FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Midland
Kwame Dawes
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In his new collection of poems, Dawes flawlessly weaves in settings and events from the American South, Africa, the Caribbean, and England. Weighing loss against experience, a sense of home against chosen exile, and relationships and community against broken bonds, Dawes meditates on the things that remain most vivid in life. This volume represents a sorting out, a sifting of life through a spiritual filter, where what details that survive in the psyche of the poet thrive with rare intensity.

Dawes begins in unsentimental praise. The seven-section tribute to Derek Walcott entitled “Inheritance,” explores his mentor’s life and work. Generically, these types of poems often end up as piles of sentimental mush. In Dawes’ hand, however, readers catch a glimpse of why the poems had to be written and the faults found with his master. This gives gravity and credence to the tribute by exposing the selfish but self-preserving nature of such poetic quests.

The poet achieves an epic sprawl and lyric intimacy in the poetic sequences within the collection. The “Inheritance,” “Holy Dub,” “Map Maker,” and “Midland” show that Dawes has the depth of a novelist.

In these sequences, he creates a dense world within a few pages, then revels as that world spins away from him. This effect produces stunning imagery rooted to the essentials of the plot. In this passage from the first section of “Midland,” a potent description turns into a gift the poet knows will be rejected:

The corn has turned a rotten gold and pale in the summer, / the twine of leaves and roots dark and spotted while the mildewed glory // of old hymnals seeps from the St. James Baptist church / where the blues have marinated the boards until they are supple / with the fluent pliability of faith so old it knows the ways of God / like it knows family, and blood ties. I am stealing things from here / and sending them to you, knowing you are too decent to use them.

Dawes short poems are certainly worthwhile, but lack the greatness of the longer ones. Although Midland is the poet's seventh collection of poetry, this is his American debut. His first collection was awarded England's Forward Poetry Prize. Midland placed first in the Hollins Summers Poetry Prize competition. It deserves many things more, especially a wide readership.

Michael Graber