

Image as Act, a review of Lenard Moore's *A Temple Looming*

Lenard Moore's *A Temple Looming* (WordTech Books, 2008), was initiated and inspired by a request from the visual artist Sherman Jenkins to work on an ekphrastic project based on old black-and-white photos. Four other poets each paired with a graphic artist, and for two years the five poets, including Moore, wrote about sculpture, photographs and paintings. For Moore the process resulted in *A Temple Looming*, a three-part collection that includes not only moving individual poems but also an unforced thematic unity that for me makes this Moore's most ambitious and successful book.

Yet Moore's ambition seems to come from modesty rather than from literary hubris. Ralph Waldo Emerson's statement, "The man who is his own master knocks in vain at the door of poetry," has troubled me for years as an incongruous observation from the sage who in other essays says, "Know thyself," "Trust thyself," "Obey thyself." Moore's *A Temple Looming*, suggests that will alone does not produce poems, but poems may be earned by—or at least come out of—years of trying to know, trust and obey oneself, which for Emerson identifies the individual with a transcendent whole, and for Moore draws the poet back to a community that transcends past and present by evoking time's dissolution in selfless continuity of our feelings for each other.

Moore's humility is reflected in the two pages of acknowledgments and thanks to people who have encouraged, advised and sustained him. His willingness to present his poems not as the work of an individual master but as a community achievement, gives voice to lost lives and suffering that can be acknowledged but not assuaged.

The book is in three parts: "An Album of Strong Old Men," "Women in a Photo Album," and "It Begins with the Middle Passage," an overall organization reminiscent of a Renaissance altar piece. As a Christian triptych might have the Virgin and Child as a centerpiece with side panels, the middle section of *A Temple Looming* is slightly longer than the other two sections. "Women" flanked by "Old Men" and "The Middle Passage."

In many cases, the poems' images almost obviate the need for the photographs that inspired them. "A Temple Looming," the last poem in the section, "Women in a Photo Album," is illustrative:

In front of a wrought iron gate
you stand, slim and solemn,

a temple looming in light,
and while your mouth stays shut

like a window, words themselves
lock in the throat.

Thomas Lisk, Professor of English at North Carolina State University, edited *Obsidian 7.2*, a special issue dedicated to the work of Jay Wright. He admires Alex Haley's advice, "See the good, and praise it."
