

## PHOTO ALBUMS AND (UN)FAMILIAR FACES

*a review by Savannah Geidel*

Grace C. Ocasio. *Family Reunion*. Broadstone Books, 2020.

Lenard D. Moore. *Long Rain*. Wet Cement Press, 2021.

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**LENARD D. MOORE** has taught at NC State, NC A&T, and the University of Mount Olive. He is the author and editor of several books, most recently *The Geography of Jazz* (Mountains & Rivers Press, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2020) and *All the Songs We Sing* (Carolina Wren Press, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). He was the first African American President of the Haiku Society of America. Read about his founding of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective in *NCLR* 2016.

**GRACE C. OCASIO** teaches creative writing at UNC Charlotte. She is the author of *The Speed of our Lives* (BlazeVOX, 2014) and *Hollerin from This Shack* (Ahadada books, 2009). Her second full-length poetry collection, *Family Reunion* received honorable mention at the Quercus Review Fall 2017 Book Award Contest. Her work has also been featured in *Rattle*, *Court Green*, *Black Renaissance Noire*, and more.

Though many books stem from writers' experiences and contain bits of personal information, some books are so deeply personal that the experience of reading them feels much like reading someone else's diary or paging through someone else's family album. Recent poetry collections by Grace C. Ocasio and Lenard D. Moore read as if intended for private eyes, giving the material a profoundly intimate feeling. Though short, both just over 130 pages, these collections are replete with emotions and memories intrinsic to aspects of the authors' lives. Yet both collections keep readers at a distance, reminding us that, though we are invited to partake in the recollections, we may not fully understand the context. Both collections remind us that experiences, while shared, manifest differently for everyone, and time does not erase the past, as the past latches onto us all and moves forward into the future.

Reading **Grace C. Ocasio's** second full-length poetry collection *Family Reunion* is much like attending someone else's family gathering – you know no one, you know nothing of their history, and yet you're thrown into the crowd of relations to try and piece everything together. Ocasio traverses time and place seamlessly, entangling the narratives of her maternal and paternal family members. Broken into five parts, Ocasio's collection lives up to its title, bringing her kin together from across the geographical expanse of the East coast and temporal swath of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As we

read through the poems, we travel up and down the coastal region, always returning to North Carolina where Ocasio uncovers memories of her family and welcomes them back from time past. The collection depicts various family members through literary snapshots representative of critical moments in each person's life, as if Ocasio is paging through a family photograph album with us while recollecting stories passed down through generations.

Indeed, there is one actual photograph in the collection, and photographs permeate the text as an organizing motif. The first poem, "Grandma's Portrait," recreates Grandma Cloris (to whom the book is dedicated), though the portrait is used to uncover insight into the speaker's father. In "Granddaddy Watkins," a photo of the speaker's grandfather evokes memories of their relationship when she was a child and how she holds all men to a standard he created. There is brief mention of a picture of her father in his youth. Gloria (the poet's alias, according to the family tree in the back of the book) notes how he won't speak about his younger years and explains how he became the man he grew into, leaving Gloria to piece the past together with photographs. The nine-part poem "Photo Album" begins with a photograph of a mother and her infant daughter and ends with a photograph of the mother as a teenager. Although these portraits are of specific family members, they create a web that links one member to another, as if the compilation is superimposing them all to cre-



ate a scene encompassing each individual photographed – a family reunion.

It is not until the end of the collection that we are given a family tree and a timeline of events. If you read the collection as I did (and as I recommend), without paging to these endnotes, the poems become a whirlwind of information that you must grapple with while piecing together who's who. Though this method is more difficult for the reader, the effect is a heightened engagement, an investment in piecing together Ocasio's family story. Reading the collection without insider knowledge is challenging. As the point of view shifts from one poem to the next, the reader becomes unsure of whose memories are whose – and that's the point. The intersections represent how families are interconnected even when separated by physical and metaphysical boundaries: the persona Gloria is the culmination of each of her family members whether she has met them or not, just as her parents were products of their ances-

tors. Thus, this collection shows family as a series of crisscrossing lines that create a web the reader cannot untangle, regardless of time or place.

Yet, in other places, we're introduced to nameless people, as if Gloria has stumbled upon people in a family album she does not recognize. The poem "Inside Grandma's Scrapbook" switches between second and third-person perspectives, and it remains unclear who "you" are or who "he" is – is Grandma Cloris looking at the photo, or is Gloria? Do they know "him," or is he merely an unnamed face in an old scrapbook? Elsewhere, a poem from an unnamed narrator in 1932 shares memories of "John," who appears nowhere else in the book. The various unnamed or once-mentioned individuals envelop the collection in what feel like family secrets. We're left wondering how these mysterious subjects fit into the family and who invited them to the reunion. It's not necessarily a mystery we need answers to; in fact, these unidentified people add to the personal feel of the collection. We are reminded that we are guests in someone else's home, and we don't need to know every detail to understand the bigger picture.

Though at times the poems feel temporally fragmented, and it becomes difficult to keep track of all the people, the collection offers a way of thinking of family in terms of what connects them rather than what disconnects them. The concluding piece, "Mama's and Daddy's Womenfolk

Convene for Juneteenth," is a section of prose separated from the poems by the photograph of Cloris. The divide closes the scrapbook and moves us to the family gathering, in which we watch Gloria and her kinfolk exist in the same space at the same time. As the women sit together and discuss various details of their lives, we see the bits of each woman that Gloria sees within herself, characteristics passed down from generation to generation. It is fitting that Gloria's own daughter, Zoe, is present at the Juneteenth gathering. She, too, is a culmination, and celebration, of the women present. Though most of the people from the collection are physically absent, Ocasio's collection is a reminder that familial connections are based just as much on emotion, history, and spirituality as they are grounded in tangible elements of connection. Ocasio's family history lives on through her and will continue to live on through her daughter, something no passage of time can negate.

While Ocasio evokes her kin, living and remembered, through her poetry, **Lenard D. Moore** transports us back to assorted moments in *Long Rain*. The poems, all of them five lines and untitled, recreate singular moments focused on nature's connection to everyday life, creating tiny landscapes between the lines. The collection is broken into four parts – "Earth," "Wind," "Fire," and "Water" – each beginning with a short prose introduction to a specific

moment in time and the corresponding element. "Earth" opens with a recollection of the poet's Great-Grandma Fannie who "walked up and down sun-beaten rows, chopped weeds as steady as machines." "Wind" brings us on a nighttime car ride with Moore in which we witness an owl swoop "on the currents of Carolina air." "Fire" situates us in an attic where the speaker speaks to his partner and remembers her "kisses, the fire shooting through" them. And "Water" brings us to April 9, 1968, where a fourth-grade Moore watches Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral with his class who "weep salt water." While the prose is more metaphorically connected to the elements, the poems within each section directly correspond to the natural environment, grounding the collection in both emotional and physical connections to place.

The poems detach from the preceding memory and concentrate more on the natural elements. As Guy Davenport states in his introduction to the collection, "Moore has paid careful attention to the time of day and

time of year. . . . [H]e gives up narrative and anecdote for those sharp observations of moments." Despite the few specific memories dividing the sections of the collection, the poems zoom out to focus on commonplace glimpses of life, relying on pronouns rather than the names of specific people and a cyclical timeline that crisscrosses the four seasons. The lack of specifics positions the environment at the forefront, while in the background, humanity exists with the landscape.

Moore's careful attention to time – or bits of time, rather – gives the collection a personal, yet familiar feeling. Each poem captures a glimpse of humanity performing actions against the backdrop of a changing natural landscape, illustrating everything from reading a book, in "Fire" – "summer sunburst: / she puts on her sunglasses / and reads the novel" – to driving after rain, in "Water" – "reflection of headlights creeping / down the two-lane road." In many ways, Moore's poems force us to slow down and experience the world around us,

notice the slow passing of time, the movement of light throughout the year, the scent of seasons and loved ones, strangers we encounter. As Moore states in the prose introduction to the "Wind" section, "Bonded by the natural world, I am one with the moment." It is just that which these poems represent – moments – connected but fragmented, separate but one.

Though there are only two mentions of place in the collection (NC State in the prose portion of "Wind" and Raleigh, NC, in the prose portion of "Fire"), Moore's collection is permeated with sights, scents, and sounds of the South. From the depictions of pine trees, bullfrogs, crickets, collards, and endless heat to the farms growing blueberries, grapes, or apples, Moore's poetry paints a vivid image of the South's various landscapes. Their combination creates an unbreakable connection to the region.

Moore's brief poetic snapshots of life create a montage of experiences; the assemblage is another photo album encompassing what it means to be alive within a natural landscape illuminating and influencing our movements. Moore's poetry transcends everyday life, reminding us to pause and observe the world around us and form deeper connections with our surroundings. Reading *Long Rain* takes us on a journey across North Carolina, forcing us to slow down, relish the scenery Moore paints for us, and then go search for those small moments throughout everyday life. ■

