

Difficult Fruit, Lauren Alleyne

Peepal Tree, 2014: 72 pp.

Reviewed by Jeanne Emmons

Early in Lauren Alleyne's collection of poetry, you will find a long sequence entitled "Eighteen," one of several poems addressed to the speaker's younger self. The poem relives the process of coping with the trauma of rape through withdrawal, masking, bravado, and a repression that makes self-knowledge impossible: "We have not seen our face / without its shadow for almost ten years." The act of naming, the final acknowledgement embodied in the word "rape," becomes the "raft of language" by which the speaker eventually escapes drowning and is "delivered" into her adult self. The formal dignity of this poem serves to counterbalance its painful content. The ten stanzas of the poem are themselves raft-like, square blocks of text that carry us over the roiling waters of emotional distress. Each stanza is an unrhymed sonnet ending with a rhymed couplet, and the end of each stanza contains a verbal link to the first line of the next, forming a kind of chain. In this poem, Alleyne's mastery of form and control of content are at their height.

In the epigraph to her collection, Alleyne quotes from Lucille Clifton's poem "Female": "There is an amazon in us." This idea that we contain powerful rivers that can both destroy and create us is fundamental to the collection. The "small rivers" of tears and blood-tinged semen with which the poem "Eighteen" begins quickly give way to the "undammed flooding" of emotional pain in which the speaker is almost drowned but ultimately "birthed." Similarly, in "The Place of No Dreams," a drop of rain becomes a river rushing towards "no time."

All great poetry is an act of courage, I suspect, but this is courage that rises to the heroic. To write "Eighteen," to include it in the book, and to place it so early in the collection amounts to an announcement: No hiding, no locked doors. Secret doors are a recurrent motif in this collection. The first poem, "Ask No Questions," speaks of the locked door inside, the "carrying of secrets," the "longings / ...too heavy to move..., too spiked to cling to." Again, in "The Place of No Dreams" Alleyne describes a cave with no doors. Yet the locked or blocked entry need not be a prison:

... you have only to open
your imagination. Sometimes
a wall is a fear so old it has become brick.
Sometimes a wall is a wish so fragile
it would crumble if you uttered its name.

The locked places within us, Alleyne suggests, are accessible through the creative faculty and through language.

Many of these poems are about love, and they do not sentimentalize. In "If, Sky," Alleyne writes, "Ask for love, and the sky

/ will unveil itself layer by layer, / its naked blue flame wanting/ only your blindness in return." She has written poems about love in several keys, with titles like "Love in B Major" and "Love in A Flat." These titles in and of themselves convey love's subtle moods and iterations. The poems range from the innocence and freedom from fear envisioned in "Love in G Major" to the sensual, comforting closeness of "Love in A Major," in which she describes "the way our bodies tangle – my sweat, your sweat." In "Love in B Minor," the predominant mood is disgust and rejection of the inebriated lover: "I want to push you out of my heart, and watch your long fall through its chambers / and valves until you are momentary – a blip, / an irregular beat." The poet negotiates the warp and weft of human relationship, revealing both the beauty and the anguish of that multicolored tapestry.

I don't want to leave the impression that all of these poems are purely personal. Throughout the collection, Alleyne takes on national issues, and many of the poems concern other people. "Grief Etches its Silver Into Our Days, Singing" recalls the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, even Alleyne's treatment of headline-worthy events reads like a personal testament. In "The Hoodie Stands Witness" the speaker imagines herself as Trayvon Martin's hoodie, literally touching his fear.

I can tell you his many hairs
raised in warning beneath me;
his armpits funk'd me up
with terror.

Alleyne's ability to enter into the experience of another is evident in poem after poem. She imagines the feelings of a man who hangs himself and of the twelve-year-old son who finds him, wraps his arms around his father's legs, and pushes up, trying to save him: "He is telling you over and over *It's okay, / Daddy, I've got you.*" The imaging of the pain and grief of another is both a poetic and a human virtue.

Yet the poems are most powerful when the poet applies that kind of empathy to her former self. The adult looks back on her various selves with the necessary distance that time and experience bring. Yet she is also one with the child she once was. In "Fifteen," Alleyne says, "I am writing from 29 to tell you / we live." The compassion of the adult for the despairing teen, the tone of reassurance, is powerful and moving. The poem ends "We never could have imagined this." What this collection makes clear is that, though the future may be unimaginable, the past is not. It is perhaps the poet's calling to reimagine the unimaginable in one's own experience and in the experience of others, and thus to make sense of what is otherwise senseless. Alleyne rises to this challenge.