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## Poems the Big Cats Brought In (review article)

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*Poems the Big Cats Brought In*

Sapphires. *Black Wings & Blind Angels*.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Rafael Campo. *Diva*.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

Sue Owen. *My Doomsday Sampler*.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

David Ray. *Demons in the Diner*.

Ashland, OH: The Ashland Poetry Press, 1999.

Sharon Olds. *Blood, Tin, Straw*.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Among those so often faulted for the small poetry-reading audience in the United States, including everyone from elementary school teachers to T.S. Eliot, also to be cited for their take on the poetry landscape, it seems to me, are the major commercial publishers. While they may claim virtually any poet they wish to, so far as I can tell they maintain reading practices no more catholic than their far less affluent counterparts. To the contrary, while small presses often stage national competitions intended to discover emerging poets through a process of blind reading, most commercial presses will not even consider unsolicited poetry manuscripts. As a result, a publisher such as Alfred A. Knopf (with two books under review here) creates a critical inequity in which even the exercises of poets they publish tend to receive serious (and to some extent popular) attention, while the accomplished work of poets such as David Ray, who has published over a dozen volumes of poetry, is apt to be overlooked. To be sure, fervent readers may seek out Ray and others like him published by small presses, but



why is it that the Knopfs of our time show so little interest in, let alone obligation toward, representing the original and diverse voices found throughout the U.S.? If they mean to publish artistic leaders, why do they not feel a deeper responsibility in how they select poets? If they do not mean to be leaders, why publish poetry at all (as indeed some of them have ceased to do)?

What disturbs me, reading these new collections, is less what books the major presses publish than how whatever they publish, by virtue of its imprint, carries an aura of greater literary significance than does a small press book, such as David Ray's. Meanwhile, it is accepted dogma among literary people that the university presses try to function as intermediaries between small presses and the "big cats." Yet with few exceptions (such as LSU Press here), their poetry lists are excruciatingly small, usually from budget constraints. Consequently, though the U.S. has a wild plethora of poetry publishers, few publish more than a handful of titles a year. Major presses could address this problem, I think, if they enlisted good editors from across the spectrum to establish cogent standards, which other presses could respond to (or against). Poets and readers might object, but at least such a system would eliminate the fuzzy hierarchy we now have.

None of this rant intends to fault these five books. Rather, each leaves me wondering how I might be disposed were it under a different imprint: Would I, for instance, be more forgiving of Sapphire's rhetorical excesses, if *Black Wings & Blind Angels* were published by a small press? In theme and method, Sapphire's poetic involves the psychotherapeutic use of repetition, specifically the practice of performing emotional crises until you chance onto their true significance. Besides in her themes, this tendency shows in her method: together with villanelles, dramatic monologues, and poems in sequences, her collection of forty-seven poems includes ten sestinas. Not until the fifth one, "Benin Silver Father Slaves," however, does the poet fully exploit that form to her advantage, when she links key concerns of African art such as water, brass, and silver with her deceased father. As her end-words double back on themselves, the poem closes with the mesmerized speaker looking in a mirror, as though at the dead, and



discovering her heritage in her own face. "A Window Opens" also achieves a formal mastery in its reconciliation with childhood sexual abuse, as the poet renews herself:

To love? It's not really about a penis—  
It's about opening, being vulnerable, coming out front

with my desire, being clear after all these years. The front  
is as big as the back. I am not four, his penis  
is not my father's. My father is dead, it's my life now.

The plainspokenness of these lines is well earned. Unfortunately, too many poems around it test our patience, as in the gimmicky *xs* in "Under Water," or "Found Poem," for which the footnote is more politically engaging than the poem itself. Throughout *Black Wings & Blind Angels*, Sapphire blends social ills with personal history almost seamlessly, but too often her reasons for linking the two are unconvincing. If Robert Lowell's confessional poems portray personal ills as emblems of national problems, Sapphire's tend to evoke national ills as emblems for personal problems. While her titles and notes suggest her poems will crack open the prejudices tearing the heart of American culture (police violence, racism, apathy, sexual abuse), those delving into private pain are the ones that resonate. In those, "it is an act of courage to say, Leave the lights on."

Rafael Campo's *Diva*, from Duke University Press, also confronts contemporary issues—cultural assimilation, AIDS, and homosexuality. Indeed, his collection opens with the poet discovering from his Cuban heritage

the people who survived in me:  
part-slave, part-royalty, part-Caliban,

cross-dresser in the golden silk the sea  
rolls out along a beach that isn't mine,  
American yet un-American.

Like Sapphire, Campo deserves praise for his unabashed exploration of identity, but his method is neither confessional nor colloquial. Instead, he relies on rhymed or unrhymed pentameter to articulate the kinds of insight Sapphire's poems elide. In less successful poems, this can result in lines rhythmically stiff, overly general, or both; it is hard to take seriously,

while surfing on the Internet  
you realize you never understood  
your father's grief...

.....

...soon, you start to think that life  
is pretty pointless, even in the age  
of Microsoft and MCI.

Despite the meter, nothing in lines like these seems poignant as social comment nor self-conscious, self-consciously American, lingo. They may illustrate Campo's contemporaneity, but their heavy-handedness keeps them from being as forceful as their subject matter might suggest.

On the other hand, in *Diva's* stronger poems, including the impressive translations of Lorca, Campo's rhythm and voice stabilize potentially maudlin emotions. Campo's most consistently moving poems, the linchpins of his sensibility, are those that reflect his medical practice—"The Cardiac Exam," "The Pelvic Exam," "The Abdominal Exam." These poems explore how professional identity can divide us from ourselves, as in "Last Rites," where the poet-doctor, distracted by the view outside a dying patient's window, is "less horrified than plain amazed" when the patient starts spitting up blood in clots as "slick // As cherry candies on his startled tongue"; when the patient died, "I searched the skyline for his wisp of smoke, / But night had rendered it invisible." As its allusions to popular culture, music and the poet's own experience attest, *Diva* is a clear product of 1990s American culture—in a negative and positive sense. While it suffers



in spots from indulging its own predilections, at its best it dramatizes the struggle for a compassionate life that underlies the American obsession for success.

Though also published by a university press, Sue Owen's *My Doomsday Sampler* resists overtly personal themes in favor of an imaginative excursion through the tropes of American English itself, those familiar idioms by which we rationalize daily life. Despite avoiding personal detail, Owen is as intensely engaged as Sapphire and Campo, as she reveals in the uniform pattern of nine-tenths of her poems, which consist of seven unrhymed, unscanned quatrains each. In this way Owen asserts control over her material as though stitching it into the sampler of the book's title. Many poems examine gruesome truisms: "The Fly in the Ointment," "Dead Reckoning," "Work Myself to Death," "Name Your Poison." Extracting these phrases frees them from any social context, as well as from etymology, so the poems are preoccupied less with social conditions than with whatever dark impulse drives us to devise such conceits in the first place as Owen probes each phrase for some other meaning to emerge. Generally, the turning point of each poem occurs mid-poem, where the imagery turns back on itself, as in "Thorn on the Rose," where the poet remarks how "pain and beauty always // go together" and ends up championing the thorn that

grows on  
the same stem as the rose  
but lives a spiteful life.

Not always is Owen successful in unraveling the imagery implicit in these tropes; some poems fail to surprise, while others tend toward overstatement. But when her technique works well, Owen's poems reveal just how much we invest in these homespun expressions. "One Foot in the Grave" closes with the *other* foot:

The other foot claims life.  
The other foot will stomp

on death if it dares  
to come near and snatch it.

By the end, despite its fixation on the macabre, *My Doomsday Sampler* finds solace in wisdom not clichéd. Like the shadow imagery Owen applies to the written word in "I Think about Ink," the phrases and images she highlights in *My Doomsday Sampler* haunt these pages, following her

as if  
each word is a foot-  
step taken behind my back.

And despite Owen's preoccupation with diminutive objects and seemingly incidental expressions, as the fireflies in another poem ultimately teach us,

light  
and smallness matter  
even if their own glowing  
will soon fade out of sight

While the least elaborate of these books in its production, David Ray's *Demons in the Diner*, from The Ashland Poetry Press, is arguably the most wide-ranging, both in prosody and subject. Whether treating personal matters such as a son's death, landscapes, artists, or social issues, each poem is to be taken on its own terms. Reading Ray's poetry recalls for me a remark actor Martin Sheen made, when asked to compare himself to his son: "My son has a career; I'm an actor." One criticism might be the absence of a more ambitious vision, as the poems are not arranged by any scheme. But poem by poem, Ray writes with a lyrical clarity and assurance that draws us into wanting to know what he has to say on virtually anything, from the aftermath of divorce felt as a phantom limb to shooting a nuisance



porcupine who "dying, looking me straight / in the eye...uncurled my father's hands." Leaving an "Estate Sale," the poet expresses his repulsion stemming from a fear of death: "We walk quickly home and throw out more, / resolve to leave them nothing, nothing." "Extinction" meditates on "the golden frogs / of Costa Rica" who, despite having followed Plato's rule of the *polis*, still "failed the test / of living with our toxins" and have vanished. In contrast, a dramatic monologue depicts Coleridge's withdrawal from "that lulling pill, quaint opium":

The Devil's swallowed whole, with antlers spread.  
No, horns are hinged for the gut descent,  
eased in. And then he spreads them, flails,  
beats with cleft feet, a scourge for all  
acts performed, then for those we've failed.

Tolstoy is remembered for his diaries, Dickinson for her "poems / folded, each with a stitch or two of blue thread," Lafcadio Hearn for "the gloom he had brought / across oceans," and Chekhov for the "Chekhovian" absurdities at the moment of his death.

*Demons in the Diner* burgeons with vivid detail and figuration, and while few poems may strike a reader as dynamically postmodern, they reward a second and third reading. Ray's poetry is remarkable for its quiet strength, musicality, and gentle spirit equally at home among the sacred and the profane, a poetry ready to acknowledge, "For a guru / a mosquito will do" and "we never have anything left but the earth."

In the other Knopf book, Sharon Olds's *Blood, Tin, Straw* gathers poems on topics familiar to her readers: family, marriage, sex, birth, motherhood, the death of parents. Neatly arranged into five parts, each with fourteen poems (what is it about the number fourteen and poets?), each section has a one-word subtitle: *Blood, Tin, Straw, Fire, Light*. Though this orderliness suggests discrete themes, Olds includes poems deliberately out of sequence, as though she were shelving



books and added a few irrelevant titles just to surprise the browser. This whimsy, in fact, derives from one of her strengths: joined to her alliterative phrasing and intricately intimate detail is her readiness to make imaginative leaps, whether figurative or cognitive. While not always integrated into a poem, these leaps lend her voice an energy that keeps a reader constantly on edge. They may seem to distract from a poem's focus but actually serve to sustain it, like sharp cross-cutting in a film that requires close watching for fear one will lose the plot. Not that Olds is an Ashbery or a Susan Howe, with whom every line can also be an adventure; her faith in signification is unquestioned. But she has mastered making every sentence sound momentous, no matter how otherwise flat or conspicuous the diction. Tomato aspic is "murky," "like the silt of a wound"; the poet's father

would  
watch and see it stay down in me,  
as if his exophthalmos eye  
held down, on the floor of my stomach, a bolus  
stripped with infectus.

In another poem, a suddenly shifting necklace is characterized as a

small whipper or  
snapper, milk or garter, just  
the vertebrae now, as if a stripped  
spine had taken its coccyx in its jaw  
around my throat's equator.

In "After Punishment Was Done with Me," Olds devotes fifteen lines to a child's view of "the anonymous crowds of grit" in the corner of her room she observes,

as if  
looking down into Piazza Navona  
from a mile above Il Duce, I would see  
a larval casing waisted in gold

thin as the poorest gold wedding band,  
and a wasp's dried thorax and legs wound love-ring  
with a pubic hair of my mother's

Such poetry is as shimmering and tensile as a body in heat. Still, Olds's infatuation with the physicality of experience and language inevitably results in poems that celebrate subjects, even when they mean to assault them. For domestic poems ("The Sound," "Outdoor Shower," "The Remedy"), her febrile prosody scintillates. But when the "soul" makes an appearance, as in "For and Against Knowledge," it seems a stock character, a straight man against which to show off her cleverness. Olds's poems create the aura that body functions, detritus, and private memories set the stage for truth, but she sometimes blurs distinctions rather than uncorking from them any vital insight. Maybe it is time for her to write a longer poem, not an epic but a work in which her sustaining talent can confront head on the cultural concerns hovering just outside the scope of her vibrant lyrics.