FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Poetry

South of Here
Lydia Melvin
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We grow up hearing the adage that "History is told by the victors"—the notion that those in power possess jurisdiction over our shared story. In authorized versions of history, the prevailing orthodoxy decides whose lives were meaningful, while others are erased. Yet as long as 2000 years ago, when classical Chinese poets were writing from exile, poetry has often defied the official versions of events. To speak aloud about the subjects and people edited from collective memory constitutes an act of revolt. In this debut book, the poet joins the rebel tradition. A former Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at UW-Madison, Melvin is currently a PhD candidate in English at SUNY-Binghamton, and completing her MA in African American Studies.

She is a fierce and lyrical record-keeper—a poet who performs a meticulous forensic accounting, and then registers in dark ink what is missing from the official ledgers. Here, the *re-collection* of memory is at once tender and ferocious. A vigilant observer, Melvin waits in the shadows of lost and stolen time, to name what she sees there: from her own mother, born to a housekeeper in 1939 on her employer's "eggshell-white kitchen floor"; to Marty Joe, a first love who phones to "promise [he'd] be back in jail soon, back to one call a week."

Incarcerated, Marty Joe has nothing but time, yet the ownership of even his hours is stripped from him. Time is rationed out in meaningless dollops, like lousy food on a cafeteria tray: "two hours of TV time, three / hours for meal / four for games and exercise, countless hours, / reflection hours, memory hours, longing hours, hours of / desire for more than numbers identifying you." These days are sliced so thin, they add up only to a pile of absence: "forgetting all about time; losing your senses … a cosmic loss." In a country where so many black men are known by a string of prison digits, Melvin insists on recalling the intimacy of when "our knees first touched."

But there's no Vaseline-blurred lens of sentimentality in this work, no dizzy buzz of

infatuation. Love is adrenalin-infused and dangerous here, even the first time around—"first kiss, first carjack, first midnight walk, first fuck." In "Nothing More," the struggle for intimacy also manifests itself in language use: "Perpetual / cynic. We can't seem to help ourselves. / It's natural the way we continue to fight romance / as a word. Stuck in this rut of learning / without listening and listening with believing."

When Melvin speaks of compassion, the word catches on an "imperceptible rust in the throat," and sympathy is costly, arriving like "the bill at the end of a long stay." Nonetheless, an assertion of self comes from retaining the rights to a full vocabulary of emotion, no matter what else is taken away. "The uncontrollable heart" survives despite it all, persistent as "a patch of wild dandelions, a patch / of wild onions growing furiously, weary, along the sidewalk."

Memory functions as testimony of one's place in the world, and in Melvin's poems, the location of self is a precarious, urgent venture. What cannot be located goes unseen, and thus, without proof of its existence. *South of Here* sings like a dusky ballad of an *Invisible Woman*, a voice from the underground. In "The Sound of Evolution," Melvin writes: "I feel like a mole / on the underside of a stranger's arm, hidden / misplaced." There is the sense of the self eclipsed, its momentary, fragile brightness like "a flashlight competing with the sun."

Jungian analyst Robert Johnson once wrote: "Heroism could be redefined for our time as the ability to stand paradox." Melvin's poems, like all unforgettable literature, perform this act of courage: they allow what is terrifying and grief-infused to climb into bed with beauty. In "Chattanooga Times: July 24, 1963," Melvin writes of a boy shot on his sixteenth birthday for stealing Cokes in "another diminishing white town—the town losing itself, resisting possibilities." Early in the poem, "scarlet begonias [are] thrashing in dirt" on a hot summer day—an image foreshadowing the bullet that enters human flesh: "how it burned him awake. / Invisible boy no longer." Melvin draws the reader close, into a volatile zone of paradox in which no one can look away; that's what these poems demand. In the process, we touch knees in the dark with the lives that inhabit *South of Here*.

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