a Spanish church in Waco, "The only Anglo, she enters in tennis shoes," but after surveying the interiors in a few two-line stanzas, a second voice takes over to witness an astonishing transformation, Christ descending into a Spanish congregation's communion cup:

They go slowly through ritual until
Eucharist. She eats it though she is Episcopalian.

As she notes, wryly, in a deadpan style that is her trademark, all the statues of this Catholic church are "pallor white," and the congregants around her are all the dark-skinned natives of an unfamiliar America she is surprised to encounter. The poem's irony, carefully suspended among her details, asks a profound question: how does one believe so fervently in gods that come from elsewhere, born out of soil and traditions that have nothing to do with the people around her? Willa Cather asked the same question in her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, when a French priest, Father Vaillant, discovers the depths of native belief that leave him ashamed of his own superficiality.

Is there a plot running through these ninety pages? It's scattered like wild flowers along a Texas highway. But its insistent questions all point the way of a woman in middle age observing her rites of passage as parents die, other women suffer the deaths

of sons and husbands, as friends wither away from cancer and divorce, while the world turns on its old rhythms of spring and winter, death and renewal. Death is much on her mind, not as self-pity or fear, but to relish its alien landscape and feel its power. In "Native on Land," which recounts a car trip to Arizona, the desert looms into view as that terrain of absence and removal:

When we descend from the Grand Canyon
on the cold eastern side, Highway 64,
toward the Little Colorado Gorge,

we come upon the vast Northeastern
Arizona flats named "Painted Desert"
huge and barren, unspeakable.

In "Sea's Brew," a hurricane transforms the familiar beaches
of Galveston Island into another landscape of alien beauty:
Fiercest wind she's ever felt here batters
her face. High seaweed-strewn waves

roar. Loudest she's known except in storms.

On those rolling waters is her father, dead for forty years, swimming as she observes him from her hotel window, a scene that "comforted / her more than any sound in cities can." It is nearly Father's Day, and the scene, at once real and familiar, suddenly veers round into a dimension of magical convergences, a ghostly father riding the whitecaps as Tropical Storm Allison roars against the roofs of Houston. Terror, nature's strength, and the dead orbit around one another in this poet's imagination.

The plain, even-toned pace of these poems, with their conversational rhythms and dogged respect for verisimilitude, are a combination of the nasal southern drawl of Lady Bird Johnson, the plodding speech of beauty parlor gossip, the logy pace of Mississippi summer afternoons, all of which fed the imagination of this poet and shaped her personality. But do we have that many women poets raised in the deep South on hominy grits and the Bible who can sing as well as Pittman Estess in all the registers of the plain truth and the dark truth just below it?

Here she is on her mother's hands after a stroke:

My mom's
hands that have worked, scrubbed often,

cooked, washed old pots and pans. Hands,
stay with us, even clenched, as mother's

paralyzed hands are. Bridled, broken,

to our long end.

“Prayer for Her Hands”

The Southern voice in poetry has been mainly a man’s voice—one thinks of William Vaughan Moody, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, more recently the voices of Dave Smith and David Bottoms. Southern women writers more often turned to fiction to examine their lives under the double hammers of racism and oppression. Sybil Pittman Estess is among a very small company of poets, Betty Adcock coming to mind, who have explored daily life in this age, under the roar of the freeways, the ambiguous political climate of the Bush years, the less strident social tensions of the last two decades, which almost seem to lack a story. Our lives are parceled out among malls and suburban tract houses, and the daily grind of the office. Where is there epic in such cautious living?

Estess’ book takes such meager material and shapes it into a circuitous logic of meditation on the plainness of the moment and the craggy deeps that lie below our habits and assumptions.

Absence is that steeped, deep sadness stories
keep. Ties, like scars, don’t heal.

“Every Sorrow Can Be Borne”

Her advice in *Blue, Canded in January Sun* is not to trust appearances or their apparent fixity. Nothing is solid in Pittman Estess’ world, everything shimmers and becomes a translucent veil cast over a larger world of spirit and memory. There is both “despair divorce or loss of a friend,” but equally “love and joy.” We must accept the life we are given, then “Let it glow.”

—Paul Christensen (Texas A & M)

***Radiance* by Barbara Crooker. Word Press, WordTech Communications. 84 pp. \$17.00 paper; *Pascal Goes to the Races* by Janet McCann, WordTech Communications. 84 pages, \$17.00 paper; and *Emily’s Dress* by Janet McCann. Pecan Grove Press. 39 pp. \$8.00 paper.**

Barbara Crooker and Janet McCann are mature, accomplished poets. Crooker resides in rural Pennsylvania, while McCann is a professor of English and Creative Writing at Texas A&M University.

Crooker’s 10 chapbooks include *Impressionism*, *Ordinary Life*, *Welcome Home*, and *In the Late Summer Garden*. She has won the W. B. Yeats Society of New York Award and The Thomas Merton Poetry of

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