

two poets, whether writing to each other or with each other. “Double Negative” is their attempt to capture, in collaboration, a train journey across Australia, Marlatt’s birthplace. Frank Davey calls it a “long-poem/journal about two lesbians crossing Australia’s Nullarbor Desert that draws comparisons between the theft of Aboriginal lands and the denial of space to women who are lesbians” (742). The pun on “birth/berth [train sleeping compartment]” offers another seemingly innocent example of this denied, or unacknowledged, space. An interview conducted by the pair follows, in which they interrogate their own preconceptions about how best to be “in the landscape.” This interrogation continues and is heightened in the last two parts, authored by both Marlatt and Warland. “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” melds the two voices into shared meditations on how they “interwrite.” But it is “Subject to Change,” which concludes the books, that seems the most risk-taking, as the project of writing a poem each per day, presented on opposite pages, breaks down into a maze of hurt feelings, distrust, doubt, and anxiety. For March 7th, Warland writes: “*we talk angrily. you accuse me of leaving the collaboration because it isn’t going the way I want it to. I accuse you of judgement when you say I’m getting too theoretical*” (159). In “Afterthoughts” both acknowledge the “difficulty collaborating on such a microscopic level . . . we’ve had to give up individual control.” But as this piece concludes wryly, “giving each other the gears we are still engaged.” (160). In their sophisticated questioning of the links between gender, sexual desire and language, Betsy Warland and Daphne Marlatt challenge patriarchal and homophobic cultural codes. And in their collaborative efforts at honouring one another’s needs as well as their own, they revisit women’s wisdom of labour and birth throughout the ages: giving up individual control to find a greater wonder.

Work Cited

Davey, Frank. 1997. “Marlatt, Daphne.” *Oxford Companion to Can. Lit.* Second edition. Gen. eds. Eugene Benson and William Toye. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 741-742.

Talisman

Afaa M. Weaver
Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1998

Reviewed by Rishma Dunlop

This collection of poems explores the speaker’s relationships with five women in his life. Weaver devotes the sections of his book to Bessie, his mother; Eleanora, his first wife with whom he had two children; Ronetta, his second

wife; Aissatou, his third wife; and finally Mizan, actress, friend, companion.

The author's use of voice is powerful, evoking the African-American vernacular throughout, beginning with the speech patterns and observations of a four-year-old boy. Throughout the years spanned by the poems, the boy's mother is described with love and affection as Mama, a woman of strength and wisdom. In "Mama's Hoodlum," Mama waits for her son during his years in a street gang, the years of carrying knives and getting high, when "Being bad felt so good and right/ while Mama sat home and worried/about how and when I might die."

Especially poignant in describing maternal relationships is the poem "Mama and her Mama." The grandmother is Big Mama, who lives with the boy's family during the last sixteen years of her life. The agony of Mama is conveyed as she struggles to please her mother. She would "touch her mama and get the love/what made her sit and cry in her hands./Grandma and Mama had choke holds/on each other." In many poems, Weaver engages the reader, then ends with a twist of a knife's edge, driving the point home: "Mama had/gone stone crazy on my behind./When she knew she was dying,/Mama apologized to me./It was spring. I was thirty years old."

The line that haunts the collection is "Mama was preparing me to be alone." The section about Eleanora, Weaver's first wife, tells of marriage at eighteen and the death of their first son, born with Down's Syndrome. In the third section about Ronetta, the central image is of two people turning to each other through experiences of pain and, in the end, a marriage seen as a bridge "built/from need to need/and of need," until it finally cracks.

The fourth section about Aissatou, the speaker's third wife, marks a linguistic change with a voice charged with the sensuality of sexual love and sensitive to the aesthetic possibilities of the world. In the final section, through the accounts of the speaker's relationship with Mizan, the reader is left with the impression that he is leaning toward self-knowledge. The attempts to understand and recover love culminate in a sense of spirituality that is retained long after relationships have ended.

The speaker always returns in memory to his Mama's house. This is the key to the title of the book, as he returns again and again to that lonely room, searching for the "*talisman* that has made me a prisoner of love,/against the wishes of my dreams/at night, all gone in the bones." This is a fascinating, culturally rich, collection.