



“Our Bodies Confound Us:” A Review of Lauren K. Alleyne’s *Honeyfish*

VLADIMIR LUCIEN

REVIEW



ABSTRACT

This review examines the exploration of the traumatized consciousness occasioned by the constant and brutal denigration of black life, as faced by the persona/e in Lauren K. Alleyne’s collection of poetry, *Honeyfish*. It explores the ramifications of this upon consciousness, and also the means of redemption from this impasse in a consciousness surfeited on images of the absolute and persistent “physicality” of life, to a greater, more complex, more humane and truer reflection of the relationship black people and human beings bear with our body. The review maps this journey in *Honeyfish*, from the stranded, dispossessed and denigrated black body, to a redemptive re-remembering of complex black being that goes beyond the—many dead—bodies.

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In the wake of the multiple murders of African-American boys, men, women; the videos of the moments of their dying circulating and repeating across the globe; the specter of the dying or dead black body in its latter day manifestations, a new iteration of African diasporic poetry has emerged. Where Caribbean-born poets like Dionne Brand have engaged with the arc of black death from the Middle Passage forward, more recent diasporic writers like Lauren Alleyne contemplate and engage with closer tragedies. *Honeyfish*, Alleyne's second collection, deepens and intensifies the Trinidadian-American poet's engagement with the murderous American landscape, and with the body—the persona's own and that of her people. Appearing five years after her debut collection *Difficult Fruit* (2014), *Honeyfish* continues Alleyne's straddling of African-American and Caribbean land—and literary—scapes (a positioning she shares with several Caribbean writers based in North America such as Safiya Sinclair, Kwame Dawes, Canisia Lubrin, Ishion Hutchinson and others). Both thematically and structurally, the collection probes the experience of the diasporic body, the body out of place and simultaneous at/not at home, even as it resides at the extremity of what we consider diaspora at a metaphysical level.

Much of *Honeyfish* dwells at that unmappable convergence point between the body as mere *material thing* and the body as vessel for enduring spirit, even as American society seems to put the existence of the latter into question. There are bodies strewn throughout the book, many of them dead, male, and black. There is Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, alongside unnamed friends, which the poet-persona tries to resuscitate with words. In a poem entitled, "How to Watch Your Son Die," for instance, we are made witness to personhood being peeled from the image of the body:

Watch his skin become a coffin
for his breath. Watch

his bones rise like phantoms
to haunt the twilight of his flesh...

Watch him lose each human border (8)

This space is not a heaven filled with light, but rather that brief arc of light of living sight coming up against a hard unseeing. "You see a pile of beached boats lumped/like bodies in a mass grave" (6). It becomes clear that that fundamental distinction between humans and things rests in the sinister distinction between those whose lives have value and must be protected and those that are expendable:

You see...
an American flag, and below it, the reddening back
of a white boy lying face down on the sand,
his body the opposite of a chalk outline (7)

The poet develops an earthbound eschatology in the iconography of dying. Here, heaven is found in the act of dying itself. And at such extremities of life and language as she is driven to, it seems the poet herself is also thudding against the pavement, almost out of the poet's breath, the poet's words. The poem "Killed Boy, Beautiful World" examines the world outside this body, and the banal beauty of what is left behind. Here, the poet again attempts to contrive an afterlife against the impenetrable, eternal pavement:

How ruthless with beauty
the world seems, clouds
tumbling in streams of white,
the sky dappled, then clear,
then blotted with rain (9)

Throughout this first section of the book, however, is a more intimate death than that of those now-familiar strangers: that of a close friend. Though the circumstances of this personal death are

not clear, the experience is different from that of African Americans slain by a rogue police force. And this difference lies in metaphors such as these:

The coffin arrives— a strange tree
we plant, wreath with blossoms,
water with tears. It blooms your name
in stone. (18)

or

The cemetery is an untended field
I trample in search of your plot. (18)

In the *planted tree* of coffin, in the *untended field* of cemetery, there is possibility. In “Untitled,” the departed friend even returns to comfort the “left-living” persona. What distinguishes this poem from the others that also grapple with black death is its healthy measure of bewilderment at a death that is still somehow reconcilable with the rhythm(s) of life. Therefore, the ‘afterlife’ in “Untitled” can be immaterial, in contrast to the finite, concrete afterlife that murdered black bodies encounter—one in which the body itself is both the site where the soul was present, and the point from which whatever is next will proceed. These are poems, yes, but also the poet’s own protests, to not be, one day, reduced to one’s body. Whether living or dead.

Poems in *Honeyfish* repeatedly evoke art in terms such as *still life*, and *self-portrait*. But in the world of the collection and with the often tragic themes it traces, these terms shift meaning that a *still life* evokes the newly-dead, while a *self-portrait* can easily become an endangered self—a self on the verge of being unselfed, as the title, “Self Portrait with Impending War,” suggests. “Still Life with Empty Beach” introduces a new way of seeing provoked by the surrounding society. The persona meditates on being, on the ‘left-living’ human body, by proxy, through “still lives”: the frames of deck chairs with, “each plank made of a million separate splinters,/Some splintered from themselves” (16). The ensuing conclusion is neither consoling nor cynical but rather a detached approach to a sobering cosmic truth: “What I’m saying is we are made of spaces/no thing can breach, bridge or heal—/not longing, not touch, not even love” (16).

In the book’s second section—one more focused on the beautiful banality of family, personal whims, and smaller, quotidian conflicts—there are still imbrications of the themes and images of the first. For instance, the violence that is grimly corporeal in Part I is shown, in poems such as “Visa Villanelle,” to be also psychic and systemic. These poems bring us deeper within the human being to whims, desires, ambitions—possibility—something that the first section, in its reckoning with the mute corporeality of the persistent corpse, finds it difficult to locate.

Near the beginning of Part II, we find another poem dedicated to the persona’s friend, Anton. In “Self-Portrait on the Anniversary of His Death,” there are echoes of this stifling materiality that has come to clog possibility. “Self Portrait” echoes “Killed Body, Beautiful World” from Part I, but Anton’s death concerns the persona *personally*. And it is the difficulty of grasping this personal experience of death that forces one into the *creation* of afterlife beyond the body. At the end of the poem, the persona muses that “if there could be heaven on earth/he would be here” (39). The last of the poems dedicated to Anton, “A Gathering of Light,” finally transcends this, ending in what amounts to a succinct metaphysical statement on the profound, and welcome, ambiguity of death. It is also no surprise that this ambiguity is carried by spaces, such as those evoked in “Still Life With Empty Beach,” by the only half-explained meaning of the line-break’s work in the poem, in poetry, in life:

In the earth now, your body.
In what must remain. *In what must be*
given over to memory’s safekeeping:
In the way the sky holds you, and shines. (77, my emphasis)

In four lines Alleyne captures and reclaims the metaphysics that this rampant materiality sought to interrupt. First, the fact: “In the earth now, your body.” Then, this clause “in what must remain.” Then, this statement, made more complex by the emptiness that follows it via the line-break: “In what must be/.” This line emphasizes the inevitability of death, but also how it is reincorporated into life: “given over to memory’s safekeeping.” Through what portal is one life able to enter another if not through an inner emptiness, represented here with the white space on the page? With this empty space created in the wake of Anton’s death, or perhaps a space through which we emerge into being, the poet forges a transcendent view amidst the unrelenting black death, the ever-increasing body count that disturbs the persona and haunts the collection.

Another motif in *Honeyfish* is the fish-as-weathervane. In the first of two poems dedicated to it, “Elegy for a Fish-as-Weathervane,” though referring ostensibly to a gored fish that has been repurposed, one discerns one of the abiding facts of our human condition: “No schools for you there, *in that lonely/elevated place, only its perpetual piercing*” (20, my emphasis). Pierced by love. Pierced by tragedy. Pierced even more by the appearance of both (as in the case of Anton) together—which if nothing else, is one of the most undeniable reminders of our humanity. And it is then that we are “close to God;” we “spin in the place where prayers rise,” ... “where dreams take hold of you like hooks, yanking you this way, now that” (20). That is certainly the case for the persona we meet in “When Daughters Drown Their Fathers,” whose resistance to her father’s staid, cautious, and seemingly unambitious world evokes a rebellious or adventurous spirit within her. The violence of the gored fish is in some way connected to the force it seems to require for this daughter to break away from the world of her father so that she can allow her dreams to yank her “this way, now that,” to forge a sense of possibility:

...you
purge him like a poison, cut your eyes

at his face in yours— you, daddy-in-drag,
wearing his small-toothed smile, his dark face.

You stomp *no* on any anchor, refuse
any limit but the horizon, rename yourself,

endless, and him, *outgrown*; you bury him
with the bright blue mists of your future,

set sail and never look back. (33)

The poem frames the relationship in a confrontational fashion in order to realize possibility, to envision some still point against which to measure one’s ‘movement’.

In the final section of the book, this movement is illustrated by the itinerant persona writing from various places all over the world. Against the sort of corporeal stillness and heaviness that the father represents in “When Daughter’s Drown Their Fathers,” and the caution that the body seems to require of us, we meet a persona who concludes that:

Our bodies confound us;
in return we hurl them
against the edges of safety...
We manacle our spirits
to this world, name it
living. (58, my emphasis)

Possibility is the anthem of the final section, enacted by *naming*; a livingness measured against the prior stillness of the body, a naming that counteracts the silences “filled with a dead father/& six siblings & breakback work//that crushed all dreams...” (33). The trope of movement and stillness is framed through the relationship of a child faring forth into the world and into her realized dreams, far away from parents who remain.

The persona, however, comes to recognize that what constitutes stillness, movement, and the riddle of it all is located in that very confounding body that has transfixed us since the first section. The persona in Part III begins to see *things in things, inter-existence*. Both the father and the Fish-as-Weathervane reappear one after the other. This formal revisiting—of Anton, of the Fish, of the Father complicates the idea of movement as a moving “away” from. Instead, the movement is *within* the self, with particular direction, no particular coordinates. The persona comes to measure her movement through her ability to see *self in things* and *things in things* rather than see ‘self’ only against things. Instead of elegy, this section offers an “Ode to the Fish-as-Weathervane.” The persona sees, in another form, a thing taken out of its element, of its habitat, experiencing a kind of death even while its body is, repurposed as, and exalted into and as weathervane. We have moved beyond biology and biological death: “Say biology is one order of being,/but imagination is another” (71). In its affirmative stance, its belief in the power of saying, chanting one’s reality into being, the poem begins again to assume a position of faith, of personal and spiritual power that can overcome the degradation of the black body: “Say these gills will become lungs/and testify. Say thrive in any element/and name it possible” (71). In “Father, Christmas” the previously Drowned Father is revisited. Like Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays,” the unappreciated black father figure triumphs not into “dreams” and “possibility” as things that happen *in spite of* dire material circumstances, but *through* these dire material circumstances makes dreams possible—makes them a reality. Here, the father bears the heft of a pine tree, he *lifts* his children to place the star on the tree. Through his bearing the heft of material life, his children are able to reach the empyrean. The poem’s materiality, its sensuality even, is striking: “the bread you slow-kneaded”; “how we devoured your love, hungry/as only children are” (70). The children who belatedly learn “love’s austere and lonely offices” which lie, in many ways, in the body and what it bears, the greatest weight of which, is the immaterial within it: life, the heart.

In *Honeyfish*, the Caribbean is simultaneously home—internal to the personae, there in memory, family relation, affection—and physically far away. But as the collection evolves, the Caribbean becomes increasingly located *within* and resides more in feeling than in the clear coordinates of thought. It is spiritual refuge represented by family, friends, and memory. In a strange way, then, this entire collection dramatizes the diasporic movement outward, away from source, seeking possibility and coming up against aggressive limitations meant as much to impede us as to hone us. Some of us get to recognize this and to return in the flesh, others are slain and return in spirit, to Source. This moving, sobering, exquisite collection is more than just the diasporic story of the Caribbean-born poet in the Caribbean diaspora in America; it will resonate through time and space and with Afro-Americans, Caribbeans, Afro-Caribbean Americans, all of us on moving from the world of spirit, navigating the diaspora of the flesh, and then, inevitably, back again. Within. Beyond.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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