

SEAN PEARS

"Like a Shock of Doves Comes Forgiveness": On TJ Jarrett's *Zion*

Zion, by TJ Jarrett. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014.

"Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within," writes James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*. "I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense," he continues, "but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." This love Baldwin describes is far from liberalism's staid appeal to sympathy and equality. Rather, it is Christian love in the deepest sense, one that—like Abraham's—involves risking everything.

This kind of love seems central to TJ Jarrett's second collection, *Zion*, which explores the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement through the stories of three generations of Southern women. The women are brought together at the deathbed of the eldest, where they are haunted by the ghost of Theodore Bilbo, prominent Mississippi politician and author of the 1947 white supremacist screed, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization*. However, Bilbo's ghost haunts these women not to perpetuate violence and hatred, as he did during his life, but to confess.

In "Theodore Bilbo Begins His Confession," he admits to having spied on the eldest woman years ago while she was bathing in the river. At the shore, he is simultaneously seduced and horrified by the difference he projects onto her body, both racial and sexual:

I knew that there

were places I could still not enter,
a peace inside I could not reach

and I hated you for it, even more
than I hated myself for seeking

ways to conquer

Jarrett's profound challenge (to herself and to us) in these poems is to humanize a historical figure whom most writers would immediately demonize. That this gesture in turn participates in an elegy to her grandmother further deepens the text's essential sacrifice. In imagining Bilbo's confessions, in turning to face him, in ultimately offering him forgiveness, Jarrett's speaker surprises herself as much as she does the reader. The book's final scenes are gripping, even in—perhaps as a result of—their quietude.

The pathos of these moments is balanced in the book by an insistent investigation into the ability of language to actualize this dream of reconciliation. What can poetry really do? This question, so often asked, feels urgent here. "*The worst has already happened to us,*" a woman (perhaps her mother) tells the speaker in "At the Repast," "*What good is metaphor now?*" This question isn't answered by the text, but is instead repeated, as the speaker and author continuously test their faith in the medium. When we re-enter poetry, it is a leap. Jarrett further tests poetry through her sly use of the subjunctive tense. In "The Peonies at the Bodega," the speaker meditates on what *would* be the case "were this a poem":

In the poem, it would be near dusk; there would be a metaphor
about how the earth participates in the end of things. I'd mention
the owners of the bodega were an old married couple, restocking
the produce to guard against decay. I'd mention the flowers;
they would be peonies. Peonies would stand in for something else.

Jarrett refuses the terms of poetic language even while indulging them. These moments remind the reader that merely reading is, of course, insufficient for the real work of reconciliation, or grief. Much must happen off the page.

Despite the pleasure of tracking Jarrett's use of verb tense, many of the formal aspects of the book will feel quite familiar to the contemporary scene. Most of the poems employ couplets with quiet rhyme and meter, and lines of regular length. There are a few poems in prose. A few sonnets. There are—one major darling of contemporary poetry—vaguely directed imperatives. However, it could be said that even the most familiar gestures stay out of the way of the book's thematic development; the quiet forms allow it to unfurl with a seriousness and a poise perhaps suited to its subject.

One exciting exception is the mesmerizing quality of, "After Forty

Days, Go Marry Again," a poem that reaffirms Gertrude Stein's observation that there is no repetition as long as there is emphasis:

There she is in Biloxi, there she is
and there she is and there she is.
There she is: bits of black hair
and the earrings. They say: *maybe*
that's not her. Look. There.
The ball-stay barrettes. Yellow,
flowers stretched around. There she
is at Christmas. There she is [...]

At times one wishes Jarrett had spent more pages exploring these less conventional poetic modes, as they yield many of the book's finest moments.

Intimate, ambivalent, and hugely generous, this book came to life in a moment of sound and fury. Within the current context of heightened awareness of race politics and racial inequalities in America, the universal mode of *Zion* might feel strangely out of time. "This isn't about particulars," Jarrett admits to us towards the end of the book in "How to Grieve." One almost wants to know how the manuscript would have looked had the author held onto it another year; perhaps the vision of a plaintive Theodore Bilbo would have seemed simply too unreal beside the face of Darren Wilson. But had that been the case, readers would have lost out on a challenging intervention into American literature on race and loss, one that picks up Baldwin's mantle of risking everything to bridge the distances between us. It may at times seem horrifying, but how else would reconciliation happen?

"No version of / paradise // have we imagined / with the other," the speaker tells Bilbo in "Theodore Bilbo and I Survey the Contours of Zion," "And as we are / already dead, // there is nothing / either of us / can do."