Book Review

Doxologies and Admonitions

Psalm
Carol Ann Davis
Tupelo Press, 2007.

Epistles: Poems
Mark Jarman
Sarabande Books, 2007.

Gomer's Song
Kwame Dawes
Black Goat, 2007.

"NO POET, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," T.S. Eliot wrote in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot saw poets less as purely original than as indebted to the generations before them, writing in response to texts that form a tradition. But if the text a poet responds to is the Bible, is the poet responding to it as a religious tradition or a literary one? The collections of poems under review here all refer to the Bible in their titles, but they do not merely answer back to the text. Instead, they use scripture as a point of departure. It becomes a means of exploration, a source that leads them to develop their poetic vision.

Of the three writers, perhaps the most concerned with figurative and literal vision is Carol Ann Davis. "It will be hard to be done seeing," she writes in "Distal," one of the opening poems of her first collection, *Psalm.* This statement brings into sharp relief the central problem of the book: The world is full of beauty; we are going to die. In poems that span birth and death, particularly the birth of the poet's son and the death of her father, Davis achieves a vision of the world that gazes long and unflinchingly at these truths.

Though the book's title is *Psalm,* it brings to mind less the text of the biblical psalms than the psalms as they might be chanted in a medieval Benedictine monastery. In other words, here *psalm* means *practice,* path to the contemplative state of mind. Almost anything can become an object for contemplation. In one poem, a corn maze becomes a labyrinth where we "follow signs and answer questions." And in "Listening to Willem Squeal while a Selmer Guitar Reminds Me of the Existence of All Things," the blending of a baby's cries with a wailing guitar produces a meditation on distance and love:

> Love owns
>
> this part of the melody, turns the world
> away from ruin for the second it takes
> to inhale a breath…

Although love and the melody's beauty transport the poem's speaker, grief is always lurking around the corner. The poem ends by contrasting the part of the melody that "turns the world away from ruin" with the song that sings "our world quickly made // of stones and river water / and grief transmuted into fire." In three poems titled "Grief Daybook" [see *Image* issue 54] and several other elegies, Davis threads a meditation on loss through poems that contemplate beauty—Vermeer's view of Delft, Joseph Cornell's boxes, liturgical art.

Although the poems on art are lovely, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ones addressing grief feel more urgent, and are thus more compelling. In "Feast Day

Elegy," Davis brings the two subjects together, blurring art and reality, so that the poem's speaker appears to have stepped into a medieval painting of "a feast day with its large hands / and mouth, its river sound and clay color, / the town concerned just now with bathing // and gathering wood." As the poem progresses, it gradually pulls away from this scene:

> For now, the garden door
> is made of birds, my saint flutters
> like a wasp, and the girl's hands
> in the painting almost rest in her work
>
> of making thread. She doesn't look at
> us.
> She looks into the paint,
> where she was made.

The poem draws attention to the painting's artifice, and as this happens, art loses its ability to gloss over grief and suffering. When Davis combines this keen eye for detail with a direct emotional tone, she is at her best. In these moments, her precise images become piercingly clear. I look forward to seeing how she develops this clarity of vision in future books.

The thirty prose poems that comprise Mark Jarman's *Epistles* exhort, console, command, question, and answer the reader—sometimes all in the same poem. "If I were Paul..." the opening poem begins, and so we know we are meant to think about the Pauline epistles. Yet Jarman's poems range far from Paul in their subject matter, bringing in radio talk shows and sweaty joggers right along with the parts of a plant and the mysteries of DNA. Although science and scientific language appear frequently, science is not really the subject. Instead, Jarman makes scientific knowledge serve as a metaphor for all human understanding and for its limits. Jarman is concerned with the limits of knowledge, and he wants to use the poem as a vehicle to discover them:

> I have lost my explanation for the divine plan.
>
> The vehicle for my metaphor was either the depths of π or it was the trajectory of DNA. I think something about the existence of numbers going on infinitely backwards reassured me. But how from that do I extrapolate love?
>
> Mathematics calls across distances. The angels are sines and cosines. And so on. But can heaven choose between one and many? There is no warmth in knowing God's guts are a string of irrational numbers.

This is heady stuff. Yet these poems remain grounded in human life, and Jarman is keenly aware that grand, philosophical abstractions exist right alongside ordinary people. This blend of abstract and ordinary recalls Paul's letters, which swerve between richly poetic doxologies and admonitions against squabbling in church. And this blend recalls one of the central questions that contemporary interpreters of Paul's letters face: Which parts of them are personal, bound by the time and place of the writer, and which are universal? Insofar as they are interpretations of Paul, Jarman's poems seem to give a both/and reply. Their tone is both intimate and formal. "Do the impossible," the opening poem commands: "Restore to life those you have killed, wholeness to those you have maimed, goodness to what you have poisoned, trust to those you have betrayed." This command sounds like an addition to the Sermon on the Mount, while the next poem commands: "Sit at your kitchen table with the phone in your hand, the radio on," evoking an intimate setting where moral absolutes are difficult to perceive.

The poems reflect a tension between doubt and faith that is present in Jarman's earlier work, particularly his *Unholy*

Sonnets. It might seem strange that a poet who's known for his sonnets and who has edited a collection of "New Formalist" poetry would write a book of prose poems. But in Jarman's hands, the verse paragraphs have the compact energy of sonnets. The fluidity of the form allows him to achieve the illusion of ease in his style, a freewheeling conversancy with divine mystery and ordinary life, so that each poem is, in the words of holy sonneteer John Donne, "a little world made cunningly."

Jarman also draws on the tradition of prose-poem writers like James Tate, embracing the surreal and the humorously bizarre. "Recently I learned that God no longer delighted in my existence," one poem's narrator tells us. "He had grown homesick for the child I was, and regarded the balding, graying, overweight, five-nine middle-aged man with some disenchantment." His willingness to play with the trope of a "personal relationship with God" serves Jarman well. But he always knows when to leave abstraction and rhetoric behind and enter the world of image:

> Someone else could embody all I am saying in a horse. He would see it through the animal's coffee clear eye, as it stood between traces on cobblestones, pained by a growth above its right fetlock—a soft, gray, carrotlike protrusion.

Just when the poem is in danger of slipping into the realm of pure abstraction, it grounds the reader in a meticulously observed image. These moments are breathtaking, and Jarman produces them with regularity and impeccable timing. Certainly *Epistles* is a book that bears rereading.

Kwame Dawes addresses the biblical ties to his collection, *Gomer's Song,* more directly than either Jarman or Davis, in a note on his acknowledgements page. He writes:

> These poems make no effort to retell the story of Gomer, the harlot wife of the prophet Hosea in the biblical book bearing his name. However, they imagine the psychological complexity of Gomer and find some mythic anchoring in that narrative.

It's a fine line between "retelling" and "mythic anchoring," and it's true that the poems do not work as a straightforward narrative. But in addition to his many books of poems, Dawes has also written fiction, and this collection has a novelistic feel, although the poems are in the lyric mode.

The poems reimagine Gomer as a complex woman whose life takes her far from her Jamaican birthplace. Three locations serve as headings for the three sections: "Hamilton, Ontario, 2002," "Rock Hill, South Carolina, 2004," and "Cassava Piece, Kingston, 1977." In the first section, the poem deals with Gomer's sexual encounters as a prostitute, while the second section explores the give-and-take between Gomer and her husband amid cycles of intimacy and infidelity. The third section goes back in time to imagine a troubled but beautifully rendered childhood, often linking memories to scenes from her later life.

Gomer's exact narrative is blurry. We don't know exactly why she moved from one place to another, how she met her husband, or who tempted her to betray him. But her voice is utterly clear. She speaks with explicit, frank authority throughout the book, whether the subject is her sexual prowess ("Here is the calculus of desire— / I have studied its insides // like I have studied the language / of the sky") or her uncertainty about forgiveness ("To walk // away now bloodless, unburdened, / forgiven, seems patently decadent, / and I keep looking around,

waiting // for the fire to fall").

One of the pitfalls of representing a woman like Gomer, who is only briefly depicted in the biblical narrative, is the temptation to depict her as all flesh, no spirit. But this narrator's bold voice and canny self-awareness make her more complicated than that. Twice in the poem "Translating Love," she draws attention to her own use of language as a way to make sense of her actions:

> I am learning to say *love* as an unguent
> for the tawdriness of our coupling
> in rank motels […]
> To return
> each night, I call it love, make an epic
> of it […]

Despite this awareness, Dawes's version of Gomer raises more questions than it answers. In the poem "Peace," when sex gives way to sleep, the narrator finds herself haunted by dreams of a man threatening her with a machete. She prays for relief from these dreams but finds: "These sliding songs are all / I have in me, all I can give, / my voice turning about in the dark." While she finds comfort in her own strong voice, as she does in her sexual power, she remains a haunted and wounded figure, raising questions of consensuality in a world where bodies are bought and sold. Gomer may proudly claim she knows "the taste of sin: the pure light / of a soft boy's smile, the sound / of it growing with the shock / of his orgasms," but she is still deeply broken.

Because the narrator is at once strong and wounded, and because she is so explicit, Dawes's book comes closer to the Bible than Jarman's or Davis's. *Gomer's Song* reminds us that the Old Testament is full of sex and violence, that it's full of flawed people who "have stood under the healing shadows, / felt the hand of mercy," like Gomer. Still, in the same poem, "Punishment," she tells us: "I battle my appetite with fasts / and carry the weight of guilt with me." She is never fully able to accept forgiveness. But this feels true to the Bible, and at the same time it fits with Dawes's novelistic impulse. The Bible is mostly stories, after all. And in Gomer's story, Dawes cautions against a reading of the Bible that scrubs out the dirty parts, that erases the flesh-and-blood people who rebelled against and wrestled with God.

I began this review thinking these three books would enable me to define the relationship between contemporary poetry and the Bible. But they've done nothing of the kind. While Davis, Jarman, and Dawes all use the Bible as a point of departure, they begin and end at different points. They even respond to different genres within the biblical text, so perhaps it's not surprising that the psalms, epistles, and prophetic narratives would lead three different poets in very different directions. If anything, this variety is an indication that there is plenty of room for more poets to follow the midrashic impulse to speak into, speak back to, and embellish upon the biblical text. We can only hope that future poets who follow Davis, Jarman, and Dawes in this direction will arrive at such fresh and engaging results.

—*Reviewed by Hannah Faith Notess*