

in which “I threw in for a time with a renegade band of Sufis helping to stage large healing conferences” (212). Crowe’s prescriptive diatribe, however well intended, is a blanket solution that would have rubbed Henry Thoreau the wrong way. As evidence, see Thoreau’s *Walden* rejection of presumptuous philanthropy and his caution that his advice on living is tailored only for those who find it a good fit.

This is a sample of Crowe’s frequently labored writing: “These days . . . there has become an exaggerated and romanticized idea of going back to the land” (9). Contrast this and other fumbling passages with Crowe’s sentient description of a surprise snowstorm on the first day of spring: “In an hour’s time the whole mountain world has been clothed in a saggy white suit. From my writing desk at the window, I watch the snow fall. Big leafy flakes settle on branches and ground, now more than an inch deep in white irony. How beautiful the pines and laurels look half covered in this midday meringue!” (179). The polemical passages numb my brain and irritate me, the clunky ones grate on my ear, but the lyrical charm of descriptions such as the snowstorm open my eyes to revelations. I know what advice I would give to this author. Stick to the nuts-and-bolts and the nuts-and-berries of your personal experience in nature. These anecdotes and descriptions are your milk-and-honey. They can be your bread-and-butter too – your *real* wild work.

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A “book of pages waiting to be turned”

a review by Christina G. Bucher

Minnie Bruce Pratt. *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003. \$12.95 paper

Several constituencies of poetry lovers should be delighted with the publication of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems*: Southerners, lesbians, Southern lesbians, mothers, both whites and blacks committed to battling the insidious racism that still plagues our culture, folks from anywhere committed to social justice, academics who wish to teach her body of work, and, perhaps most importantly, those who cherish well-crafted, evocative, lyrical poetry, whether shorter “imagistic” works or longer narrative pieces.

Pratt, an Alabama native, received her PhD in English at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and afterwards became involved in political activism while living in Greensboro and working with women in Fayetteville. She is especially important to North Carolina’s literary community as one of the original contributors to *Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South, Emphasizing Lesbian Visions*, which was published by a collective in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Durham; those involved in the collective, including Mab Segrest, were, says Pratt, “a group of anti-racist, anti-imperialist Southern lesbians” (www.mbpratt.org/fork.html; see also articles by Tamara M. Powell and Wynn Cherry in *NCLR* 9 [2000]). Pratt eventually moved to

Washington, DC, a city that she has described as “very southern, really” (Vickie G. Hunt, “An Interview with Minnie Bruce Pratt,” *Southern Quarterly* 35 [1997]: 97-107), and lived there for quite a number of years, living and working with her partner, Leslie Feinberg, a transgender author and activist. The couple now resides in New Jersey.

Prior to *The Dirt She Ate*, Pratt published four collections of poetry: a chapbook titled *The Sound of One Fork*, which she and some of her co-collectivists at *Feminary* published in 1981; *We Say We Love Each Other*, originally published in 1985 by Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press, one of the earliest independent feminist presses; *Crime Against Nature*, which many consider to be Pratt’s *tour-de-force*, published by Firebrand Books in 1990; and *Walking Back Up Depot Street*, published as part of the Pitt Poetry Series from the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1999. Selections from all four collections are included in *The Dirt She Ate*, as well as a selection of new poems.

Readers will be especially grateful that Pratt chose to include seven poems from *The Sound of One Fork*, which is out-of-print and difficult to find. Even though these poems are from early in Pratt’s career, several of her key poetic themes are already present and some of the poems are among



Minnie Bruce Pratt at an anti-war demonstration in Washington, DC, 29 Sept. 2003 (front right)

the best in this new collection. Her feminist consciousness is present, for example, in "Cahaba" (5-6), a chant-like meditation comparing the Cahaba River, near Selma, Alabama, where Pratt grew up, and the natural treasures that lie beside it, such as "worn stones . . . shattered / at veins of crystal / where arrowheads lie / hidden but angled for flight" (ll. 12-15), to the untapped power of the women in this rural Southern community who "flow like the river / in the dry beds of men" (ll. 18-19). If they were but released from the oppressive force of patriarchal society, the poem implies, these women could "flood the fields, / spread the red mud to move / over house and porch" (ll. 21-23), and ultimately "step where we please / on the banks of the Cahaba" (ll. 34-35). Both the pleasures and tensions of family relations are apparent in "My Cousin Anne" (7) and "My Mother Loves Women" (8). In the former, Pratt's speaker recalls how her cousin taught her "how to eat honeysuckle" (l. 2); with her signature sensual imagery, Pratt describes how

She snapped each calyx
and pulled the stamen through
so I could tongue from it
the one drop of nectar
shining there. (ll. 5-9)

But adulthood seemingly brings changes to their relationship – or perhaps simply the distancing that comes with the passing of time, as the poem ends with a wistful stanza, declaring: "We were still girls then. / Years had not burned between us. / We saw only each other / and the yellow honeysuckle" (ll. 14-17). "My Mother Loves Women" is one of the first poems in this collection to confront directly Pratt's sexual identity and the difficulties it has caused in various familial relations.

The poem also rather strikingly calls into question the very definition of lesbian identity and may, especially given its original date of publication (1980), remind readers of Adrienne Rich's concept of a "lesbian continuum," which she set forth in her famous essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" and which gained much currency during



Minnie Bruce Pratt

the second wave of the women's movement in the US. The poem begins simply: "My mother loves women" (l. 1). Pratt then goes on to recount the evidence for such a statement: that her mother sends her jewelry on Valentine's Day, sends flowers and foods to her female friends when they are in times of need, "walks every evening down our hill and around / with Eleanor Hallman / . . . / At the slippery spots they go arm in arm" (ll. 6-7, 9), and brags about the "intricate afghans" (l. 21) she knits for the women she works with. Conversely, the speaker speculates that she doesn't think her mother has "known a man except [her] brother / and my father who for twenty years has been waiting / for death in his

rocking chair in front of the TV set" (ll. 16-18). However, in the midst of all this love that her mother has for the women in her life, the speaker brings the reader up short in the closing stanza by ironically stating, "My mother loves women but she's afraid / to ask me about my life. She thinks / that I might love women too" (ll. 23-25).

Pratt herself has described her second volume of poems, *We Say We Love Each Other*, as a "book of poetic maps, tracing the search in a violent world for a place to live as a lesbian, a place to make art and to make love, to savor life as delicious and sensual as the center of a peach" (www.mbpratt.org/wesay.html). And indeed the poems included from this book in this new volume bespeak her purpose. Two poems are especially worth noting. "Waulking Song: Two" (26-33) is prefaced by a headnote that informs readers that "waulking songs" are "sung by groups of Hebridean women as they work woolen cloth with their hands and feet to strengthen its weave. . . . Each waulking song has a narrative, which may be altered by the lead singer, as well as a unique refrain" (26). Pratt has chosen to use Hebridean refrains within her poem, which she states may be as much as a "thousand years" old (26). Thus, the poem begins and is constantly interspersed with lines such as "*É hó hì ura bhì / Ho ro ho ì, ó ho ro ho*" (ll. 1-2), juxtaposed with varying numbers of couplets offering the narration. While perhaps the original Hebridean singer-women's narratives told tales of tragic loves of women and the violence they sometimes suffered at the hands of their male lovers or husbands, Pratt has chillingly and movingly updated this "waulking song" to relate the story of a female couple, one of whom has been raped. At first



Photograph by Leslie Fehring

hesitant to tell the speaker, her lover, what is wrong, the rape victim finally does and hands over “the shirt to mend, / a thin K-Mart cotton // with lines of yellow blue and red / running from grey to brighter plaid” (ll. 9-12). The plaid shirt becomes the controlling metaphor for the rest of the poem, as Pratt goes on, not only to tell of the horrific rape and the lover’s eventual recovery from it, but also to widen the poem’s theme to cover the topic of rape in general. Relating to the assault itself, we are told, “He cut the buttons off one by one. / He raped her and tried to cut her throat. // . . . And he did. / The red of her blood crossed the plaid of her shirt” (ll. 29-32). He does not kill her, however, and she is able to make her way home – still silent, where “[s]he washed the shirt, put it away / and looked to see what else was torn” (ll. 41-42). While the woman and her lover both suffer the difficulties of the aftermath of this crime, “The shirt lay folded, unmended, in my drawer” (l. 92). Healing finally begins three years after the attack, when the lover has come back

to life, “has made herself strong, enough / to knock a man down” (ll. 109-10), and when the speaker, who “wanted my hands to be rain for her, / to wash away all hurt” (ll. 115-16), takes the shirt out of the drawer: “I did what I could. I took out the shirt, / sewed the buttons back on, one by one. // Sewed over each seam, twice, by hand. / He would not ruin what we had made” (ll. 117-20). However, the speaker then hears the story of “a secretary, three months pregnant” (l. 136), who was also brutally raped and died later in the hospital. The story of this woman’s rape caused the narrator to “remember again your blood / in the dirt, your neck exposed to the knife” (ll. 143-44). The poem ends with a sort of “dedicatory” section framed by two of the Herbridean refrains, a brilliant section that stitches together, not only the metaphor of the shirt and what its state of mended-ness means for her partner, but also its connection to women everywhere who work, women perhaps like this other victim:

This poem is for you, to pin to
the mended shirt,
like the paper slip you find in a
new pocket,

#49, but you know it’s a woman,
all day folding sleeves around
cardboard.

At work, almost dead on her feet,
she folds the plain thin fabrics.

She thinks what her hands must
do at home.

When she leaves the line, the
machines are silent.

Her steps make a poem to the
rhythm of her heart,
like a poem for you, to pin to
the mended shirt. (ll. 157-66)

The second poem of particular note among those selected from *We Say We Love Each Other* is “Your Hand Opens Me” (37). The frank and genuine and shameless transparency of describing making love marks the poem as one of the most erotic lesbian love poems since Adrienne Rich’s “The Floating Poem” from her sonnet sequence *Twenty-One Love Poems*. Pratt’s speaker proclaims, “I’ve wanted to make love with you outside, your ass / sunk into a curve of dirt, my fingers sunk in you / up to the knuckles and palm” (ll. 2-4); however, this night brings a different kind of lovemaking: “Quiet, your hand opening, opening me, to the width / of light made by one candle, opening my thighs / clenched against the night” (ll. 9-11). Mixed with the pleasure is fear, the fear of vulnerability, of the very openness, both literal and figurative, the narrator describes. Their quiet lovemaking on a dusty floor, however, seems to assure the speaker of her partner’s love, a love so strong that “I can come to you again / like this: my need

for you naked as me, / flat on my back, thighs open, against the boards" (ll. 28-30).

Such celebratory poems of lesbian lovemaking did not come into being without a cost to Pratt. She had married a fellow student and had two sons by the time she came out as a lesbian and sought a divorce in 1976. At that time, being lesbian or gay was still legally defined as a "crime against nature" in North Carolina, and her ex-husband used this legality to deprive Pratt of custody of their children. The award-winning volume *Crime Against Nature* chronicles the story of Pratt's attempts to remain connected to her sons; of the deep pain and blistering homophobia she faced from her ex-husband and others as she attempted to be true to herself yet still maintain her role as mother to her two boys; and, happily, of her ultimate success in forming healthy and close bonds with her sons, who prove more accepting than most others she encountered through this troubled journey. Two lines from her long poem "Shame" (66-69) reflect well the content, theme, and structure of that earlier collection: "In one hand, the memory of pain" (l. 67) and "In the other hand, change" (l. 74).

Crime Against Nature was perhaps the first book (of any genre) to so viscerally and thoroughly detail the travails of being a lesbian mother, before the lesbian baby boom erupted in the late 1990s. Chosen as the prestigious Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets, it is comprised of brutally honest poems about Pratt's loss of her children to her ex-husband after she came out. The same year this collection brought her such critical acclaim, however, Pratt was also one of the artists viciously attacked by then North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms in his attempts to dismantle

the NEA for what he deemed that agency's encouragement of "obscene" work.

With nineteen poems from it included, *Crime Against Nature* is well represented in this new collection. The poems chosen are primarily very personal ones about the turmoil Pratt faced ("Declared Not Fit" [54-55] and the selection from "Shame" [66-69]) and almost prayer-like verses to her sons ("Down the Little Cahaba" [58] and "A Waving Hand" [65]), juxtaposed with an occasional poem that seems more generally to speak politically about the dangers that may lie in wait for lesbian mothers ("All the Women Caught in Flaring Light" [59-62]).

The tone in the poems is sometimes one of righteous anger, such as when an academic colleague responds to Pratt's disclosure that she lost her children over her lesbianism with the question: "*But how could that happen to someone with a Ph.D.?*" ("My Life You Are Talking About" [73-77] l. 20). Other times, the tone is one of deep sadness mixed with anger, such as the haunting image in "Declared Not Fit" (54-55) of Pratt again viewing her boys in the rearview mirror as she leaves. "What were the reasons" (l. 11), she ponders, for her loss of them? The "power," she answers, "of a man over / a woman, his children: his hand on power he lacked, / that my womb had made children as the eye makes a look" (ll. 11-13). That power, plus the "[t]error of a man left alone, / the terror at a gesture: my hand sliding from her / soft pulse neck, to jawbone, chin, mouth met" (ll. 14-16). This "terror," time and again, Pratt suggests, is the reason she lost her sons for a time – for the terror of a husband who could not bear the thought of his wife leaving him for another woman and the terror that produced a legal system that sanctioned,

approved of, rewarded that terror. But Pratt does not only place "blame" elsewhere. In the section included from "Shame" (66-69), Pratt confesses, "I ask for justice but do not release / myself. Do I think I was wrong? Yes." (ll. 1-2). "What I / see is everybody watching, me included, / as a selfish woman who leaves her children, / two small boys hardly more than babies" (ll. 8-11). Still, though regretful, she also relates "How I wanted her slant humid body" (l. 15), how if she "had not been so starved" (l. 39), she may have been able to squelch her lust, to be more "ashamed" (l. 40) and to hide. The complexity of the feelings Pratt relates about this moment in her life is clear-sighted, lyrically expressed, and telling for readers.

"Shame" – and, indeed, all of the poems in this section – may remind the reader of a famous literary character who faced a similar situation of choosing between her own desires and the needs of her children. Though separated by a century, by class, and of course, by sexual orientation, Pratt and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier seem to have much in common. Fortunately, Pratt did not swim to her death in the Gulf of Mexico, and so we have a record, a litany, of the consequences and rewards she found in choosing her self; one wonders what similarities there might be if Edna had decided to tell her story rather than end her life. And it is indeed fortunate that Pratt's story does finally have a happy ending. Even in expressing her own ambivalence and anxiety over the choice she made in "Shame," she also is able to tell readers that she and her sons have "made it": "Now that we're / here, they've grown up, survived, no suicides" (42-43). Survival and celebration of the bonds with her sons are

expressed eloquently in "Another Question" (87-88), in which Pratt conveys that her sons have indeed seen these poems, and that, while "[t]he world prefers / I not tell the children" (ll. 23-34), her youngest says, "when I tell it all, that's what he likes best" (l. 26).

After the deeply personal *Crime Against Nature*, Pratt turned to quite a different project in *Walking Back Up Depot Street*. This collection includes a series of interconnected narrative poems told in the third person persona of Beatrice, a Southern white lesbian woman raised in the segregated South but making her way North. Pratt has called them "epic poems," "a reinterpretation of the history of the South from the underneath point of view" (Hunt 98-99). Only four of the poems from this collection are included here, but they are enough to whet the reader's appetite for more. The title poem (99-100), for example, has Beatrice pondering place and slowly drifting back into the memory of walking up Depot Street with "a dark woman" (l. 14) to hear the white engineer blow the whistle, "the tremble of power" (l. 18). She knows now, as an adult, that if she were to go back and visit this "dark woman," who had raised the children of others, "they'd be divided by past belief, the town's parallel tracks, / people never to meet even in the distance" (ll. 28-29). She wonders, thinking of all the care this black woman had given to her as an employee of the family – "whose hands had washed her / . . . had brought her maypops" (ll. 34-35) – "What had she given her, that woman, anything, all these years?" (l. 37). Thus, the section begins with a frank meditation on segregation and the knowledge that, though the past cannot be "remade," the present can, and if Beatrice means "to live in the present, she would

have to work, do / without, send money, call home long distance about the heat" (ll. 40-41), make sure that she tries to repay the debt she owes this woman who is embedded in her memory of "walking back up Depot Street."

"Red String" (101-103) uses a dead goose in the middle of a road in order to meditate on the deaths committed by the Klan throughout Southern history and is marked by an especially powerful section in which African American speakers testify to the violence and death either they or loved ones had suffered at the hands of cruel, bigoted men. "Eating Clay" (104-105) juxtaposes a description of Beatrice's lovemaking with a partner on the ground with Pratt's memory of seeing a "young thin woman digging up / the yellow-brown clay, crumbly as cornmeal / put in a paper sack" (ll. 6-8) and the potential power that may come from "the dirt she ate" (l. 36), which of course is the line that gives this new collection its title.

The collection closes with a sampling of new poems, most of them uncharacteristically short for Pratt and most focused in some way on the theme of work and money, the need to have it and get it. Many seem like poetic snapshots of those the speaker observes: the hairdresser with "nicks where she snips between / her fingers, the torn webbing" ("Cutting Hair" [114] ll. 5-6); the physical therapist who "flexes my foot like a rusty hinge" ("Doing Physical Therapy" [115] l. 1); a black man shoveling sand who "knives the blade in and pries up weight, straining for / a second, the pan low, like one arm of the scales of justice" ("Shoveling Sand" [116] ll. 4-5); two women playing "classic bingo, cool cash: *For every dream there's a / jackpot*" ("Playing the Lottery" [122] ll. 2-3).



Photograph by Michael Dobson/ Getty

These short poems are lovely, evocative, and hold within an understanding and celebration of working-class Americans – not academics, not the wealthy, but those who toil for what they have and perhaps gamble for what they hope for. One wonders if Pratt's next volume will build on the poems she has included here.

It is difficult to find fault with *The Dirt She Ate*. The poems represent Pratt at her best, especially in their offerings of luxurious, sensual, emotion-producing images and lines. Some may find a few poems strident and didactic, but that would be a criticism that speaks more to the reader's aesthetic ideology than to the quality of Pratt's poetry. The one criticism that might be justified – though one is hesitant to make it given the trauma Pratt suffered over the loss of her sons – is that some readers might prefer fewer poems from *Crime Against Nature* and more from the other volumes, especially more from *The Sound of One Fork* and *We Say We Love Each Other*, which are harder to locate and which would give an even broader portrait of this Southern poet who is a lesbian and a worker for social justice. Nevertheless, *The Dirt She Ate* should garner Pratt new readers and more critical attention from scholars of Southern literature. She surely deserves it.

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