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 from the river 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 challenges the reader to look closer, to circle the text and the images of a “feral wind…, a zephyr [wind]…, a mannish hurricane.” (“Left”).

Music provides an anchor for the political framework of the poems: “No other Black girl/ in Bombing, with the sound of music emerald set so deep in her heart, has ever been told over/ Sunday dinner, while the gravity is still passing through the air, King is crazy.” Music becomes the dominate theme: Mozart, Shostakovich, and Mussorgsky invade both memory and dreams. In “Concerto No. 7: Condeleeza (Working Out) at the Watergate,” as Condeleeza 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 “Please Help Please.” Finney comments sardonically, “Regulations require an e at the end of any Please 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”).

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**Reviewed by Colleen J. McElroy**

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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,” observing a language pattern reminiscent of fables. The diction is in the cadence of traditional storytellers with alliteration and repetition emphasizing details. Images become “woozy wozzy”; 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 staysin 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, 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”)

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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 glister 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 cellular 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. “Slides 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.

—Full Circle to Where the Story Begins

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

Women’s Review of Books
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 with 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 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

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