

CHALLENGING PERSPECTIVE WITH PERSONA POETRY

a review by Michael Beadle

Catherine Pritchard Childress.
Outside the Frame. Eastover
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MICHAEL BEADLE is a poet, author, and teaching artist in Raleigh, NC. His poetry has appeared in *Kakalak*, *Broad River Review*, *River Heron Review*, assorted anthologies, and *NCLR Online Winter 2025*. His fiction has appeared in *Apple Valley Review*, *moonShine review*, and *BOMBFIRE*. A former journalist and magazine editor, he has written local history books on Haywood County and served as poet-in-residence at the North Carolina Zoo, student poetry contest manager for the North Carolina Poetry Society, and emcee for the state North Carolina Poetry Out Loud Finals.

CATHERINE PRITCHARD CHILDRESS teaches writing and literature at Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, NC. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *North American Review* and *Still*; has been anthologized in *Southern Poetry Anthology Volume VI*: Tennessee and Volume VII: North Carolina, and *Women Speak*, Volumes VII and VIII; and has been collected in a chapbook, *Other* (Finishing Line Press, 2015).

"We wear the mask that grins and lies," Paul Laurence Dunbar famously wrote in his oft-anthologized poem.* Its words resonate with anyone who has ever been told to tone down their voice, subdue their emotions, or silence their opinions so that someone else (family, bosses, society, or cultural institutions) won't have to confront painful realities like systemic racism or misogyny. But what if a mask didn't hide the truth but transformed it, reimagined it, magnified it so that voices once silenced and sidelined could acquire new power, agency, nuance, and complexity?

Poet and Appalachian scholar Catherine Pritchard Childress uses her latest collection, *Outside the Frame*, to don the mask and challenge readers with a series of persona poems that reimagine women and girls from across time telling their own stories with poignant, provocative voices. Each poem carries its own weight while evoking emotions from regret and shame to unabashed sexual desire and tender love. In both free verse and rhymed lines, Childress creates authentic, contemporary women (rebellious teen, irreverent preacher's daughter, dreamy sister, unfulfilled housewife, among others), and spotlights women from the Bible. From the Old Testament, we meet Rachel, Sarah, and Bathsheba, characters scarcely mentioned and vaguely described when compared to their male counterparts. We meet a defiant housewife who rejects the trappings of

June Cleaver (of 1950s *Leave It to Beaver* television fame), a mournful Mary Magdalene after the crucifixion of Christ, and various stages of girls and women in modern life navigating strict parental expectations, rites of passage, and awkward sexual encounters.

With direct, accessible language, Childress bears witness to girls and women controlled by the passions and demands of older men. In "Blossoming Indigo," a young woman covets a pair of Wrangler jeans, only to have her Deuteronomy-quoting father declare, "jeans are for boys." In "Solo," a barmaid meets a confident man who teaches her to dance the two-step. But their roles get reversed in a seedy motel when his "quick quick, slow, / slow" turns into a "misstep in bed" – an uncoupling set in tidy couplet stanzas.

In "Oeuvre," a girl regrets losing her virginity in the backseat of a car: "A real boyfriend would've cared / I was only twelve, still jailbait / never had a slow, wet kiss." The rhythm of these words in punch-to-the-gut syllables startles the reader with staccato emphasis. When the episode ends with "his chest heaving against me / again and again / pounding out his body of work," we get the allusion to the French title (resonating with French kisses, cheap French fries, and the idealism of French romance). In this manner, Childress allows phrases and words to reverberate, ricochet, and reflect off one another.

Having studied with some of the leading Appalachian poets

of the region, Childress draws poetic prowess from her mountain upbringing, steeped in rich traditions of family, food, music, and religion. *Outside the Frame*, her second full-length collection, includes forms such as the aubade and the ghazal as well as verses inspired by poems from Claudia Emerson, Jane Kenyon, and Allen Ginsberg. In "Housewife's Howl," Childress turns Ginsberg's iconic Beat poem "Howl" into a tribute to motherhood and all its staggering work:

I watched the strongest woman I'd known crumbled by convention. Exhausted cotton shift dragged down narrow, hardwood stairs at rooster crow to satisfy a hungry family. Coal-eyed babies drained her clean as the patterned linoleum she mopped in moonlight

In these opening lines, the reader encounters a daughter watching her mother slog through back-aching chores from "rooster crow" to "moonlight." Childress repeats the hard "c" sounds in alliterative succession with words like "crumbled," "cotton," and "coal-eyed" that do double duty – vividly describing the scene while wielding the language of hard-working families. "Coal-eyed" references the coal extraction industry that has devastated Appalachians with mountaintop removal and black lung disease for miners while traditionally providing much-needed jobs for the region. In "Housewife's Howl," a "city-coddled" woman quite literally falls for a "long-haul trucker," who becomes a preacher. The eloping bride then becomes a pastor's wife, who dutifully "prayed for the lost, witnessed to backsliders, comforted the sick, / spent her life washing clothes and smart mouths out with soap." This litany of selfless acts, which pours out like Ginsberg's original poem in its stream-of-consciousness vernacular, ends with a stinging realization that the narrator/daughter both empathizes with and spurns "this woman she never hoped to become."

Childress takes writing advice from former North Carolina Poet Laureate Cathy Smith Bowers to "shine a light on a moment of intensity" with the poem, "Bathsheba's Bath," which creates a sensual scene of a beautiful woman bathing. In the Biblical story, Bathsheba is the wife of Uriah, an elite soldier in King David's army. King David watches Bathsheba bathing and eventually has sex with her – some Bib-

lical scholars argue the encounter was nonconsensual, but Childress reimagines the voyeuristic scene with succinct and sultry language that crystallizes the moment in which Bathsheba knowingly seduces the king, anticipating the male gaze from a palace roof:

I dropped my robe,
dipped one foot into the tub,
eased my calf inch by blistering inch
testing the waters to see
if my friends were right
about the way you look at me
when I walk into the room
with the man who defends your crown

The poem is delivered in two stanzas, which feels right, as the subject engages so many dualities: man and woman, king and subordinate, commitment and infidelity, public knowledge and hidden deception, rooftop view and ground-level bath.

Outside the Frame pairs well with Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999), a cleverly assembled collection by Great Britain's former Poet Laureate that gives voice to famous women from history, the Bible, mythology, and other timeless stories – Circe, Medusa, and Delilah, for example – whose reputations have been maligned and disparaged for centuries. Duffy also creates female characters from famous male stories – Mrs. Faust, Mrs. Darwin, Queen Kong, Elvis's Twin Sister, and so on. While it's refreshing to read about strong, vulnerable, flawed and fascinating women in poetry collections, it's also disheartening to know how little has changed from the desert tent-cities of Biblical Israel to the back seats and board rooms of modern life. In patriarchal societies throughout the world, women and girls continue to strive and fight for basic respect and dignity when it comes to reproductive rights, equal pay for equal work, and a world free from sexual violence. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID UNDERWOOD

ABOVE Catherine Childress reading at City Lights Bookstore, Siler City, NC, Sept. 2023

* Quoted from "We Wear the Mask," first published in 1895 in Dunbar's second poetry collection, *Majors and Minors*; rpt. in *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (U of Virginia P, 1993).