

HONORING THE ANCESTORS

by JAMES E. CHERRY

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Reviewed by Roger Stanley

Like E. Ethelbert Miller (whose introduction to James E. Cherry's first full-length collection of verse *Honoring the Ancestors* provides a pithy context for the book to follow), I too read poetry on buses. And while the several dozen short poems here primarily pay homage to famous figures in African-American artistic and political history, Cherry's free verse cameos extend beyond, occasionally encompassing family members and revolutionaries of all national and international ilk.

Author of the 2003 chapbook *Bending the Blues* (H&H Press out of Pennsylvania), James E. Cherry is not above employing metaphors from his favorite musical genre (or others) from poem to poem here too. In "Bird Remembered [for Charlie Parker]," stereotypes about the great jazzman are turned on their head—"You were nobody's down and out junkie"—via long enjambed, Whitmanesque lines. This poem manages to evoke Caucasian icons from Tommy Dorsey to Jean-Paul Sartre toward its payoff

finale, wherein Parker and “a whole bunch of cats” find a sort of existentialist freedom within a profession once dominated by white bandleaders.

I didn't read *Honoring the Ancestors* on one of my Greyhound or local bus forays into America, but it's fitting in light of civil rights history that transit—both public and via private auto—informs multiple selections in this volume. Witness the perhaps autobiographical “Drivin' Nikki,” which finds a somewhat abashed narrator picking up “the poet” at the Nashville airport and squiring her west on Interstate 40 prior to “a read at a local Black College.” The characterization is impeccable:

She emerges from the airport concourse like royalty in

black pin stripes with matching tie.

. . . .

with a neatly cropped black and silver Afro glowing

angelically above her head as I approach with extended

arms of welcome and respect.

Somewhat ironically, *Honoring the Ancestors* and three other nominees lost out to Nikki Giovanni's latest book in the Best Poetry of 2008 category at the NAACP Image awards, presented in Los Angeles last February.

There's no Rosa Parks title per se in this book, but Cherry continually crosses gender, racial, and national lines in choosing subjects for his crystalline portraits. Nigerian activist Ken Saro Wiwa, Beat-era icon Bob Kaufman, and Cherry's contemporaries Claude Wilkinson and Li Young Lee are among the many bards whom the author (himself an activist and workshop leader of Jackson, Tennessee's Griot Collective) addresses directly by effective use of second person pronouns.

I first heard "Sympathy for Saddam" (eventually placed at almost the exact center of this book) at an open mic event shortly after Bush II's invasion; its alliterative, Rolling Stones-allusive title and its mixed firebrand-benign tone almost begin to give "political poetry" a good name. Cherry has the smarmy dictator in his bunker "breaking bread with rodents," yet manages to indict "Texas / oil, cheap and plentiful. . ." in practically the same breath.

Honoring the Ancestors has its redundancies, and either Third World Press or the author himself seems inexplicably chary of providing punctuation marks like the hyphen and the apostrophe when clearly called for. But this thin volume packs a punch, as we continue to think across racial lines about our own biological forefathers and those not necessarily of blood kin who, nevertheless, have paved our way.