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Harryette Mullen

Muse & Drudge

Singing Horse Press, Philadelphia, 1995, 80 pp.

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you've had my thrills
a reefer a tub of gin
don't mess with me I'm evil
I'm in your sin

clipped bird eclipsed moon
soon no memory of you
no drive or desire survives
you flutter invisible still

Harryette Mullen's second book *Trimmings* is a celebration and exploration of femininity as something extra. In her new book length poem, *Muse & Drudge*, a sequence of eighty, four quatrains each, the speaker calls on poetic wordplay and improvisation to rhythmically stave off an aching lack and heal a wound.

Sapphire's lyre styles. In the first few lines, Mullen invokes the history of Sappho whose poems we know only through fragments. Like Sappho, Mullen focuses on details of everyday life and the agonies of love, while keeping close to speech. Unlike Sappho, she accentuates the many voices that make up the one. And while Sappho's poems have been mutilated with the passage of time, Mullen's poem comes into being only through purposefully gathering and transforming fragments. And Mullen's Sappho is instead a Sapphire. Clarence Major's dictionary describes, Sapphire as a derogatory term for an unpopular black female. Sapphire surely also alludes to the contemporary poet who delves into the mutilation that society makes black women go through (*Angry Women*). A sapphire is also a beautiful blue stone.

Mullen's uncommon, uncertain and shifting subject is a woman who in the blues tradition has been forgotten, oppressed and betrayed. Sapphire becomes traveling Jane who merges with other mothers, the essence lady; self-made woman, off bottom woman, brown gals, women of honey, hens, the bird, handsome gal, tomboy girl, a wave goodbye a girl, big legged gal, sassy cook, outlaws, etc. By slinging insults and studying the world around her and before her, she transforms her loss into lines that unravel, re-form and trick the reader. Each riddle-like poem has a secret that opens into another and I too become uneven, unbalanced, aching with pain and revenge, like traveling Jane herself. What does one do with an impossible mourning? She writes beautiful ruses of the lunatic muse:

dark-eyed flower
knuckling under
lift a finger for her
give the lady a hand

not her hard life
cramped hot stages
only her approach
ahead of the beat

live in easy virtue
where days behaving send
her dance and her body
forward to a new air dress

a pad for writing
where dreams hit el cielo
crack the plaster fool mood rising
it's snowing on the radio (20)

The betrayed woman doesn't sit still and weep. She keeps on moving rumba with the chains removed; for her, there is no time to settle down; she's going back native natural country wild briars; shake it down south to New Orleans; the French quarter; the city streets, buses and subways of Philmeyork; to Virginia/where the green grass grows; coastal Georgia and South Carolina; the slave ships; bamboula back to/the motherland; Dahomey; Nigeria; Ashanti; Ethiopia; Cuba. She travels through social bedlam, a history of slavery and drudgery and looks into these places and times for wisdom and freedom to study her story.

sister mystery listens
helps souls in misery
get to the square root
of evil and render it moot (28)

The sun may be shining but what does one do to take away the hurt. She sings scat logic, dances with her words, twisting up her tongue; she recasts, ridicules and rethinks the language of technology, advertising and religion. Jesus is my airplane/I shall feel no turbulence/though I fly in a squall thorgh the spleen of Satan. She has a sexy celebration, but the body's raw and real: copulation from scratch/kisses go down hard. Ravaged by love's loss and the sense that something must need fixin, she finds a women's shelter under a sweater; she talks to herself, tells stories of others; speaks to the betrayer who now resides within and hurls insults and threats. She lets the Mississippi rip, just exercising/her right to bare attitude: mister arty martyr/a jackass to water; his penis flightier than his word; kiss my black bottom; and then she begs someone to please come in/tell me what's good/think up something.

if I can't have love
I'll take sunshine
if I'm too plain for champagne
I'll go float on red wine

what you can do
is what women do
I know you know
what I mean, don't you

Yes, I do. She tries to make excuses: he couldn't help himself/he couldn't help it/he couldn't stop himself but ends blessing stunned cattle, spavined horses, and gutted trout. She uses poetic language to move from one invisible flutter to another beginning. Some poems are thick and layered with double, triple, and quadruple meaning--the sounds of pain, anger, revenge and forgiveness. When memory is unforgiving/mute eloquence/of taciturn ghosts/wreaks havoc on the living (71).

feed the spirits or they'll
chew on your soul
you'll be swallowed and digested
by a riled-up crocodile (69)

Muse & Drudge is a book length poem in which Harryette Mullen gathers together fragments of a life and a history. She "hums some blues in technicolor". It is a sad, funny, intelligent and powerful work.