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Each month more than thirty poetry volumes arrive at the *BPJ* Farmington address. Most come from poets I don't know, whose poetry is unfamiliar to me. How should I decide what to read and then which to review? Browsing new volumes some months ago, I thought of examining the relationship between poems we had published in the *BPJ* and books released by those same authors. I wondered: Were the poems we published similar to those included in their books? Had we managed to capture themes or images more generally important to them? In accepting some poems and rejecting others, had we missed significant work we should have chosen? Were the poems we published stronger or weaker in the larger context?

As I read I also became intrigued by the *BPJ*'s commitment to poems that display negative capability. I began to search for volumes by poets whose work did just that; in this review I'll investigate three new books by poets we have published whose efforts reflect the quality so valued by John Keats.

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Nicelle Davis twice stunned us as an editorial board with her submissions. First we could not resist accepting a tragic-comic bedroom sketch where one partner has contracted herpes from another lover (Summer 2011). Then we published her concrete poem that wittily both depicts and describes the "Hairstylist Sam Villa" (Winter 2013/14). I awaited the arrival of her second book to see what her extraordinary imagination would next provide. *Becoming Judas* did not disappoint. The volume is intriguing, rich, ambitious, and perhaps disturbing, from the pseudo-romantic staged portraits on the front and back covers (Davis as a jittery Ariel? Davis as an aged Alice in Wonderland?), to the funky interior pencil sketches by Cheryl Gross, to the poems themselves. Here's where it starts:

THE MISSING TEXT IN THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

Salvation:

[a door opening onto another

[[full rotation; self-begotten, I am, threshold.

→

Devouring light to be light. Every child is
a knob turning inward. Language of swallow-
ing. Forever.]]

joyful/joyful]

Becoming Judas is not an easy read. But as Davis begins the transformative process, as she describes "Genesis: Origins of a Homemade Religion," some strategies become clear. The poet must first have us exert our own negative capability, enter into her psyche as she first enters consciousness: "My myths crossed when I was four. I mistook the pastel picture of Jesus hung in every Mormon home for John Lennon. Both called the Prince of Peace. . . . I still talk to John when praying to Jesus." Much of the book seems autobiographical, but its energy comes from the constant juxtaposition of what seems personal material with larger pop-cultural issues and with religious themes, both generally Christian and specifically Mormon.

Sometimes, as in the herpes poem, she presents a grim romp. In this passage from "Enough Time" she depicts her grandmother:

She is married to a man who at twelve tosses his five siblings
from a second story window before dragging his father's
kerosene doused body

from their burning house. . . .

Later she will tell
me stories of the Great Depression—how she spent money to
see a flushing toilet. . . .

I'll never feel like I loved her enough. I'll love her more than any.

Often she seems to be painting the personal mostly to arrive at a broader canvas. If Judas is the betrayer of Jesus, then by becoming Judas, does the poet become the betrayer of her own savior, of John Lennon, whose lyrics occur as section titles of the book: "all you need is love" and "imagine" (here identified with the "Songs of Songs"), for "*I'm not the only one.*"

But wait, she asks. If negative capability enters these

negotiations, are we our own betrayer, do we always betray ourselves? Did Lennon do that through his alliance with Yoko Ono? And is that betrayal always a love/hate relationship between or among various portions of ourselves? In "Jesus Propositions Judas" Davis has at least one Prince of Peace say to his betrayer, "*Stop struggling against me and give us a kiss.*"

Throughout *Becoming Judas* Davis raises and questions the question of empathy, of negative capability. I won't pretend to understand the book as a whole, won't even pretend to understand if it's understandable, but I admire the imagination and respect the complexity, the interweaving of stories, and the issues she raises most explicitly in the book's title poem. If Judas betrays Jesus, if John betrays the Beatles, if Joseph Smith betrays his followers, if Nicelle Davis betrays her music, her culture, family, mother, lover. . . then what? In "Becoming Judas" Davis shows Judas (and perhaps herself) now regretful regarding the betrayal: "*There is something worth / keeping in this*" and asking longingly, "*Will I know you in heaven?*" to which Jesus answers, "*What use is there in knowing me / if you are me, Judas?*" to which Judas responds, speaking in second person, "You hate this answer," to which the poet responds, "I hate this answer." Finally she asks, "*How can I love you, the way that I do?— /* without having myself to loathe?" This mirroring, this "reflection / of Judas—dark opposite to the light we worship," calls into doubt the efficacy of empathy and even the possibility of negative capability.

In *Ain't No Grave,* TJ Jarrett raises similar questions but comes away, at least on the surface, with alternative answers. Like *Becoming Judas, Ain't No Grave* demonstrates considerable structural complexity. A sequence of four quite different poems titled "Ruin" runs through the book's five sections. Two other strings, titled "What We Say to the X" (where X = Fire, Water, Tree) and "What the X Said/Says" (where X = Dark, Sky, Grass, and again Tree) run through the book as well. Many of the poems identify themselves as autobiographical: "*I'm running away,* I said. . . . I was eight." But it is clear that the personal growth of that autobiographical figure stems in part from her negative capability, her entering into myth, family, and the racial history of the United States.

The structure, though complicated, is more immediately clear than in *Becoming Judas.* All four "Ruin" poems lead from the intercourse of god and ocean to the birth of darkness and then light. All the "what we say" and "what the x says" poems relate to specific lynchings and/or burnings and are spoken in the voices of men and women caught in the burst of racial violence during the seventy years following the American Civil War.

Jarrett uses her negative capability perhaps most movingly in the first of two poems titled "As Far as the Eye Can See." The poet essentially adopts the voice of a wife addressing her husband, part of a lynch mob, who is in turn addressing his own son: "*This is what we do. / This is what it means; this is what it takes to be a man; / This is the means of our dominion.*"

The darkness created through such empathy leads at first to darkness. The initial poem in the fifth and final section of the book begins as if purely personal, but expands as it grows:

> When a girl, alone like that
> in my room at night,
> I was afraid of the dark.
>
> For a time, my mother sat and sighed
> at the foot of my bed. Exhausted,
> she brought me a flashlight.
>
> With it, I would write
> words into the darkness until
> I could fill the room with them. . . .
>
> There was a sweet music playing. Sweet music.

This final section of the book, unlike the first four, contains no burnings, no lynchings. The history of violence against African Americans and Jarrett's ability to enter the victims' bodies and minds makes it reasonable for her to be "afraid of the dark" but also makes it possible for her to transcend their pain, to accept the flashlight of words and announce, "You can reach for me in the dark because / I am made of it." The final "Ruin" poem portrays god and ocean, the mythological two lovers, inventing a body language incomprehensible to their son, the Dark, a private

language they eventually can name the Light. By this point in the book's progression, the poet's family has gathered for "Thanksgiving" and its "song of the forks," a dinner which ends as "we laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed."

Negative capability also characterizes the one poem we have published by Jarrett (Spring 2011), "After Forty Days, Go Marry Again," a dramatic monologue in the voice of the middle-aged Chechen Vova Tumayev, whose wife and daughter died in the Russian attack on their school in 2004. The voice, with words borrowed in part from contemporary news reports of the massacre, moved us as we considered the manuscript and convinced us of its authenticity. As usual we were reading the manuscript blind, with no knowledge of the poet. Some months later, just before the poem appeared in print, I was delighted when Jarrett—American, young, black, and female—stopped by the *BPJ* table at the AWP annual conference to say hello and to talk of her experience writing the monologue. Her exploration of negative capability increased my respect for and appreciation of both poet and poem.

Brian Komei Dempster has been sending us poems for years, but we have accepted only one ("Jacket Elegy," Winter 2006/07). Although we were attracted to many, we often felt they needed to appear in clusters rather than individually, needed a larger context. His first full volume, *Topaz,* provides that context. The collection offers a powerful commentary partly because it documents the incarceration during World War II of Japanese Americans, including the poet's mother and grandparents. But its strength also results from his creating a complex vision dependent on his negative capability.

The narrative begins with Dempster driving through Utah, hoping to find some sign of "Topaz," the camp where his grandmother and her children were first interned. He is heading for San Francisco and the Buddhist church founded by his grandfather in 1931, where the poet's mother "was born / and torn away." Dempster, his wife, and their son re-inhabit that same church after decades of decay, his "mother's room now mine," using for his child's crib the same streamer trunk, "temple chest / of rusted sweetness," that had served as birthday

table for his mother during the years of internment.

At the end of one poem written in the voice of a letter from his grandmother to grandfather, Dempster suggests his method:

> Shapes dissolve, and words become our windows.
> We go home in envelopes, the ocean rolling us into each other.
> These letters widen doorways, let us grow.

And the poet does roll his characters into each other. Within the thirty-five lines of "Sickness," for example, we follow his mother as she endures a ruptured appendix, his father who has asked him to care for her, an uncle as he undergoes radiation treatment for cancer, the friend with whom he hurries to a clandestine sexual encounter with two young women, the uncle "thinning in critical," his mother now returned from the hospital, his father rubbing her stitches, and one of the young women as she crawls through a window to be with the poet himself.

The elaborate narratives in *Topaz* arise partly from the scope with which Dempster depicts family relations, partly from the historical political situation, and finally partly because interwoven with these two components is the poet's own sexual history across gender and ethnic lines. Dempster identifies himself as half-Japanese. He provides a vivid sketch of the Korean father of his high school girlfriend. He describes his wife as Chinese. The most moving poems in the book are those that explore the interactions of ethnic Asian Americans touched not only by the internment camps, but also by the history of Japanese abuse of Korean "comfort women" and Japanese brutality during its invasion of China, especially in Nanjing/ Nanking.

Dempster often seems to enter directly the lives he describes but only rarely speaks in the voice of another person, as he does in "My Wife Grace Reflects on her Great Aunt's Jade":

> My husband Brian clasps
> the gem on me, presses
> his warm lips
> to my neck, touching
> my mole—a dot

on the map, your city, Nanking.
He is half as Japanese
as soldiers who sliced
you away. . . .

Great Aunt,
we mark you in stone.

If Joy Kogawa has created, in *Obasan,* perhaps the most powerful depiction of North-American treatment of ethnic Japanese following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dempster has expanded it through these interactions, with our justifiable sympathies for interned Japanese Americans juxtaposed against equally justifiable Korean and Chinese antagonism toward the Japanese. Although few of the actors here described have immediate connections to their lands of eventual origin, the tensions remain remarkable, not resolved but recognized, both for their pain and for their contribution to our individual and collective growth. In *Topaz* Dempster manages not only to articulate the complexity of his world, but also to embrace the value of this complexity. As he comments in the book's penultimate poem, "Only when I circle back, can I continue beyond." The phrase might serve as epigraph for each of these strong volumes, for each of these three strong poets.