ForeWord Reviews

The Shine Poems
Calvin Forbes
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Many of America's great works of art dive headlong into the river of homegrown folklore for inspiration. Extending what Pete Seeger termed the "folk process," Forbes appears so steeped in idioms and mythos of Blues and, by extension, Jazz, that one could say his verse has been baptized in the proverbial river. In his latest collection of poems, The Shine Poems, Forbes takes his guiding sensibility from the vernacular culture.

The result is a collection paradoxically wise and innocent, employing a humorous wise fool in the grand American tradition of Twain, Berryman, and Langston Hughes. Pain and tragedy exists plenty; however, there's an underlying sense of joy and detachment that gives the better poems in the collection a wry naiveté. In section four, which is populated by Shine, Glow, and Shade, Shine sings of the erotic virtues of "Ms. Glow" and it is romantic, tangible, and filled with history like the blues.

> *Her mouth was curved / Into a moist grin // Like a canoe / Just out of the water. // She could row you to Africa / With one slow protruding kiss.*

In a crash of cultures high and low that typifies America, this jive romance plays out on a mythic stage. What is heard from either the mouth of the poet or the mouth of the character Shine is street-smart, front porch poetic.

It's little wonder that Forbes makes his home in Chicago, the city of the Great Migration. His voice, like the blues legends of Tommy and Robert Johnson, stands at the crossroads, ready to deal with eternity and the issues of this country with a strong sense of awareness and dispossession (from the poem "Blues": "I have no use for nothing /Nothing don't do a thing for me—Raise hell and still go to heaven / Some people's crumbs worth more than cakes").

He knows what he's doing; Forbes teaches Jazz History, Writing, and Literature at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Shine Poems resonates with an intuitive knack for its subjects, a bittersweet sense of reality in America, and a scholar's zeal for evolving the folk process without committing sacrilege. Perhaps it's best to let Forbes end this post-modern medicine

show in his own words from the poem “Homing”:

“It taste like baby’s breath, / Like dew. I never knew sweeter water. / But I’m a spook’s spook; I stole / This story from a dead man’s mouth.”

Michael Graber