

Five Kingdoms

Poems

KELLE GROOM

Anhinga Press, \$15.00 paper,
ISBN 978-1-934695-13-5

In Kelle Groom's poem "In the City," from her new book, *Five Kingdoms* (her third volume of poetry), a reader must explore loss so seldom discussed we might not otherwise think of it: the loss of thinking that we still have the time and ability to obtain a love relationship. The speaker sits in the backseat of a rental car driven through an unnamed city. The front-seat conversation is "lulling." No surprise, then, that the speaker has greater interest in the city outside than in the talk up front. The poem focuses on the speaker's experi-

ence of the city: "eyes and mouth open as if the buildings/would lean down for a kiss." That is, until she meets the eyes of a boy in the next car, who smiles at her "open-mouthed admiration of the city." Together, they laugh.

After this glimpse of recognition, the simple human connection is gone. "Then" marks a turning point. "Then, the road sped up," as if the road is at the wheel. The two cars move apart, yet the narrator sustains her existence in relation to this mysterious, fleeting boy:

*I was carried along,
... past him.
I can still feel the way the dark changed
when we went on ahead ...*

She realizes that in that moment of interchange it was as if she were

*... still
young, thinking there'd be others
who would look at me with that much
tenderness, after the boy in the city.*

Groom excels at turning interior monologues into poems talking to us on the page.

In "Hey, Hey," the speaker is pressed down by "boredom," a state of "black laden with ice that/little passes through." She decides that greeting a small child with the words "Hey, Hey" is

REVIEWER: **Deborah Ager** is a poet whose most recent volume is *Midnight Voices* (Cherry Grove, 2009). She is publisher of the magazine *32 Poems* and is coeditor with M.E. Silverman of a Jewish American poetry anthology.

the least she can do despite the cloud of darkness surrounding her:

*... if the only
thing I do in a day is shine at a child,
I'll choose it over the sin of being
so much static.*

Rewarded for her efforts, she hears the girl reply,

*"Hey, Hey," in my
intonation, as if I have taught her
the words to a song.*

Five Kingdoms uses such small intimacies to address isolation, mortality, and love. What moves this reader is Groom's skill with our common language and her intuitive manner of taking a simple, unremarkable moment and embodying its revelations. ■

Breaking Bread With the Darkness

The Esai Poems

Book 1

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

Foreword by CAROLYN FORCHÉ

Sherman Asher, \$12.95 paper, ISBN 978-1-890932-39-8

The Trouble Ball

Poems

MARTÍN ESPADA

Norton, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-08003-2

Jimmy Santiago Baca and Martín Espada have been called populist poets and seekers of social justice. Baca, firmly rooted in New Mexico, and Espada, a New Yorker transplanted to New England, have steadfastly pursued their crafts and causes for more than three decades. Starting with the wide disparity in their territories, they have as many differences as similarities.

Jimmy Santiago Baca has published books of poetry, memoir, essays, and fiction. *The Esai Poems*, his 12th book of poetry, is part of a planned series called *Breaking Bread With the Darkness* that celebrates his children. It also delivers an important personal passage:

*This September 2010 marks the time that I have been
more free than imprisoned; twenty-five years in the sys-
tem, twenty-five years and one month out in freedom.*

Born in Santa Fe in 1952 of Indio-Mexican origins, Baca was in an orphanage by age 5, then reformatory and detention facilities, and prison by 21. The Chicano movement of the late sixties and seventies had its accompanying renaissance of art and writing while he was locked up, but Baca began his own rebirth during those years, learning to read and write. His first poems were published, while he was in prison, by Denise Levertov, who was then poetry editor of *Mother Jones*. He truly was saved by learning to write, by poetry. That vital intensity permeates his writing still. "And so I return to my poetry/refuge from a maddening world" ("1-19-04"). The poems in this collection are dated like journal entries, not titled.

A poet of Whitman descent and Neruda influence, Baca also writes long narrative poems. Social justice issues and working out his own story are intertwined, sometimes with rage, sometimes with sardonic humor. The first Baca poem I ever heard was read to me by another ex-con poet, Michael Hogan, and I relished quoting from it for years. It was in Baca's first collection, *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, published in 1979, the year he got out of prison.

So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs From Americans

*O Yes? Do they come on horses
with rifles, and say,*

Ese gringo, gimmee your job?

Most of *The Esai Poems*, written in 2003 and 2004 when his son was growing from baby to toddler, have a tender glow:

*Esai in bed
between his mother and me,
arms extended up at the dark ceiling.
He studies his hands as if they are newly
discovered planets. ("12-26-03")*

Baca's abiding themes appear here as well, and he vents old frustrations. Seventies activists talked about Mexican Americans as "the sleeping giant of the Southwest" that made no fuss and could be ignored.

REVIEWER: **Patricia Dubrava** is a writer and translator whose last review for TBR was of *Vanitas*. In the 1970s and 1980s she collected Chicano literature, and she has a pristine copy of *Bad Boys*, Sandra Cisneros' first chapbook of poems, but sadly, a first of Baca's *Immigrants in Our Own Land* was one that got away.

Noting the continuing lack of attention 40 years later, Baca rants:

*It's not enough
that Chicanos are the number one
group in America
with the highest death rates in war,
the highest drop-out rates, those with
the lowest health care,
the highest arrests and early mortality. ("3-14-04")*

His indignations are now fueled by concern for his children's future, which he wants so much to be unlike his past. It is a future he both pins his hopes on and fears to trust. Here is "12-31-03" in its entirety:

*The highchair
you sit in at breakfast
smearing applesauce all over your face
and gumming the apple slice
while the morning moves sideways like a
giant blue lizard
past the windows
its blue dinosaur feet
suction cups at the windows.
It pauses, its black tongue flicking,
flickering,
snatching up warm dreams.*

It is always risky to read a poet as if the poems were autobiographical, but Jimmy Santiago Baca makes such reading irresistible. The "Harper's Index" of August 2011 reported that a US man who's been incarcerated has a 1 in 50 chance of climbing out of the bottom economic quintile. Overcoming such odds, and the passion for words that enabled it, are the compelling foundation of Jimmy Santiago Baca's writing.

Martín Espada, Puerto Rican, born in Brooklyn in 1957, has 11 previous books of poetry, 3 of essays, 1 of translations, and, as editor, 2 anthologies. As Baca was too young and was incarcerated during the Chicano renaissance, Espada was too young for the flowering of the Nuyorican writers, already well in progress when his family moved out of Brooklyn. He was 13. Nonetheless, he eventually came to narrative, social-justice-themed poetry. Although like Baca, he's been labeled as having Whitman and Neruda among his forebears, for Espada, Ernesto Cardenal is equally significant. Espada's focus on international issues, such as the horrendous Pinochet years in Chile, are partly a result of that influence.

The title poem, "The Trouble Ball," is about Frank Espada, the poet's father, and his memory of his first big-league game at Ebbets Field in 1941. Frank was taken by his father, the family not long away from the island where the likes of Satchel Paige played. "Where are the Negro players?" Frank Espada asks. "No los dejan, his father softly said. They don't let them play here." This and the other poem mentioning Frank Espada in this book are affectionate tributes, speaking to a childhood in a politically involved family. Martín went to college after high school and became a tenant lawyer before discovering his poet's voice.

Many of Espada's poems in this collection, as in his *Republic of Poetry*, are portraits or homages. A sampling of them demonstrates wide-ranging political and literary concerns. There's one for the Puerto Rican lightweight champion boxer Carlos Ortiz; one for Isabel, a Mexican illegal immigrant Espada married so she could stay here; one for the Chilean poet Jorge Montealegre, who buried his only book of poems when Pinochet's police surrounded the place where he was reading it; one for Sam Hamill, of Copper Canyon Press and Poets Against the War; one for Howard Zinn, who wrote *A People's History of the United States*; and one for Sandy Taylor of Curbstone Press. There's also a poem for Abe Osheroff, lifelong political activist and veteran of

the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the American volunteers who fought against Franco fascists in 1936-1939:

*How to Read Ezra Pound
At the poets' panel,
after an hour of poets
debating Ezra Pound,
Abe the Lincoln veteran,
remembering
the Spanish Civil War,
raised his hand and said:
If I knew
that a fascist
was a great poet,
I'd shoot him
anyway.*

Perhaps the most poignant homage is the last poem, "Litany at the Tomb of Frederick Douglass" (originally published in TBR). It is dated November 7, 2008, and takes place at Douglass' Rochester, New York, grave.

*This is the tomb of a man born as chattel, who taught
himself to read in secret,
scraping the letters in his name with chalk on wood;
now on the anvil-flat stone
a campaign button fills the O in Douglass.
The button says: Obama.*

...

*I say a prayer, the first in years: that here we bury
what we call
the impossible, the unthinkable, the unimaginable,
now and forever. Amen.*

A litany is a prayer of supplication, and this one holds the hope so many felt in 2008 and struggle to keep alive in 2011: the hope for an end to racism and an end to victimization of the poor, among many other things.

Baca has a post-9/11 poem in which police stop to glare at him on the street, and in his brown skin he is "feeling less American." Espada has one about being held for hours, suspected of stealing his own car, in which the officer asks if he's wanted by the police: "I don't know, I said. Do you want me?"

Both poets are fueled by faith in words, bearing witness in words. Baca says the poems he writes

*are stones
I litter the dusty roads with
so kids can pick them up readily
to throw at tanks. ("12-30-03")*

And here is Espada's poem dedicated to Sam Hamill, mentioned above:

*Blasphemy
Let the blasphemy be spoken: poetry can save us,
not the way a fisherman pulls the drowning swimmer
into his boat, not the way Jesus, between screams,
promised life everlasting to the thief crucified beside him
on the hill, but salvation nevertheless.
Somewhere a convict sobs into a book of poems
from the prison library, and I know why
his hands are careful not to break the brittle pages.* ■

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