Imagine Leda Black

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Black Swan
Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon
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I stripped bark from trees in fat bands
down to the meat
green-rimmed like melon rind
and ultra-white, new wounds
I licked to taste the bitter.
(from "199 Lee Street")

In her first collection of poetry, *Black Swan*, which received the 2001 Cave Canem Prize, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon writes solidly within the tradition of the personal and narrative lyric. Her poetry revels in intense visual imagery, particularized description, and musicality: tools which she puts to good use as she explores themes of home and family relationship—both conflicted and sustaining—and issues of identity and voice. This poet's stance is subjective, considering the world almost exclusively from a first-person point of view. However, hers is a subjectivity not so much interested in confession as in growth. Her subject is "on the move," and as the poems of *Black Swan* succeed one another, she travels and matures.

Greek myth and Biblical verse and story give shape to this collection and function as way stations along the trajectory of the poet's imagination. "Imagine Leda black—," she challenges in the opening line of "Leda," the first poem in *Black Swan*. With such a beginning, Van Clief-Stefanon locates blackness inside the foundation myths of Western literature and culture. She brings Zeus, with his "god/swan's neck/ …like a white down noose," down into the swamp with "the snakes/ and the gators" of her native Florida, then converts him in "Black Swan" into the lover who is "familiar…the grace/ of his red bill open in acknowledgement." Blackness is transformative here, and though the "I" who speaks through these poems "cannot answer what difference/ this color makes, this dark lack/ of silence," this difference replaces silence with the voices of Leda's daughters. The book closes with Helen, daughter of Leda and a twofold Zeus. Leda, imagined black, authorizes all her daughters to claim Helen, archetype of female beauty through millennia of mythmaking and storytelling, as one part of their identities, "the ninth me on the left."

Detail from cover

Along the way, we meet Dinah (daughter of Leah), Daphne, Tamar, Danae, and the Daughter and the Concubine from the nineteenth chapter of Judges: women raped, abducted, prostituted, and silenced. It is the gang-raped concubine who says,

I have put
my story
into
my sisters'
mouths
and we
will sing
and we
will wail
and we
will shout.
Amen.

We are in church here, giving testimony, testifying. Finding one's voice becomes also a "giving voice." The speaker, poet and storyteller, has a responsibility to (her)story. It is in this sense of commitment that Van Clief-Stefanon's poetry reveals itself as both feminist and community-based.

Black Swan is divided into three sections, an arrangement that charts the maturation of a voice, an identity, within a field of complicated and often conflicted familial, sexual, and religious roles and relationships. In Part I, the poems revolve around instances of violation, both enacted and implied. Home, here, is not a safe place but "a place that I can say I left," a place that holds "the threat of family."

I know more than I want to know. I smile,
and draw him to the game of war my brothers
fight with pillows against his sisters while
our mothers, off at prayer meeting for hours,
praise God. I've learned to call on other
powers.
(from "Eight")

A war is going on between brothers and sisters, wherein daughters are betrayed, more often than protected, by fathers and mothers. Antagonists reside on intimate terms in these poems. In "Roadside Stand," the repeated refrain, "I will watch men's hands my whole life" underscores this atmosphere of recollected, as well as anticipated, violence. Here, Mama insists that the boys get what they want, "a hot meal," rather than what their sister wants: "All I want is tomatoes for supper." This betrayal of daughter by mother deepens, as Mama pulls out the family photo album and points to her daughter's baby picture: "She makes a low disapproving noise, mocking.// She points to my vagina with her index finger./ My brothers learn my body is this wordless, dirty joke."

In Part II the danger encountered in Part I persists, but now the poet introduces the idea of salvation, of being saved and of saving oneself. The speaker makes her first moves toward constructing an identity that can appropriate what is useful and life-enhancing from the past of home place and childhood and liberate itself from that which is not. In "Getting Saved," the "circle of mothers/ urgent in prayer" prepares her for "seizures of salvation," a salvation so connected to sex that in the next breath, we hear of the "meetin' baby born last week." But she is only half in this experience, for she is already traveling another path, one that leads to consciousness: "I squinch my eyes so hard I can open one unnoticed." She is no longer passively buying into the program as it has been defined for her. When she ultimately leaves home, her mother sends her a package of miscellany, things that her daughter will have to sort through and sort out in her new life away from home: the poetry of Langston Hughes and Wallace Stevens, "a plastic cross-stitched 'Welcome' plaque/ a pink pair of panties in a little pink bag,// a gospel cassette, a fifteen-piece do-it-yourself tool kit," and maternal advice couched in Biblical citation. These artifacts mark the stretch of what her past has to offer. Home and childhood are but a starting point, however; even more disparate influences are certainly coming her way, experiences and ideas to take up or put down, to range on the shelf alongside the modern poetry and the Bible or to throw away in the trash.

Close to the midpoint of the collection, an emotional nadir is reached, when in the poem "Brother" the speaker says, "[I] fear I've lost the last/ black man in my life." Immediately following this psychological low, however, the poet reverses the flow of energy that has occasioned the abuse of women by gods and men. The protagonist of "Europa: *Daytona Beach, Florida*" mounts "a bull as still as God and tame enough/ to touch." From this new position of power, she redefines her relationship with both Eros and language: she is no longer content to wait for that "one word sweet/ and sacred from the mouth of creation." Instead, "she reaches wild-eyed for that tongue."

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Van Clief-Stefanon revisits the psychological territory of "Brother" at the beginning of Part III, where the speaker confronts "my fear of being found wanting/ in black men's eyes," but then resolves this conflict into mutual "desire," which can transform apparent injury into lovemaking:

This is how you know desire: bent
over a metal chair in the garden;
bent over a stairwell's iron railing; bent over
a guardrail on the highway—
(from "Long Road")

Just as rape and consensual sex may employ the same moves but for entirely different ends, words that carried "threat" in Part I are reclaimed and put to new use in Part III. The "red" we encounter

in the house where I learned the red rug
against my chest, my knees
my tongue, and the back room's
stark patterned tile—
(from "199 Lee Street")

evolves into the "red" of the beloved "red whorehouse sofa" whose "battered curves" are beautiful and worthy of building a home, and a life, around. At the end of the story, we find another beginning, that new place from which the poet speaks.

Finally, it is not so much the individual poems of *Black Swan*, however melodically sophisticated, that impress, but rather the structural intricacies of the collection as a whole. While rarely overstepping the bounds of lyric convention, Van Clief-Stefanon orchestrates each poem as if it were one movement of a jazz suite, rich in texture and sly accordance.

Paula Koneazny lives in Sebastopol, California. Her poetry has appeared in Interim, Volt, *and* Verse.