

"SWEET SWEAT" AND "PLAINSONGS": THE LYRICAL RECLAMATION OF PLACE

a review by Annie Woodford

Forrest Rapier. *As the Den Burns*. Texas Review Press, 2022.

Jacinta V. White. *Resurrecting the Bones: Born from a Journey through African American Churches & Cemeteries in the Rural South*. Press 53, 2019.

ANNIE WOODFORD is the author of *Peasant* (Pulley Press, 2025) and *Bootleg* (Groundhog Poetry Press, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021); *Where You Come From Is Gone* (Mercer University Press, 2022), which won the 2022 Weatherford Award for Appalachian Poetry; and a micro-chapbook, *When God Was a Child* (Bull City Press, 2023).

Though Forrest Rapier's *As the Den Burns* and Jacinta V. White's *Resurrecting the Bones* are different in context and voice, both are potent examinations of language as the medium between place and myth. These deeply Southern poets relish the lyrical cadence of their region's language and the complicated history that informs it. Speech patterns absorbed in churches, at parties, on basketball courts, at funerals, and at gas stations alchemize in these poems that give voice to both the human and the geographic. In Virginia photographer Sally Mann's memoir, *Hold Still*, she quotes British historian John Keegan's observation about the South: "Pain is a dimension of old civilizations. The South has it. The rest of the United States does not."* Each of these collections depicts not only the heat-wavered air of Southern weather, but the violent and kin-close history of the land.

Jacinta V. White's *Resurrecting the Bones* is subtitled *Born from a Journey through African American Churches & Cemeteries in the Rural South* and uses the location (and dislocations) of African American churches and cemeteries to explore the poet's spiritual quest to know her community and her history in the dirt and wood, the tombstones and choirs of the South.

In a poem set in the "Second African American Graveyard in East Salem Ave & Cemetery St, Winston-Salem, NC," the title

is empty brackets. The poet is confronted with "the density of our past / drops of red blood dried in green grass" and how "southern dirt buries all alike." Here is the fusion of religion, history, geography, and suffering – the "gumbo soil" as White terms it – that is the profound project of this book. The speaker yearns to connect to the lives represented by these physical places. In the penultimate poem of the collection, as the speaker contemplates "the hours it took / to get the red clay out of" her hair, she reminds herself that "beneath the bed where I stay is dirt."

In addition to dirt, the body – its feet, hair, skin, nipples, "ribs and spine" – are evoked over and over again in *Resurrecting the Bones*, a corporeal yearning toward ancestors, toward the "body of the church," and ultimately toward the body of humanity and therefore toward God, who is "a woman" and whose "hair naturally coils." This attention to the body, the Black body, the body of Christ as a source of strength, beauty, and object of white violence culminates at the end of the book in a poem titled, simply, "Body," which ends with the refrain "this is the body, this is the body, this is the body / that was broken."

The wood found in churches also plays a central role in connecting the physical with the metaphysical in White's book, becoming part of the "resurrected bones." White lovingly details how a much-used table



where "poor people rich in gifts" feed the pastor has "spots darkened / in the wood where pots sat hot and full." The spiritual reverberations of the sanctuary's wooden floor form a motif across multiple poems, where "Under baseboards and wooden planks / not yet rotten, there is rocking." These are living churches: "This wooden floor is laughing, my toes tapping."

What begins in Winston-Salem as a journey with her uncle LeRoy to visit churches – documented with resonant, koan-like black and white pictures interspersed throughout the collection – becomes a sort of beatitudes, an "Ameritudes" as the first poem of the last section is titled, blessing "the dying and the burying / the mourning toil of grief" inherent in our regional and national histories. This final section is preceded by a photo of a communion rail stained by wine, allowing "insight into the individual histories of the collective ritual,"

as the poet explains in her end notes. The image resonates with life, with the sense of the many presences that have knelt there, as does this book, obsessed with how physical spaces – the earth, the dirt, the wood, the "cup of wine – your lip / print still moist on the rim" – are perhaps a way to access "the questions that are lived." The speaker often addresses ancestors, who were not able to write their own poems, though in this book she makes a poem of their lives: "sweet sweat // give me // your hands / that had no time to write."

This is a poet who was raised in the church, whose father was a preacher (she visits churches where he preached). She has sneaked "a taste of the juice that saved" from "the latched box sitting on the back seat of Dad's '77 / black Sedan deVille." In the poem "Church Mothers" she is greeted by "women in white dresses" who tell her how "they knew my folks, and how

they knew me." Though her own faith has become a complex affair in which she is drawn to the "the gospel of Nina Simone" and now offers "praise to the God I know instead," she obeys when the "Church Mothers" take her to the altar: "I am caught up in their strength / speechless and well-taught to not / resist this kind of salvation."

Her familiarity with the custom of the country, though, is in a constant state of defamiliarization, of deepening the poet's quest to find "a voice" to "penetrate the stillness." This is a spiritual quest, a quest to understand the South as a macrocosm of the larger national character. Preceding the first section of poems in *Resurrecting the Bones* is a photograph of a handmade gravestone, its raw dirt decorated with flowerpots and a fallen cross made of planks. The poet invokes the



ABOVE Cemeteries visited by White during her travels across the South

* Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (Back Bay, 2016) 82.

JACINTA V. WHITE is the author of a chapbook, *broken ritual* (Finishing Line Press, 2012). Her poetry has appeared in *This Magazine*, *New Verse News*, *Press 53 Open Awards Anthology*, and *Prime Number Magazine*, among others. White received a BA in Speech Communications at UNC Greensboro and an MPA in Nonprofit Management from Georgia State University. She worked as a corporate trainer for Forsyth Tech Community College before moving to her own firm, Deeper Dive Consulting.

land as the place where bodies are laid to rest in all of these cemeteries she visits, but also as the source of spiritual, cultural knowledge: "I drink / while body broken like lands / open." She addresses the dead under "red dirt" to "Tell us, who has forgotten / you breathing under the earth." In an age when a white supremacist shot up one of the oldest Black churches in the country, she says that she prays "that the dead are watching / over us if God blinks."

Forrest Rapier's *As the Den Burns* is haunted by its own beloved dead. It is haunted by human stories – funny, tragic, and tender – and how the words we use to tell those stories ravish and beguile. It's rich with the old words for places, words that predate European genocide: Apalachicola, Tampa, Lackawanna, Okeechobee, Ichetucknee, Appaloosa, Seminole, Calusa, Immokalee, Catawba, Tennessee – and, being deeply Floridian, full of



flowers – wild roses, hogweed, azaleas, camellias, hibiscus, knockout roses, acacias, hyacinth, firewheel, jasmine, and magnolia. This is a book about language and how language emerges from place, and in that merging one finds myth. This is landscape as psychology, the hallucinatory beauty and sickness of the South, of capitalism, of America, "much like the land: / translated from Calusa to Seminole to asphalt / to sheet metal to billboard to mean *my home*."

The language in *As the Den Burns* is "skittery batty unto a savage horizon," at the edge of dissolution through the sheer weight of how much it tries to contain. After all, as the speaker in a poem titled "Primordial Soup" observes, "Humanity is obsessed

with creating / impossible structures." Part of the "impossible structures" of these "tempest-tormented" poems, these poems of "buckshot language," though, is their compelling, controlled use of syntax to build energy. For example, in "Neptune Beach" the sentences build action, like a waterspout "Raised out of eroded dunes," "Raised out of tightened-up nets," "Out of sawgrass," "Raised out of Tropical Storm Tammy," "Raised out of low tide mussel beds mouthing," "Out of Neptune Beach magnolia gravel crunch."

Rapier's poems are a dense knit of our rag-tag American English, some warp and weft of slang and King James, Southern accent and something stranger, something Floridian. *As the Den Burns* is a "slipknot," a "poetic étouffée," a "Neanderthal tongue" of "spliff reek piques," "cherry Slurpees," "Ford Explorers," "velvet guitar case," "Blackhawk / helicopters." It is "brackish." It contains "barflies," and the "Panhandle," "Stratocasters," "mallrats," a "truck-bed," "Pepsi lips," and a "dozen honey-butter-chicken-biscuits." It uses "ash" as a verb: "oaks ash Spanish moss across dark grass." It advises, "Try to make movies with your words, try to carve / Mary Magdalene from scrap wood," and "Smooth the poem-stone with plain lingo / for the reader. Write into the meat." Rapier even draws upon

Old English-style kennings across multiple poems as the speaker appeals to his dead father as "fathermark," "father-beast," "fathermyth."

This is a speaker who has heard "God's heartbeat" as it "thumped in the forest," who has "drank enough to drown a draft horse" as he plumbs the past for his ghosts and the present for sensory and sensual delights. "Let long vowels be untouchable strings / of the Aeolian harp inside your throat," he implores. Rapier plays across many registers of language and accent in these poems that are just as likely to contain a Toyota Corolla as they are vestiges of older tongues ("I was Odysseus / waking up rock-wrecked"). These poems celebrate language's vibrant music across time and find inspiration in both the "strawberry Pop-Tart" and "Caravaggio's red / shawls painted around the bone-thin / shoulders of insane saints." He wills himself into a wild



exuberance with words and other substances in poems that take us through the woods and waterways and neighborhoods and dreamscapes of Florida: "For listless years, I went after wicked angel / dust." Once he "drank a whole creek bottle dry." He takes us into the past, where his dead father, an "Unmedicated visionary" sent him "postcards / signed love" from the "County jail" and an elderly woman who took care of him as a child (a grandmother, an aunt?) had a "voice / . . . bent like muddy offshoots of the Catawba."

Rapier's language reflects the geographic and mongrel cultural sensibilities of his home state, which is both deeply Southern and very much its own "edenic lush" place. "Florida is a constant state of flux," Rapier observes, "Everything here is feeding off something." He ends one poem with the advice: "Go missing in Florida, die and get found." In "Tallahassee Nightwatch," the speaker is "a hyacinth-throated / peacock plucking a cedar guitar," an *ars poetica* distinctly born of semi-tropical Florida. One must "Meet God in the glade"



and "Navigate the gorgeous / circle-of-all experience." Most importantly, "Keep honeypots / inside the pantry – leave your love-door ajar."

As the Den Burns is a deeply intimate, exuberant history that marries the origins of language and pain and magic and admonishes both the wild, seeking speaker and the reader to "Unbury your family plainsongs from the grave deep / inside your throat."

It feels a bit like creating another kind of kenning to try to join these two collections in one review. They do, however, resonate with each other as they present a lyrical reclamation of place and history. Each book makes place sacred in the way Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday defined: "Sacred ground is in some way earned. It is consecrated, made holy with offerings – song and ceremony, joy and sorrow, the dedication of the mind and heart, offerings of life and death. ■"