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19 Names for Our Band
Jibade-Khalil Huffman
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Fence Books tends towards the avant-garde, the young, the hip, and this collection of poems fits into the niche well. Huffman's poems resist traditional narrative meaning, relying instead on the power of nuance, juxtaposition, and suggestion. Here ambiguity salts every poem, inviting reading and re-reading. While some books may be devoured in a sitting, these poems suggest the *amuse-bouche*, each a taste of observation and intuition that creates an understanding which is almost always fluid.

For Huffman, winner of the Grolier Poetry Prize, none of these poems are ostensibly autobiographical. Instead, a character named Jerome makes frequent appearances chronicling his "early life." Rather than having the poems grouped, Huffman lets them serve as a backbone chronicle of early memories; "This year I will enter a beauty pageant and start courting a boy who calls me his little big mouth bass and I have many loafers, a pair for every occasion"; relationships, "There were ashes on the lips of their glasses and pins in their hair a way I imagined was dangerous"; and more. Here and elsewhere, the poet intersects high diction with low, pop culture with high culture, and moves adeptly between band names like "Handjob" and sly references to William Carlos Williams' plums in the icebox.

Huffman also tackles race with references to Nat Turner, Paul Robeson, and even Star Jones. Do not expect to finish the book with a nugget of poetic truth; the book resists that with all its power. This isn't traditional poetry which resolves itself in fourteen lines; instead, Huffman's sonnets suggest ways in which the sonnet might reconsider itself. Huffman enjoys the art of turning the meaning of a line with each line that accumulates after it. Read with its predecessor, a line has one meaning. Read the line that follows, and it assumes another meaning as with "Sonnet": "In this country you have/ never named your child."

For readers interested in bemusement, an assemblage of impression and image, voice, and change, this is a terrific entry into avant-garde poetry.

Camille-Yvette Welsch