

Pretty from the Back

Sharon A. White

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Experiments in form and language convey one woman's struggles with love and race.

Poetry is a safe space where people can express their inner fears and experiences. Sharon White's collection, *Pretty from the Back*, examines the poet's childhood, family, and experiences living as a black woman in modern society. The wide-ranging poems take on a positive attitude, even as they discuss race and the trials of love.

White is not afraid to experiment with form. There are stanza-long pieces, sonnets, and prose poems in this collection. White uses repetition to demonstrate longing, among other emotions. For example, the phrase "how long" is used again and again in a poem of the same name to highlight the speaker's desperation.

Pieces focusing on race are among the most specific and moving in the collection. For example, the poem "My Brother New Classmate The White Girl" discusses the complicated responses White's family has when her brother dates a white woman named Betty Jane. This piece does not shy away from the conflicted responses, and it references everyone from Angela Davis to Nikki Giovanni. For example, Betty Jane's mother says, "Kids today just don't understand what all this means," which illuminates how different generations view race.

The most memorable poems are playful with language. For example, White allows herself to use surreal imagery when explaining a dream in "Wild Winds." Here, she writes that "I Dream of running wild with the wind / Bare chest and free / Feather I am not." The rich alliteration of the opening line and the language throughout make this ten-line poem a standout. If other pieces experimented more with images and sound play, key ideas would sharpen.

Vague poems are harder to place and understand, such as "Used To," which opens with a speaker saying, "I used to Dream about you." However, the "you" in question is never revealed. Many pieces allude to love lost but do not shed light on the specifics of these relationships. Without such information, these works read more like encrypted journal entries than accessible poems.

Many of the longer poems come across as mini-essays or letters rather than lyrical explorations. For example, "Sharon 1, 2, 3" is a memorable poem that examines a long-time friend. However, there is no rhyme, and the line breaks seem haphazard. Without musicality, the pieces simply tell important ideas rather than show them. Similarly, capitalization is inconsistent and unnecessary, especially when it involves words like "heart" and "dream."

Finding one's place in the world can be difficult, especially for the marginalized. White explores her personal history: from love lost and won to growing up as a black woman in modern society. White's work acknowledges that the "Sun is Still Shining," as one poem ends, no matter life's tribulations.

LISA BOWER (May 8, 2014)

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