

## The Audacious Natural Word: A Review of Camille Dungy's *Black Nature*

Fearless. What comes to mind when we see this adjective? Brave. Unafraid. Courageous. Bold. Marching forward with heads up and eyes open. All of these can be used to describe the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* edited by Camille Dungy. And fearless perfectly describes the attitude of this collection in addition to also being the title of the last poem in the book. Its author, poet Tim Seibles, probably never imagined the poem would close out a full collection of Black nature poetry but so it has. This is my point of entry for this review. Rather than starting from the front and working forward, I opt to work backwards primarily because I think this poem's title does a wonderful job of summarizing a book that is one of the most fearless, comprehensive and engaging collections of African American nature poetry and essays that this country has ever seen.

This collection is gutsy because for years, MFA programs have canonized the nature poetry of White poets, while excluding, or conveniently overlooking depending on one's perspective, the nature poetry of Black poets. Almost all literature buffs have heard and studied Wordsworth, Frost and Emerson but how many knew that Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks also wrote nature poetry? And in addition to these renowned classic black poets essential contemporary Black poets such as Patricia Smith, Yusef Komunyakaa, Nikki Giovanni, Natasha Threthewey, Lenard Moore and Carl Phillips are included. This anthology even schools readers by including emerging and early mid-career poets such as Tara Betts, Remica L. Bingham, Gregory Pardlo, and Sean Hill. That's why this collection is fearless.

As an editor, Dungy doesn't sway from the truth. She eloquently states the fact that Black folks "developed a complex relationship to the land" in her introduction. This relationship often revolves around their position as manual labor in America and far too infrequently the casual viewers of this land.

One of the standouts in this collection, Yusef Komunyakaa's "Work," tells the story of a worker in a yard trying to avoid watching a woman who readers would assume to be a mistress. Lines like "my body's been one/ solid motion from sunrise" articulates the pain and tenacity of a field worker (58). But the man will not look at the married woman, despite her lying "nude/ On a hammock among elephant ears." Although the syntax and language of this poem are stripped down, in typical Komunyakaa style, readers can still smell the thick stench of tension between this worker and his female employer. The intricate details of the red Corvette the children drive, and the cook only working half-day on Saturdays, depicts a privileged and wealthy family. Meanwhile, the worker toils on trying to ignore but "Drawn to some Lotus-eater." Even to pen this poem is an act of resistance. The yard and garden filled with beautiful foliage in bloom set against this worker and his married employer is a complicated and charged scene. While readers long to know if the worker was completely successful or not, Komunyakaa refuses to answer. Instead, he leaves us with the final image of a crushed Narcissus and wondering if "gods wrestled here." Ending with this tinge of religion is interesting considering this poem is set in a garden and involves an interaction between a

man and a woman. This poem could almost be a nouveau interpretation of the Adam and Eve scenario.

In order to dive into this book completely, readers must be willing to travel beyond pastoral outdoor scenes. Due to the Great Migration of Blacks from South to North, many African Americans grew up in or near cities with harsh urban settings. Therefore, the poems born out of those experiences are landscape poems, although they are not typically categorized as such. And in these urban areas insects, rodents and animals co-habitate with humans. The next two poems up for examination are both in a chapter called "Pests, People Too." In Tara Betts' "For Those Who Need a True Story," the narrative of Raymond and his mother in a rat-infested apartment building is explored. Betts, who is a native of Chicago, clearly comprehends the nature of living in the city. While this poem probably is set in Chicago, it could actually take place in any major city in the US. It is devastating to read about how Raymond's mom "seasons this meatloaf with rat poison" in order to get rid of the rats. The poem's words are soberly convincing. The reader can almost hear the screeching and scratching of the rats as Raymond is asked to help collect them so his mother can get dollars off their rent money. This act of a mother surviving the harshness of the city by any means necessary is a sad but fearless act.

While money isn't the main concern of Thomas Sayers Ellis' poem "The Market," it does share with the Betts poem the subjectivity of vermin. This time we have both rats and cockroaches that plan to attack. They are plotting to enjoy all the great food the family has brought home from the recently reopened market. While this may initially sound disgusting on the literal level, Ellis transforms it. The food is a metaphor for the advantages that Black people have garnered since the Civil Rights movement, but have slowly let Whites swindle from them. The brilliance of this poem is how the poet finds a way to sprinkle this topic with humor. Lines such as "Their families outgrew ours" and "Our holidays became theirs" are both tragic and comical. This landscape poem ends with an image that somehow harkens back to Komunyakaa's aforementioned poem. The crumbs the family eats fall "from our mouths into theirs like snow." This final disturbing image of the crumbs falling into the vermin's mouths has an eerie quality about it. Ellis manages, within the confines of this nature poem, to also display savvy political commentary about the state of our people. This is indeed fearless.

Another favorite risk-taking poem of mine is by newcomer Indigo Moor. Moor's "Pull" is the story of the speaker's coyote-hunting outing with his uncle. This poem reveals the true nature of the human experience by examining life and death in an intricate and delicate manner. It is a beautiful testimony to a young boy's innocence as his uncle takes the life of an animal and parallels that to dealing with a human loss. This poem is a lament over losing the speaker's brother, but Moor knows that relating this to something in nature will heighten this sentiment. The way Moor constructs language in this poem packs punches at every turn. Phrases such as "fistful of buckshot" and "eyes tunneling through me" demonstrate that this poet can hold his own among heavyweights like Ellis and Komunyakaa. Additionally, this poem has a final line that is simple yet poignant. "Everything/ that lives on live trapped in love." Moor is showing how the animal without his partner will live with loss just as the speaker will sadly live on, dealing with the loss of his brother.