

Except by Nature

Sandra Alcosser

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Of those poetry collections in the ecstatic genre, Sandra Alcosser's *Except by Nature* is one of the best, deserving of its recent selection for the National Poetry Series. Poets of the ecstatic often craft images and language around transformation, building mystery from the sensuality of experience. Their work is characterized by a lush physical response. Of the three divisions of Alcosser's book, "Sugary Heat," "Sweat" and "By the Nape," the first most fully fits these qualities. These poems, set in both the lonely bayous and urban waters surrounding New Orleans, build momentum from a physical experience that assumes a larger-than-life quality. From the dark, jungle-like atmosphere in "Pole Boat on Honey Island" to the lush dissonance of "In the Jittering World," Alcosser creates a literary tropics dripping with both mystery and the raw heat of the body.

The second and third sections move away from this initial exotic setting, but offer plenty of dexterous imagery built out of the fantastic and ordinary stuff of her world. The second section offers readers experiences as varied and formative as a child dancing on the farm or watching the Mercedes assembly line. The poems in the third section explore transformation through the primitivism of animals, observing and questioning the experience of the grizzly, spittle bug and ground squirrel. Against these, she sets poems marked by lyrical characters as startling as her animal observations: Michael, who makes wine and killed a man; the boy who jumped the ice floes; a woman she calls "Greenhand." Poetry readers who have enjoyed Patti Ann Roger's *The Firekeepers* and the darker elements of Billy Collins' poetry will discover another pleasing voice in *Except by Nature*.

ANNE-MARIE OOMEN (July / August 1998)

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