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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ POETRY

The Book of What Stays

James Crews
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This is a marvelous book: a debut collection filled with the voice of an old soul, someone who has battled to claim what he knows. James Crews' compassionate intelligence ranges wide, looking for stories within the stories of news accounts, saints, and mythological figures, sifting through experience and possibility to find moments of intense clarity and feeling. Thanks to Crews, for example, it's a little clearer why Orpheus, on his mission to retrieve Eurydice, couldn't keep it together. The speaker's own experience is rich subject matter too; the reader follows his journey out of a false life into a joyous embrace of his gay identity.

The shape of this book contributes much to its impact, moving as it does from shadow to light. Poems in the first section illuminate a kind of spiritual winter, a blindness within which people make poignant gestures toward greater understanding or to fill some wrenching need. The poems that confront the guilt and regret that comes from the speaker's double life stun in their courage and reach. The poem "Dare to Speak" signals a move toward a new truth: a man's kiss "is revelation, and let it burst forth, hovering / in the chill air."

Thereafter, poems directly address the joys and sorrows of life as a gay man, including a series that trace the love and life together of two men, one of whom dies of AIDS. By the end of the book, the poems simmer in joy. In "Red-Tailed Hawk, Summer Storm," it seems the speaker has at last arrived home: "the waist-high, waving blades / of timothy part half-miraculously for us, forging a path / through that timeless, noiseless moment before the coming / rain rains hotly down, and we have crossed to safety."

Crews is at his best when the images do the heavy lifting—as when a stained glass Mary Magdalene gazes heavenward while the speaker has sex with a stranger in a ruined church. Sex, by the way, often appears in all of its varieties: guilty, playful, comforting, charged.

Crews is the author of two prize-winning chapbooks, some poems of which are included in this book, and recipient of the Prairie Schooner Bernice Slote Award for Emerging Writers. While his book will be an important addition to a gay collection, Crews' emotional integrity and the quality of his craft makes this an exceptional book for any poetry collection. What stays behind for the reader is the resonance of truth and inspiring courage in the face of a life in which there are "*No miracles in love*. Only these hours."
TERESA SCOLLON (September / October 2011)

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