

## ONE PRIZE FITS ALL

Pulitzer poets explore Achilles' heel, the Great Depression and Charlton Heston  
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Stephen Dunn's new collection is called "The Insistence of Beauty," and insistence seems to be a theme in several new collections from Pulitzer Prize-winning poets: the insistence of emotion in Dunn's book, the insistence of voices in Rita Dove's "American Smooth" and the insistence of language in Donald Justice's "Collected Poems."

Dunn's Pulitzer-winning 2000 collection, "Different Hours," comprised plain-spoken poems from an introspective family man; their strength came from juxtaposing serene domestic life with the outside world, contrasting appearance and reality. The perspective was grounded in a stability that allowed those contrasts to emerge. "The Insistence of Beauty," Dunn's 13th collection, shatters the idea of stability as it traces adultery, betrayal and new love; it is as volatile and, sometimes, uneven as the emotions it describes. One way to keep from sounding too foolish when writing about big emotions is to use the scrim of metaphor. Discussing Achilles falling in love, Dunn says, "she instinctively knew what to do—/as smart men do with a mastectomy's scar—/kiss his heel. . ." That scar, and the battle-weary relief in the "heel" (heal) kiss, is the most striking image in the book.

More risky are the raw poems, largely dealing with adultery. In the first of two poems called "The Answers," the betrayed wife asks repeatedly why the speaker left her, the repetition creating a tortured sense of futility; the answers demonstrate the betrayer's exhaustion and complete shut down: "No, I will not explain it to you. I'll say anything/rather than explain it to you. Even things that sound true."

In the second "Answers" poem, however, the author speaks for his wife: "But I will not speak to you," he has her say, "and have not spoken to you./Admit it, and tell everyone: Despite appearances,/I haven't said a single word." Whatever his motivation for exposing her (A desire for expiation? To make himself look better? To show her side of the story?) this gambit seems unfair; she cannot answer him or speak back.

For the most part, the poems are strongest when Dunn turns his gaze inward, particularly when addressing things he has thought about a long time. In the opening poem "The Stairway," he writes, "wild things are not easily seen/ if what's around them is wild . . ." Though these poems trace a world gone mad and beautiful, Dunn's writing is surest when he has firm ground to stand on.

Voices carry

The wildness of former poet laureate Rita Dove's "American Smooth" comes from a profusion of voices. Subjects of her latest collection include: ballroom dancing (which is referred to in the collection's title), jazz, African American soldiers during World War II, jurors, Salome, Charlton Heston, the rumba, Hattie McDaniel and guns. Each voice is

insistent and clear, the formal qualities of the poems shifting drastically to suit the subject and tone.

"Noble Sissle's Horn" is a short nine-stanza "conversation" between the thoughts of a black soldier who is stationed in France and what is said to him in South Carolina. The lines are shot through with jazzlike rhythms and the voices become an almost musical counterpoint to each other.

A cornet's soul is in its bell —  
trap that liquid gasp  
and you're cooking.  
(Take your hat off boy.  
Not quick enough.  
Pick it up! Too slow.)

The number of voices that emerge within individual poems and series of poems are also remarkable. Five different people speak in the "The Seven Veils of Salomé," the poem with the best line in the collection: Salome's mother says she "moves as if inventing/time . . ." Twelve jurors and an alternate are each given a page to speak in a series of poems called "Twelve Chairs" that are now carved into chairs at a Sacramento courthouse as part of an art installation: "Proof casts a shadow" says the first juror. "How long will/this take?" says the fifth. "I am not my/ brother,/ thank you;/my hands are/full already/taking care/of/myself."

The poem perhaps most emblematic of this collection — if such a thing is possible — is "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove." McDaniel, who won an Oscar for portraying Mammy in "Gone with the Wind," goes to the awards ceremony "where the maid can wear a mink and still be the maid." Dove praises and chastises McDaniel and, above all, enters her story with empathy and compassion:

. . . It's a long beautiful walk  
into that flower-smothered standing ovation,  
so go on  
and make them wait.

Few poets have the skills — or perhaps the desire — to assume so many different voices, to find the form and language and the rhythm to give them life. Dove does, and can.

Everything golden

It is impossible not to be seduced by the superb craftsmanship of Donald Justice's poems. Justice, who died last month, was a meticulous form-maker whose poems, like those of Elizabeth Bishop or James Merrill, demand to be read aloud, so that the musical closure of identical rhyme or the subtle variations of a villanelle can be felt as well as seen, so that we pay as careful attention to the language as to the meaning.

This volume includes nearly all the work from Justice's previous collections, as well as 10 new poems written since 1995. His poems are often called nostalgic, and indeed

nostalgia has been an important theme throughout his career. In his early poem "Ladies by Their Windows," he writes, "The light in going still is golden, still . . ." The idea of fading light being golden is crucial to Justice, and though this poem is not in any traditional form, its formal qualities are remarkable: the consonance, the assonance, the boldness of using "still" twice in the space of four words, which almost forces "going" and "golden" to rhyme. And Justice glories in playing with rhyme — near rhyme, half-rhyme, identical rhyme. Later in that same poem, he offers the mouth-slowng rhymes "lurch," "slur," "turn" and "world" in one line.

Nostalgia is not Justice's only note; irony is also important, as is music, art and translation. But reading this collection shortly after Justice's death, nostalgia was the thing felt most keenly. There is a particular kind of seeing in Justice's poems, a looking outward to the world and objects and people for subject matter, paired with a use of meter and rhyme and form to create tension and revelation that does not happen much in contemporary poetry.

Here, for instance, from "Cinema and the Ballad of the Great Depression," a poem chosen at random: "We men had kept our dignity;/ Each wore a cap or hat. It seemed/ We had become a line somehow;/ Dark soup was all our dream." It's a particular kind of beauty, whose "light in going still is golden."

Moira Muldoon writes the "A Girl Walks Into a Bar . . ." column for XL.