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Leaving The Rest To Burn

The poetry of C. Russell Price

D.G. Gerard

Oh, you thought this was a date?!

by C. Russell Price

136pp. Northwestern University Press 2022

Oh, you thought this was a date?!, the first full length poetry collection by C. Russell Price, is a book about falling in love during the apocalypse. Price, originally from Glade Spring, Virginia, crafts poems that rise from a landscape of vacant parking lots and unharvested cornfields in a broken world where friends and lovers are survival. It's not a world without joy.

The book is a cemetery of memories. Price digs up injustice from the past and demands acknowledgment. Their poems are full of references to the dead and the diminished: friends lost in tragedies, family estranged, and people so deep in their own suffering that there is little hope for change. When Price decides to bring a person to life within a poem, the characterization is highly specific, lively, humorous, and often conflicted. Feelings of love cannot be untangled from bone-splitting anger. But Price pieces together a beautiful heritage from familial wreckage; taking what works from the cultural landscape of their childhood and leaving the rest to burn, instead of throwing it all away to pursue a rootless existence. In "Fetch the Boltcutters" (a poem that first appeared last summer in *ARB*) they write:

The night I made myself a bridegroom to the doomsday I took my dead grandfather's name,
all the rotted limbs branch out like an acceptable eyesore. I'm taking everything back.

Here love and anger don't have to be ripped apart, but are accepted as painful and inseparable.

Oh You Thought This was a Date?! also connects the suffering of the land with the suffering of the people who live on it. In some poems, images of the abused body are connected with images of the exploited earth. This technique of linking violations points towards capitalism as the culprit. In other poems, connections between the body and the earth are a source of uncomplicated joy. As in the poem "Apocalypse with Eyeliner". Here interconnection is not idealized, demonized, or ignored; it simply is.

My body: a shoebox of histories
it never wanted.
The night you beat me

I became a highway-lined wildflower field.
When the plane covers me
in an insecticide cloud,
I turn into toxic honeysuckle.

This theme of interconnection extends into familial life. They examine the dysfunction in their family through the lens of intergenerational trauma, and sympathize with ancestors who suffered through hunger and disease. But sympathy is not dismissal, and Price does not ignore the spectre of familial abuse. They explore what it means to be raised by people who abuse or accept abuse, and what we can become despite connections to that lineage.

Price writes for people who understand, but they do not lose track of how their work will be perceived by outsiders. At times, they directly tease the reader by naming stereotypical expectations before disregarding them. As in the poem "Ritual":

Tape these pages from your front door
to the front door of the closest financial institution.
What? Were you expecting a church?

In a world where classist stereotypes go unquestioned and queer identity is increasingly commodified, this helps to bolster the work against the possibility of commercialization.

In this vision of the apocalypse, nature surges forward to claim the wreckage that humans have left behind. And after an exploration of their lineage, Price states their desire to end the family line. There is joy and pain present in both of these endings. In the first pages of the book, Price provides a definition of the word "apocalypse" that includes "a relief". These endings are apocalypse as that relief; a vital and radical change.

When you are the end result of centuries of trauma, you will suffer, but if you are lucky, you might get the chance to improve things. Price never gives up on imagining better ways of living, through relationships and rituals. Every poem says, "Fuck you. I am going to thrive."

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