

# Virginia Reviews



Stuart, Dabney. *Tables: Poems*. Montrose, CO: Pinyon Publishing, 2009. 85 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0982156117. \$15.00 (softcover).

*Tables*, Dabney Stuart's masterful fifteenth book of poems begins with an intensity that is maintained throughout the work. "Gifts," the first poem, is a gem of control and originality, beautifully ornamented with a rhyme scheme using, save the fourth stanza, only two end sounds. Constraints like this, not to mention the regular meter, usually require poets to twist sentences and add unnecessary words, but Stuart's syntax is clear and straightforward here and in all the poems, even if it is not always simple. The skill to create this apparently inevitable flow of language is a part of mastery that does not come to poets easily or early in their careers. Think Frost, since he is mentioned later in the book, but a Frost who is as comfortable writing about subatomic particles and astrophysics as about stone walls. "Gifts," which suggests Stuart's early, formalist poetry, also introduces the book's central theme, the consideration of a life given to art—the mixed blessing of talent. It introduces artists including Joan Miro and Paul Klee, who will turn up again and again at crucial junctures in the flow of the book.

*Tables* is a notable example of how a book of poems differs from a collection. It has a definite progression, with each individual poem having something to add to the poet's themes and using recurring images that echo like footsteps in a long, empty hall. Hints of the formalism of "Gifts" show up along

the way, but often as unexpected rhyme or meter, looking effortless or accidental, though it is neither. Look, for instance, at the intricate rhyme scheme in "Joints," which I readily admit was pointed out to me by a more astute reader. It is *abcdeedcba*, with the fifth and sixth lines ending in the same word. Speaking of echoes, "Refrain" is an even more artful use of extremely constrained form appearing to be

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simple, natural speech. The intricate rhyme scheme of the first and third sections is impressive enough, but after a number of readings I realized that the shorter lines of section three end in the same word as their counterparts in section one. (Section two, so help me, looks like a sonnet.) So, while the book may appear to move toward freedom of language and form as it moves from an individual voice considering an individual life to that voice accepting both mortality and the physical fate of the universe as predicted by astronomers, the use of form runs through the poems like a spine. Decades ago a J. D. McClatchy review severely criticized one of Stuart's books for

having a section that was "merely a set of miscellaneous poems." Whether or not that was true of *Round and Round*, it has no relevance to *Tables*, forty-nine poems cut and set so precisely that no mortar is necessary.

Much of the poetry I read these days looks at life through a loupe, hoping to find a resonant image in the mundane. That is not necessarily bad, but I admire Stuart for having the nerve to use poetry to address the human condition in a larger context. That does not mean that the book is short on memorable phrases and images, such as the Merwinesque "as a farewell leaves its speaking / in its own name" from "Air Time," or this remarkable passage at the end of "Traveling Light":

If such light made a sound  
it would be as if the wide space-  
wind  
formed a bell of itself,  
and a smaller wind within, and  
rang.

The poems in *Tables* move across the reaches of the mind, touching the development and tragedy of the atomic bomb, the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painters, the monastic life, literal and figurative trips to the desert (complete with a hawk whose appearances suggest inspiration, vision, and desire, among other things), the inescapability of the family, and internal voices who have their own personalities: a prophet, a warrior, a courtier poet. Stuart considers, in "The Expanding Universe,"

—the mind's great whirl, its  
curvilinear  
shiftings, the spherical web it  
throws out

into its shapeless dark, a  
comfort  
and a confusion, vaster than its  
own  
intentions, its need.

The vastness of the book's theme does not preclude humor, and there is quite a bit scattered through, usually coming as a welcome surprise, appearing effortless and accidental like the formal elements. In *Trials*, for instance, Stuart takes a swipe at Sidney, who appears in a number of the poems as one of the narrator's interior voices:

I have tried looking in my heart  
to write this,  
according to instructions, but  
hypertension  
and elevated cholesterol have  
muddled the source.

In spite of this self-deprecation, the book is one of the best examples of current poetry that really does come from a poet looking directly at himself and his situation. Consider "Transitions," which confronts both the struggle with the artist's overwhelming need to create and the fear that at some point that need will disappear. "Mummery" continues this confrontation:

What could be more indifferent  
than this pen,  
warmed by my fingers, when I  
put it down?

Some poets burn out early, some reach a level of skill they never improve upon, but a few grow and learn and refine their gifts over the course of long and productive lives. *Tables* is worth reading as a celebration of a poet of the long haul. There is much to delight and much to instruct the attentive reader. The book may be purchased through Amazon.com or directly from Pinyon Publishing (www.pinyon-publishing.com).

—Cy Dillon



Mack, Angela D., and Stephen G. Hoffius, eds. *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xvi + 166 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-57003-719-1. \$24.95 (hardcover).

Southern art remains one of the more dimly lit regions of America's historical terrain—in part, perhaps, because perceptions of its legacy continually change. As a result, the body of scholarship concerned with the art of the South is

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still brief enough that any addition to its ranks merits attention. When such a publication offers an original contribution to the field, as does *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, there is even greater reason to take notice.

Produced in conjunction with a 2008 travelling exhibition of the same name, *Landscape of Slavery* surveys more than three hundred years of imagery devoted to the plantation. Over the course of six essays, its authors bring new interpretations to bear on familiar works, introduce readers to fascinating lesser-known artists and images, and forge new relationships between the art of the past and present.

It might come as a surprise that the plantation was a contested, contradictory icon from the very beginning. Although

most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists leaned heavily on existing English pictorial traditions to depict the Southern landscape, contemporary debates about the nature of slavery—the cornerstone of the plantation economy—often produced profound variations in the representation of the plantation itself. As contributor Roberta Sokolitz notes, the publication of mid-century anti-slavery texts like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) coincided with a similar shift in the artistic treatment of the plantation and its black and white inhabitants. Artists as socially diverse as the African-American painter Robert Scott Duncanson (1821–1872) and the itinerant John Atronbus (1831–1907) painted picturesque works that shared similar artistic ambitions, but they differed dramatically in the value they placed upon the plantation as a cultural institution.

Even at their most radical, few artists offered penetrating views into lives of the slaves who worked the plantation. *Landscape of Slavery* thoughtfully explores this omission. Leslie King-Hammond provides a wide-ranging account of the continuation of African art-making within the space of the plantation. Her essay reveals another of the catalogue's highlights: numerous illustrations from nearly every medium. One finds eighteenth-century drawings of Virginia plantations juxtaposed with photographs of African-American workers taken nearly one hundred and fifty years later. These are accompanied by fascinating images of the decorated interiors of slave cabins, photographs of ornately carved grave markers, and reproductions of African-American arts and crafts. Such objects and images carved a space within and beyond the dominant plantation aesthetic.

As later essays make clear, the