

Poetry of Difference and Stigma

Two Debut Poetry Books by Women

First books of poetry can be viewed as their own genre, marking a coming out, often after years of rough drafts, revisions, second-guessing, wild insecurities, honing, re-ordering, re-titling. For many contemporary poets, the first book holds poems written over years and representing different phases in their lives. It is as if the formative early years of childhood were knit together to tell one story. To hear some established poets tell it, their first books often encompass their earliest fumbles and stumbles, experiments, imitations, MFA assignments, and poems they think they should be writing. No wonder these same poets describe an unburdening, a freer hand that

ing on singular subjects and characters. Both give us intimate portraits of people we don't know but who are written into vivid and epic relief. Both deal with social issues of difference and marginalization that bind and unbind families.

Kamilah Aisha Moon's *She Has a Name* gives voice to the experience of having a family member with autism. The author's note lets us know this is a "biomythography," a family narrative in poems. Through a collection of persona poems, we hear the mother, the father, the sisters, the special ed teacher, the neighbors, and — in italics, always on the left page lined up along the right margin — the young autistic woman who is at the center of everyone's lives: *I'm sorry I take too long/I don't mean to be quiet/I want to say it.*

We enter at the beginning of the narrative, into the prefatory poem: *Autism, the one-drop rule for minds/we strain to understand, the catch-all/phrase that drops kids off/ at nowhere/, yet we learn fast that this girl was not dropped off at nowhere, but into a home with parents who say she's worth a million urges.* In these early pages, Moon makes generous space for the parents to speak, to vent their fears and confusion. Father: *My chromosome limps/in her bloodstream. . . . I'm not allowed to say/I don't want to pay/ what she'll cost us./I'll work myself into pulp, withhold/ my tongue and practice nothingness.* And from a separate poem on the facing page we hear Mother: *My husband says nothing,/ his kisses shallow./ What we don't say/ we eat.*

These two passages are emblematic of Moon's spare, exquisite writing, her gift of being able to portray how a family molds itself around the child with autism, with everything recalibrated, refocused, newly centered. Even language transforms, requires a decoding: *Spooks and haints/ that speak only/ to her;/ unholy chorus/ stalking the shoulders/ of my parents' third angel./ . . . I must*

REVIEWED IN THIS ESSAY

She Has a Name, by Kamilah Aisha Moon. Stahlecker Selections, Four Way, 2013, 84 pages.

Viral, by Suzanne Parker. Alice James Books, 2013, 80 pages.

enters to write their second and third books. As Jane Hirshfield says about her earliest collection of poems, *Alaya*, it was "an apprentice volume," written "in the pit-bull innocence." After *Alaya*'s publication, she says, "a road felt opened."

Yet the two remarkable new poetry books under review here defy the rules of their "genre" by focus-

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somehow tune into this station.

By giving each family member his or her own voice, Moon abstains from critique, from the harsh judgments we often experience from the narrator of a family memoir. Only in the poem “Directions,” in which we hear the mother instruct —*Don’t drop your sister. Ever./ Especially when I’m gone. . . . Promise me she won’t inhale/ the ammonia smell of group mess halls,/ wince at the prying fingers of hired help./ Promise me, girls.* — is there even a delicate whiff of chafing at a legacy of obligation.

At first I was surprised that none of the poems in *She Has a Name* actually names the young woman (although the cover art, a painted orange face with purple lips, reproduced again and again in small squares, is attributed to Lakie A. Moon). We can hear the sister’s playground retort to the trash-talking bullies — *YOUR LITTLE SISTER IS A RETARD* — but she does not call out her sister’s name. In a way, this blank space invites us to insert the names of people we love who, because they are disabled or non-conforming or part of a despised minority, are taunted, shunned, and harassed.

Shielding and defending a sibling from cruelty and bullying is an all-too-familiar experience, but instead of using poetry as the vehicle for a direct attack, Moon serves up the persecutors in a more slanted, sly voice. In her poem “Assembly Required,” dedicated “To the man at Black & Decker who harassed her daily,” we bear witness to this confrontation: *You are pissed working/ next to someone like her. . . . You are careful to use the urinal/ farthest from the bank of mirrors* — as if he knows his own shame and cannot even look at his own image. In a surprise turn, the poem ends with the speaker goading the broken co-worker, *Go ahead—/ talk loud and bully/ the clawless one.* This deceptively simple, potent stroke elevates the young woman above the small meannesses, above the grudging worker with heartburn who smokes his way through every break, whose mustard-seed heart will be his end, not hers.

On the next page, the young woman yearns to grow up as her sisters are doing, to move out with y’all, go to college and get a car. Her family also expresses



Kamilah Aisha Moon

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this desire for her to pass through typical teenage rites of passage, but there is also an edginess that slips out, a gentle nudge to the sibling who is always tagging along. *College is not Canaan, Sis—/ not a promised land/ to independence, to normal./ . . . discover your own/ route to paradise./ We’ll meet you there.* This touching passage at the book’s center is full of complexity. Autism will keep the sister from following, she will never be able to achieve like her siblings, and she knows it, they all know it. Navigating autism’s terrain with love, compassion, and integrity is both necessary and treacherous for this family. As the mother says, *Cocooning her became everything./ Cocooning means agreeing/ to become a shell.*

Not all of *She Has A Name* is taken up solely by the experiences of a family with an autistic child. The final third of Moon’s book opens into the larger world, now inflected with our richer understanding of this poet’s acute sensibility and her capacity for portraying complexity with such brevity that our response is made more immediate, more visceral.

In “Frisson: Remembering Jamaica,” Moon’s narrator ventures beyond the home on a vacation, away from the autistic sister and tightly-wound family life. This hot, sexy lyric overflows a page with



Suzanne Parker

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smells, sights, music, a full-on release from home’s pressure-cooker. The lines are long and redolent, brimming with *turquoise salt bath, mango and banana trees, steamed fish, rice and peas, ackee*. . . . *The furious flush from my womb in this kind of heat/ moonrays across the mélange of burnished skin*. . . . *The conch dying lovely on the oatmeal shore*. I will not be the only reader to call out while reading this poem-on-fire, YES! But Moon never completely untethers from grief and longing; loss is woven deeply into beauty for this poet.

In the polar opposite emotional register of the Jamaican fling we find “Going Under,” one of the most raw, truth-telling poems I have ever read. *A way to drown on land/ is to flood the veins/ with sugar & salt until/ elephantine ankles/ can’t lumber another step . . . you’ve learned not all shores/ are*

solid/ not all breathing is living. This poem conjures a William Blake etching of a hand thrust up in a tumultuous sea, frozen there but we can see the drowning. Moon seals the poem: *when mouthed,/ the words look the same,/ help and hello*. “Going Under” burns with the isolation of the one who is bloated and distended with gorging, who is observed every day but misunderstood, not heard.

Moon’s own family is part African-American, part Cherokee. For five years Moon worked as a writer for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, a job that she says she appreciated both for the challenge of creating the perfect utterance for any occasion, but also the freedom to be absorbed in words every day. With her own name a poem, Kamilah Aisha Moon enters the published world with a stunning first book, a collection of poems so wrought, honest, and compassionate that I will return to them, learn from them, and surely continue to be moved by this poet’s essential voice.

Another debut poetry book, Suzanne Parker’s Viral, is also a collection of persona poems that circle around a stigmatized, hurt individual. The book is a response to the life and suicide of Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers University student who in 2010 jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate secretly set up a live webcam to broadcast Clementi in bed with another man. The events surrounding Clementi’s suicide received a lot of media attention, but the poems in *Viral* give voice to everything the media could not cover; Parker’s intention is to delve deep into Clementi’s interior, to reimagine him before his death at a time of early sexual exploration and striving to make his way as a young gay man. Like Moon, Parker imagines Clementi’s world through his parents, his possible lovers, his roommate, all in cinematic language that rises vividly off the page. Her expansive empathy and creativity reminds me of how *The Laramie Project* came into being after Matthew Shepard’s murder in Wyoming, and how that play continues to be performed in high schools and colleges around the country. Homophobia’s tragic consequences in the United States continue to haunt us, and Suzanne Parker channels that haunting into astonishing poetry, “part elegy, part outrage.”

as poet Thomas Lux wrote.

Parker's strong identification with this tragedy is evident from the opening pages, in which she dedicates the book to Tyler Clementi. The next page of epigrams includes words from Clementi's roommate (expelled from Rutgers and convicted of bias intimidation, for which he served 30 days in jail): *Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes it's happening again.* The opening poems are painful to read, as the perspective veers from the cruel voyeurism of the webcam watchers to Clementi's imagined experience of leaping, *The beach is simply the breath held/before diving. He can hold it longer/than needed and does, hold it,/ until the darkness cracks.*

Parker's diction is so strong here, and throughout — how she enacts the holding of breath, even a sense of hesitation, with an odd comma, a perfect line break. We read of Clementi's father making a weak attempt at throwing a football with his son until finally leaving him to practice the violin, and the young boy's musical passion, which locks him in his room fingering the instrument for hours. In many of the poems, Clementi speaks as an "I": *When I was a boy I was/ the sound of a door locking—, and, Do you think it's easy,/ practicing not/ to touch?* In these poems, Parker reaches across a chasm to snatch back the little boy, lonely and confused, and deliver us the young man filled with desire for other men, how *[I]n a storm, doors keep no secrets/ and the closet empties . . .* Yet the closet is what makes his a dual life, seeking out the "glory hole" in a gay bar and then *claiming the well-behaved boy/hanging from a number/ in the coat room,/ fastening tightly at the neck.* Can't you feel the constriction at his throat, at our own throats?

In brilliant strokes, Parker creates the first few days after Clementi's parents learn he has killed himself: the dissociated muddle of life, a hand on the mother's like a body thrown/over another's/ to stop a blast . . . the memory/ in pieces/ and sleep the washing/ out spill tide and / crawling until nothing/ beneath but air. And by Day 5, *This is how you make toast. Lift arms from lap. Grip seat of chair with both hands.* We feel as if we are

underwater, drowning in disjointed memories and the weight of the river that took the son. The poem takes us through each halting step of the daily act of making toast, until, at the end of a full page of this prose-poem, *Breathe.* Later comes the rage. In this poem, the title serves as the first line: *It is Hard to Hate the World/ but possible. When sleep first recedes and you have not yet remembered God/ opened his hands and let a boy/ drop—*

Viral is an extended elegy to Tyler Clementi, and a bold effort to understand his world and the people in it. The book is audacious in scope and imagination, complex in its empathy and rage. The title, it seems, not only refers to the way things are instantly known and seen in our global, interconnected world, but also to the virus eating away at our compassion for others, our capacity to connect intimately with those suffering right before our eyes.

Viral's final poem seems to step out of the Clementi story, and possibly to enter the world of the omniscient narrator, dare I say, the author. "An Essential Language" describes the time before the speaker can *kiss/ her tumbled hair*; and, later, when there is *permission* in front of a well-known lesbian bar in New York City, *just this— my mouth/ on the lips she opens/ to say my name.* The book stops where it began, with a kiss, with open mouth, yet we have arrived at a place where the world just rushes by, the city taking no notice of two women kissing. How different from the prying, malicious eye of the webcam. Parker shares a glimpse of her irresistible impulse to write these poems and enter the literary world with the most heart-stopping, wrenched cry for justice and understanding she could muster. **JC**

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