

REVIEWS

Dawn Lundy Martin, *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*. Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2014. 96pp. \$15.95

Imagine Harryette Mullen's amniotic-cum-seminal books of poetry adorned with a particular set of illustrations: the androgynous artwork that Allison Saar contributed to Erica Hunt's gender-neutral texts for the book *Arcade* (1996). But imagine the artwork washed out as blank spaces. One would then have a visual correlative for the experience of language, and of identity in and through language, that Dawn Lundy Martin offers in *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*. In asking readers to wash out Saar's artwork and erase Hunt's texts entirely from this analogy to Martin's latest collection, I am marking here—as I have elsewhere—the problem, critical and aesthetic, that bedevils one in situating Martin's writing. We have come far enough, I think, to say that Martin cannot be impaled on the sister-outsider dilemma that pinned Audre Lorde and others to the wailing wall of black and lesbian "victimhood." But it would be disingenuous to pretend that we now live in a post-racial or post-gender world, high school boys wearing dresses and skirts to their rap-soundtracked senior proms notwithstanding. In *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*, Martin finds a language that reflects the extent to which expressing embodied black female experience is always bound up with both the history of its (mis) identifications and the desire to transcend them. Or as Martin puts it in one of her trenchant, and often excoriating, meditations on the necessities and inadequacies of representation, "A boy is not a body. A boy is a walk."

It's true that *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life* is dedicated to, constitutes a commentary on, and is inspired in large part by the vision and art of Kara Walker and Carrie Weems. But the androgyny of Saar's woodcuts from the Saar-Hunt collaboration offers another entryway into Martin's observations. Over and over Martin depicts the ways that visual cues orient gender and racial identity from the outside, from the vantage point of the viewer and, more generally, of a putative public. This is one of the many implications of Lord Alfred Douglas's 1894 elegy for Oscar Wilde: "The love that dare not speak its name" implies that, without this public announcement or declaration (as one must declare certain "goods" at Customs), such a love goes unseen. For Martin, this love becomes a form of contraband shielded by the heteronormative ("automations to lengthen legs, / round edges, plump buttocks") and the ethno-normative ("Chokehold 'blackness'"). Martin's use of a word like "chokehold," which can be read here as either an adjective or a verb, indicates the multiple strategies—syntactic, grammatical, thematic—

that she deploys to analyze the assumptions operative on all sides of the color and gender lines. Read as an adjective, the “chokehold” in “Chokehold ‘blackness’” criticizes intraracial presumptions of authenticity. Read as a verb, the word, and the phrase it’s nested in, criticize the policing of the black body.

The play of polysemy here is not solely, or even primarily, the manifestation of a commonplace aesthetic. Here, instead, multiple strategies of “reading” are deployed to avow and denounce one another, all of them addressed, from different vantage points, to the “problem” of the black female body and its inscriptions. If this technique sounds like one of the seven types of ambiguity systematized by William Empson, that’s because Martin deconstructs even as she affirms the “MODERN [FRAME].” Martin takes Empson’s taxonomy, along with Melvin B. Tolson’s “ethnic” amendment of it, and adds sex, gender, and sexual orientation to the mix, so that her polysemous language can no longer be reduced to the structure of irony. At the level of grammar, this technique means, among other things, that common nouns are no more reliable than proper ones. Furthermore, at the level of poetic structure, it means that the distinction between poems and titles is never left stable. One can certainly read this book as divided into several titled sections, but almost all their titles can be read as poems in and of themselves. Is the following passage, for example, a section title or a self-contained poem, a caption or a stand-alone text, a frame or the verbal artifact itself?

HOW IS A MOUTH
SUPPOSE
D TO OPEN WILLIN
G LY?

The all-caps format instructs us to read these words as a title (the “sections” are announced in all caps), but the enjambment instructs us to read it as a poem. These readings are not mutually exclusive, but the enjambment of letters complicates things even more. Because the black female body is constructed as a “problem”—*the* problem—in the book, one might initially read the last line as “girly,” but noting the location of the adverbial tag (LY) below “OPEN,” one then “sees” a term for seduction (P/LY). Even the first letters of each line can be read as an abbreviated slur (“H(i)/S/ D(o)G”). Moreover, the gap or blank between the adjective “WILLIN/G” and the adverb “WILLIN/G LY” plays syntactically, grammatically, and typographically with the problem of agency, reduplicating the sentence’s interrogative gesture. The moment a black female human speaks, even if she is not “visible,” she is already her history, one that never belongs to her. To speak is to respond to this history and to confirm this history, whether the response is one of defiance (“I will not sing to you. I refuse to sing to you”) or compliance (“WHEN WE ARE INSIDE THE PRISON / WE CAN ONLY THINK OF BEAUTY”).

The impossible space Martin surveys can only be formally articulated or measured via abstraction. But as both subject and object of these pithy investigations, Martin asserts her rights—the rights of her “black female body”—even if these rights can neither be anchored to a material ground nor tethered to what passes for the transcendental:

What are the dimensions of the field? They’ve put me here in the tallest grasses and the strangest fruit and have demanded at gun point that I bend into it over and over, but I’m so tired, and my limbs are sore, and I feel disconnected, or I disintegrate, a shadow figure hovers over me as I exhaust, body buckle, ballast removed.

Though their inflections branch off in other directions, those “tallest grasses” echo, for me, Harryette Mullen’s “Tree Tall Woman.” The differences in tone and attitude are instructive. Whereas this early poem by Mullen celebrates (black) female self-affirmation ([she] “made herself / from wind and earth”) and boundless strength (“Her arms surround the sky”), Martin’s poem refuses this gesture, which has too often been conflated with the superwoman trope of black matriarchy.

Insofar as Martin’s book covers ground tread by Mullen, Renee Gladman, and (even) Rita Dove, it goes without saying that *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life* is a risk. Nevertheless, Martin’s accomplishment here is singular, by which I mean distinct from that of her peers. But that doesn’t mean she won’t find herself being shoved—even with “praise”—back into a box. This is why every single word of description—*black, female, body*—in her book, as well as here in this review (including the pronouns I use), must be read in quotation marks. These too are boxes, no doubt, but different kinds of boxes. And for Martin that may make, if not mean, all the difference.

Tyrone Williams

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Thomas Meyer, *Essay Stanzas*. Brooklyn, NY: The Song Cave, 2014. 140pp. \$17.95

Thomas Meyer begins *Caught Between*, the first of three long poems in his new book *Essay Stanzas*, with what seems like a quiet apology:

This won’t amount to much.
A handful of flowers
put on the table.
A souvenir unheard, unseen.

This table setting quickly turns. What follows are thirty-six pages of short stanzas that interlink ecological myths in easy language to describe