

What's Out There?

Head Off & Split

By Nikky Finney

Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2011, 97 pp., \$15.95, paperback

Life On Mars

By Tracy K. Smith

Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011, 75 pp., \$15.00, paperback

Reviewed by Colleen J. McElroy

I'd wager that almost anyone who has stood near the edge of a body of water has had the urge to throw in a pebble and watch the water ripple away from the landing point in circles that grow wider and wider, until you can barely pinpoint where the pebble entered. That is also how the oral tradition works: someone tells a story, which is told and retold, and as it ripples away from the first storyteller, it expands while retaining its original shape. Storytelling links one generation to the next. Taken separately, the stories may not seem like much, but collectively, they form the grand spiral of history.

Nikky Finney is a consummate storyteller. Her imagery in *Head Off & Split* maps her sense of place, and her voice challenges readers to consider whether the ordinary is actually extraordinary. From the very first poem in the collection, we see that the women Finney draws will not settle for complacency. In the poem, "Resurrection of the Errand Girl," a young girl is sent to pick up fish that has been scaled and dressed for cooking. At the fish market, she resists what she is expected to do. "Her answer is offered quicker than the fish. No. Not this time. This time she wants what she was sent for left whole."

I have to admit, the subject of this poem caught my attention immediately. When I was a child in St. Louis, my mother would take me along on trips to the central market, where I could spend the 25 cents

of my allowance. My favorite stopping place was the fish counter. While my mother bought the river fish we'd have for dinner, I'd wait for a thin slice of lox for a nickel or a bit of boiled shrimp sprinkled with hot sauce. I went often enough to know how much my pennies would buy, and how little conversation passed between my mother and the fishmonger. My mother and I were no more than the color of our skin, and once we left the counter, we would cease to exist, no matter how many times we had been customers. It was an early lesson in how to be rendered invisible. Finney depicts a similar encounter when she writes: "She recognizes the fishmonger; he does not recognize her. Even though she is the daughter of the most beautiful woman in the world."

This opening poem sets the tone for those that follow. The circles widen, moving from the girl sent to buy fish to women who defy, compensate for, and sometimes succumb to the limitations set for them by others. Finney begins these narrative explorations with "December 1, 1955," a poem for Rosa Parks. "Arching herself over a river of cloth she feels for the bias...everything will come together." Details of the seamstress's life add weight— "7,844 Sunday sermons... 8,230 skirts for nice, well-meaning white women... 18,809 pant legs... pricked your finger 45,203 times..."—and link the past with the present. Finney seems to be saying to readers: here are some things you do not

know. Count them. Parks's historic refusal to move to the back of the bus parallels that of the errand girl in the first poem: no. Not this time.

In a series of four poems grouped under the title "The Condeleezza Suite," Finney links the past and the present of former Secretary of State Condeleezza Rice, who, as a girl, aspired to be a concert pianist, all of this in an era of bombings and assassinations during the civil rights demonstrations of the sixties. In first poem of the series, "Concerto No. 5: *Condeleezza & Intransigence*," Finney examines the discipline required of a concert pianist and that of a diplomat. "At the piano you are a major sound," she writes; yet at news conferences, Condeleezza and the sounds she creates are "guillotined/ & gutted, prepared, handled, neatly trussed..." Throughout this series, Finney continues to draw discordant parallels between past and present events, evoking an italicized voice to clarify details. In "Concerto No. 11: *Condeleezza and the Chickering*," Finney draws upon that italicized voice to tell us how Condeleezza gained her discipline from "Mattie Ray, grandmother, first-generation piano master..." to the "Black girls, on Dynamite Hill..."

*Practice. Practice. Practice.
Steer your bright mind to Vulcan's torch*

Music provides an anchor for the political framework of the poems: "No other Black girl/ in Bombingham, with the sound of music emerald set so deep in her heart, has ever been told over/ Sunday dinner, while the gravy is still passing through/ the air, *King is crazy*." Music becomes the dominant theme: Mozart, Shostakovich, and Mussorgsky invade both memory and dreams. In "Concerto No. 7: *Condeleezza (Working Out) at the Watergate*," as Condeleezza hovers over the keyboard, it is as if "she and the Steinway/ are the only Black people in the room," the italicized voice cautions her: "*Don't mix up your dreams Condi*." The italicized narrative parallels the multivocal strategy used in later poems.

One such poem is "My Time Up With You," where the character Mayree Monroe talks to herself—"I have paid off this house three times over what anybody/ else would've paid"—and prays for answers—"Master of Man, where they gonna send Mayree Monroe?" Some italicized sections imply the intrusion of a different speaker: "Miss Monroe, please come with us, everybody has been/ evacuated—but you." Finney challenges the reader to look closer, to circle into individual perspectives rising out of the larger incidents, to know who is speaking and why.

In "Left," about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a "woman with pom-pom legs" fashions an "uneven homemade sign" that reads "Pleas Help Pleas." Finney comments sardonically,

Regulations require an *e* be at the end
of any *Pleas e* before national response
can be taken.

The language is sparse, offered in a tone of reportage. At the same time, Finney builds on the images of a "feral wind..., a zephyr [wind]..., a mannish hurricane..." ("My Time Up With You"). For Finney, Katrina is not just a natural disaster; it is an intervention fueled by politics and memories of war: "Three times a day the helicopter flies/ by in a low crawl.... Bon Son,/ Dong Ha, Pleiku, Chu Lai..." ("Left").

“Finney’s women are complicated. Their strength lies in their resolve to survive, be alert, and love in their own fashion.”

In “Dancing with Strom,” Finney dwells on a more distant past as a reflection of the present:

Enslaved Africans gifted porches to North America. Once off the boats they were told, then made, to build themselves a place—to live.

The deliberate pause in the last line strengthens the ambiguity of “to live,” which can mean both reside and survive. The enslaved had no choice about the places they built, and Finney reminds us, “The porch was a sign of privilege, none of which was bestowed on its builders”: “History does not keep books on the/ handiwork of slaves. But the enslaved/ who built this big House... knew/ the power of a porch...” Finney describes present-day dancing and merrymaking—during which she, as narrator, is horrified to see her mother dancing with Strom [Thurmond]. The specter of enslaved Africans hangs over the gathering where, Finney says, “The dead are never porch bound.”

Finney becomes a griot in “Negroes with Guns,” offering a poem that uses language patterns reminiscent of fables. The diction is in the cadence of traditional storytellers with alliteration and repetition emphasizing details. Images become “woozy woozy”; time is “the time time before”; the woods are “old old woods”; and the cicadas go “lickety-split.” The original tales, with their childlike characters, were actually designed for adults who could not talk openly about politically controversial matters. Like fables, Finney’s poem is a cautionary tale, in which the child is taught to stay close to home, where it is safe; the woods are old and dangerous. The duality of living under social oppression is magnified by the goals in the poem—to be armed and ready. The girl is destined to follow in the footsteps of her “mother-markswoman,” who “cannot swim, fly, leave land, with ease,” but knows: “*what goes on in the backwoods stays in the backwoods.*” (“Negroes with Guns”)

Finney’s women are complicated. Their strength lies in their resolve to survive, be alert, and love in their own fashion. In the section aptly titled “The Head * over * Heels,” Finney explores the vagaries of love. “We wrap each other down, around, become/ ground cover for every lonely night that ever was...” she writes in “Orangerie.” Throughout the section, she explores the concepts of “making love” and “being in love.” One of the most poignantly beautiful poems in the collection is “The Clitoris.” Finney uses the language of proclamation: “Mapmakers, and others, who draw/ important things for a living/ do not want us to know this.” Yet, she maintains a lyrical intimacy. Like Georgia O’Keefe’s anatomical flowers, the poem is fertile with imagination and challenges you to look again, beyond the obvious representation and rather to what the image evokes: “...desire can rise, honor sea levels,/ ignore land-locked/ cartographers...”

In “The Aureole,” Finney writes about a tryst with her lover, “A grown woman in grease-pocket overalls/ inside her own sexy transmission...” In the poem, love is not without its consequences: “I will be what Brenda Jones was stoned for in 1969...” At the same time, love is not to be ignored. “I will never be able to wash or peel/ any of this away...” Finney writes, “If I touch her here everything they

say about me will be true.” The vulnerability in these love poems is more obvious than in the earlier poems of conflict and loss.

As the collection builds toward the final poems, Finney seems to be seeking a “Hungering/ to be called Delicious...” as she writes in the title poem. In it, we return full circle to where the story begins. The errand girl has grown up, returning for annual visits to her parents. Home has become the place where “the sight of the mother standing/ in someone else’s skin makes the daughter roll down/ the glass between them one last time...” Returning is not easy. “Each time/ the leaving hardens the soft tissue of my birth...” she writes, going on to say,

I am head off & split
Perfectly served
The daughter
Home as expected...

The story is evolving, retaining its original details, yet including a larger landscape altered by the experience of the storyteller. In oral traditions, a story is valued if it has been passed through a generation. Finney presents the resilience of black women who have shaped generations. This collection indeed is “a pleasure that can stir up the world.” (“Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica”)

The poems in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life On Mars* pull readers beyond the horizon. The poems are earthbound, but Smith is acutely aware that the universe is vast and full of unanswerable questions. The poems circle out, expanding perimeters and horizons, becoming mystic and revealing, evoking one of humankind’s prevailing questions: What’s out there?

The genesis of Smith’s collection is her father’s stories about his experiences working on the Hubble space telescope, which she describes in “My God, It’s Full of Stars”:

When my father worked on the Hubble Telescope, he said

They operated like surgeons: scrubbed and sheathed
In papery green, the room clean cold, and bright white.

The room in which they work is sterile, “bright white”—yet through the single eye of the telescope they see “the never-ending/ night of space,” filled with “great stars that command, pitching stones/ at whatever are their moons.”

In the skies of the Southern Hemisphere, the stars seem to hang low, just out of reach, like ceiling lights; star clusters are not obscured by industrial clouds and urban light pollution. This is as close as the unaided human eye can come to seeing the cosmos. In “Don’t You Wonder Sometimes?” Smith writes, “After dark stars glisten like ice, and the distance they span/ hides something elemental...” Light, or the absence of it, is elemental in Smith’s depiction of space, and we are drawn to the light: counting stars, naming constellations or, in our final days, “toddling toward light.”

Into this universe, Smith injects celluloid images, the ultimate manmade lights. In a sea of theater darkness, we are so caught up in the light that we have dubbed the images on the bright screen “stars.” Smith evokes David Bowie, who sings of the astronaut Major Tom. He “leaves no tracks,” Finney writes. “Slips past, quick as a cat.” When Bowie “cocks his head, grins that wicked grin...the whole world is under his foot.”

The future isn’t what it used to be. Even Bowie thirsts
for something good and cold. Jets blink across the sky
Like migratory souls.

Here, as in many of these poems, the double spacing between each line highlights a pause between what is said and what is not said. This is a reminder of the large role sound plays in helping us to map the space around us. In space, sound does not carry—yet movies about space are full of sound effects and background music. The implication is that a journey through space entails compensating for both light and shadow, and for unbroken silence. The more compromised our visual field becomes, the more we rely on other sensory signals.



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Transsexual, transvestite, transnational, transgender, transformative . . . trans. This flexible, revolutionary term implies space between the either/or and in this provocative collection, pioneers in the field of transgender studies explore how the concept of “trans” has drawn attention to the porous areas between definitions: between young and old, the real and the imaginary, and especially man and woman.

COMING SOON: TECHNOLOGIES

*The Phoenix Award for Significant Editorial Achievement is given annually by the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

We strain to hear what is not there, anticipating the next line before it is offered.

Smith explains that her "father spent whole seasons/ Bowing before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find." She imagines this hunger extending even beyond life itself. The contrast of body and spirit is poignantly explored in "The Speed of Belief," a seven-section, elegiac poem for her father. "My father won't lie still, though his legs are buried in trousers and socks./ But where does all he knew—and all he must now know—walk?" She wonders if she should wish back the dead: "You stepped out of the body/ unzipped it like a coat/ and will it drag you back/ As flesh, voice, scent?" The poem is dream-like, the tone infused with grief and memory. The speaker longs to remain close to her father, although she confesses, "It will do no good to coax you back." The cycle of life moves on, without "someone, anyone [to] drag open the drapes and heave us/ Back into our blinding, bright lives." So she acquiesces:


.....And if you are bound
By habit or will to be one of us
Again, I pray you are what waits

To break back into the world
Through me.

Toward the end of the collection, Smith narrows her focus. She pulls back from ethereal longing in the vast universe to take on more intimate subjects, turning away from the probing eye of the Hubble and looking inward, becoming more earthbound. The body contains its own space, and "the body is what we lean toward," she writes, in "The Soul." Smith imagines that much of the space around us is occupied by other bodies, even before they touch us. The presence of someone else is often a wordless awareness, whether it is an unborn child—"You must have watched/ For what felt like forever, wanting to be/ What we passed back and forth between us like fire..." ("When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me")—or a lover: "The room is red, like ourselves/ on the inside. We enter/ And my heart ticks out its tune/ Of soon, soon..." ("Willed in Autumn"). These poems are visceral and sensual. In "Song," the speaker watches her lover's hands: "I'm trying to decide what they feel like when they wake up/ And discover my body is near..."

Reflecting on human journeys into space, or the imagined realm of space, Smith wonders if technology will overtake physical intimacy: "Women will still be women, but/ The distinction will be empty. Sex,/ Having outlived every threat, will gratify/ Only the mind, which is where it will exist," she writes in "Sci-Fi." And, in "The Speed of Belief," she asks,

What happens when the body goes slack?
When what anchors us just drifts off ...

Smith comes back to that question, what is out there? "Are we part of It. Not guests./ Is It us, or what contains us." ("It & Co.") Her beautifully crafted book offers an ongoing story about mortality, love, and the human spirit, set in a universe full of new and wondrous things. 

Colleen J. McElroy's ninth collection of poetry, *Here I Throw Down My Heart*, will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2012. Her most recent book, *Sleeping with the Moon*, won the 2008 PEN Oakland Literary Award.

Having Fun Learning to Be Liberal

Before Porn Was Legal: The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse

By Elizabeth Heineman

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 225 pp., \$35.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Leila J. Rupp

The title of this book does not entirely do it justice. This is the story of a German woman, Beate Rotermund, and the erotica firm, Beate Uhse, she founded when known by her first married name. But it is much more. Although a tale located firmly in the history of West Germany, it opens up much larger issues about the relationships among economic prosperity, the state, and (hetero)sexuality. In a contemporary world where free-enterprise sectors of the Chinese economy give rise to sex shops and an increase in premarital sex, and Saudi youth take advantage of cell phones and social networking sites to flirt, the trajectory of Beate Uhse has immediate relevance. And, both because a woman pioneered sexual consumption in Germany and because Heineman is a historian of women, this is a deeply gendered story about sexuality in its political and economic context.

Before Porn Was Legal intertwines the history and self-constructed myth of Beate Rotermund (the woman) with the history of Beate Uhse (the firm) in conjunction with other sexual consumption businesses in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). Making use of an amazing cache of firm and industry archives, as well as government records, court cases, oral histories, and textual and visual representations, Heineman

details the rise of Beate Uhse out of the rubble of postwar Germany through the legalization of pornography in the early 1970s and beyond. Rotermund is a fascinating figure, "the most famous German to remain unknown to Americans," as Heineman says. In 1984, 94 percent of West Germans knew the name of Beate Uhse (a fact repeated too many times throughout the book).

In three short sections at the beginning, middle, and end of the book, Heineman recounts what she calls the "Beate Uhse Myth": born in 1921 into an elite and progressive family, her mother one of the country's first woman doctors, Beate Köstlin learned to fly, a skill that landed her in Hitler's Luftwaffe, where she tested planes and ferried them to the front. At the end of the war, as a widow with a child to support, she began to trade on the black market. She found her calling when she discovered the need for contraceptive information in the bleak immediate postwar years. The first version of her story credited a male doctor with providing her with the details of the rhythm method; this was later revised to substitute her mother as her source of information. The account of her stint as a Luftwaffe pilot emerged in her firm's publicity in the 1960s, to mark her as a member of the social elite and a supporter of the state, albeit

