ForeWord Reviews

Soft Box
Celia Bland
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This poet writes like a woman with a mission. Her collection resounds with an honesty that is at once brutal and determined. “You will not go hungry into a strange soil,” she writes to her jaundiced infant. A stirring proclamation, to say the least. But the evocative is the crux of her collection. Bland browbeats her way through a sort of autobiography.

The characters are primarily family—mother, father, stepfather, husband, children dead and alive. Although she now resides in New York, Bland’s Southern roots are evident in the choice of her poems’ locations. Nature creeps in on her family, barely kept at bay: “Don’t pick / Queen Anne’s lace. Each bud / holds invisible / chiggers / in its fronds.”

In this poem, “The Stepfather,” the hungry bugs are not what the speaker needs to be wary of. She should be wary of he who gives the advice, the title character whose intentions are tainted at best. It is perhaps because of him that the speaker’s voice is like that of a warrior. She is unflinching, ready for the battle she did not recognize when she was ten. Although it is not explicit that the stepfather was sexually abusive, his domineering presence is evident. For example, he does not allow his wife to wear underwear or shave her armpits.

Other male figures torment the speaker, such as the school principal who spanked her and the husband she avoids. More curious, however, are the women inhabiting this collection: a woman who paints prosthetics for a living, the mother who throws an inexplicable tantrum while cooking pizza, and the speaker herself. While it is unclear whether Bland chose the most perfect or the most difficult poetic subjects, she certainly rose to the challenge of combining contemporary themes with traditional form.

Held fast by neat lines and stanzas, these poems batter on concepts such as the connection between sex and death. Bland is conscious of the power of well chosen and well arranged words. In “Painting Prosthetics,” she notes, “The hands and feet were hollow / with a hole at the wrist or ankle for a peg.” In addition to the plethora of such religious allusions, *Soft Box* is full of pagan and Greek counterparts, both traditional elements of poetry.

Bland’s writing résumé is impressive, including thirteen books for young readers, anthologies of poetry, and nominations for the Heekin Award for Children’s Fiction and for the Pushcart Prize. A contributing editor to The New York Public Library Desk Reference, she is

also Director of College Writing at Bard College in New York.

Nonetheless, *Soft Box* speaks for itself and does not speak softly. Celia Bland writes like a woman possessed, and the result is bewitching.

Erica Wright