## *Haint* by Teri Cross Davis

*Haint* by Teri Cross Davis opens with a poem, "Fade to Black," that creates a map of the body, puts a lens to a life: "Only now can pixels completely capture/ the mulatto ancestors...". I am reminded of the power of the body as Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of it in *Between the World and Me*—the way fear is embodied in the generations. But here, in "Fade to Black," we register fully a life seen close up. In the world of film there is the alteration and erasure of the African American, until now never come fully into the light. Teri Cross Davis takes us headlong into this denial and now gives full credence to ownership—"a mirror, and I discover me/ learning how slow love is, ever slower/ acceptance, but traveling down the only road I want to know." A powerful opening to this collection of poems.

A deep intelligence governs this work and a struggle to look squarely at a culture—peoples of many cultures in actuality--intentionally wiped clean of its history. I consider the strangeness of this when I stand at the edge of a massacre pit in a village where many of my own family lived, that part of my history that can never be known to me. What must it feel like when an African American makes that first journey back to Africa, to Nairobi, Kenya, as Teri Cross Davis did, learning Swahili, crossing the immense distance in time, to attempt to fill in what is missing. Simon Schama wrote once that we must study history not only through the texts but through the archives of our feet. I have never understood why the shade of our skin should have any bearing on how we envision one another. My own DNA tells me that I originated in East Africa.

In more than one poem we come to what Sterling Brown called "folk speech": "not limited but capable of tragedy, irony, the blues, pithy, epigrammatic, 'hitting a straight lid with a crooked stick'" according to Zora Neale Hurston. Sterling says he learned the arts and sciences at Williams and Harvard, "but I learned the humanities at Virginia Seminary." What I hear in this language are the remnants of African languages as they evolved over a long time and melded with various forms of English and were then invented anew, but somehow kept their identity. Plainer to see in places like the Georgia Sea Islands and other more isolated places.

In "Why Persephone" we get a poem in two versions. I think of Sterling Brown's poem "After Winter" with its beautiful refrain in the folk language of his people: "*Butterbeans fo' Clara / Sugar corn fo' Grace / An' fo de little feller / Runnin' space.*" In Teri Cross Davis's poem we meet Hades, the mighty Zeus of the Underworld who "breaks the earth apart/for want of his own piece of sun—Persephone," and this part is followed by another whole version: 'she got to stay fo'half duh year/ in some place she never asked to be."

Consciousness of difference follows the child all her growing up days and is experienced in various ways for those in segregated communities vs. integrated communities. With the coming of puberty, the poems trace a life as it comes into its fullness and its awareness. "Dear Diary," is a poem in full dialect—the tale of a girl's pregnancy, giving birth, the death of the baby at the hand of its father and the girl's primary concern about what she'll tell her schoolmates. In other work we find a child who ends up taking responsibility

for the behavior of adults, yet proves helpless to do so. These penetrating themes and the courage to let them be shown, as in "Scar Tissue: A Bop," are reminders of the cost. In "Akron at Night" mother and daughter take an unknown path, their small adventure together, building something new.

Teri Cross Davis tells the hard stories straight, as when in "Laps" the narrator's brother's wheelchair rolls down a driveway out of control. "I see the curved black tongue/ of the driveway, its mouth opening to the residential street. The eagerness/ to spill my brother into some red Taurus' unsuspecting bumper...". We are here for the long haul, for the journey, which we willingly take.

Intermingled with a hard look at the past, comes the delicate longing of a girl in "Sixteen": "A tendril reaching/for the weak sun/ of early spring" who asks for laughter and love but concludes with the hard reality—"I was foolish in this and all things."

Yet later, fulfillment does come into this life. Our narrator makes claim to love ("Morning Ritual" "Hair") and holds off time's relentless journey.
We see the deepest empathy for the other: "I wish for snow. To bury your hurt clean," ("Work Calendar") on the death of her partner's father.

"Searching" is a pivotal poem in this collection. When the poet returns to Africa, she is confronted by the existential dilemma: "I am the bastard of Uncle Sam/ and Mother Africa is senile,/ does not recognize her child's child." And later: "I came here/ the newest renovation/ African-American,/ I left, black

American." I am reminded of a visit years ago to the Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress, listening to Alex Haley describing his first trip to the village of his ancestors. "Their eyes raked over me," he said. They found him wanting. Never had he felt the power and horror of slavery as he did at that moment. Teri Cross Davis has the courage to make this complex experience come to life, to address it, to let her readers know what it feels like, and to tell them that she will go on, facing and giving life to a new level of understanding that is seldom addressed.

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