

BOOK Review

Letter **ex**

CHICAGO'S POETRY NEWS/MAGAZINE

Chicago performance poet Jean Howard has produced a first book of amazing quality and depth that bites you in the ass. Come closer if you dare.

The book is sectioned into three parts: Home, Heart-throb, and The Folks. So don't close your eyes. You are about to see the real world of Jean Howard, a world of passion and language. Afraid? Let me venture in for you for a look at a poem from each of the three parts of the book and gaze (really stare) at the photographs as we go by.

Photo: a city scape of gutted buildings and the rubble they produce (an alley that once had children gleefully playing). Second photo: window panes, many broken or missing, looking out on deciduous trees with no leaves. Poem: "City Dweller." "I saw someone snatch/a purse today-/It looked like/a school swing/or seesaw. The girl swung him/around and around,/the elms swirled. The strap snapped/a leather tune,/and ran and ran/I did at him. Next to the bed where I keep these poems,/there is a gun." I do not think you could

*Dancing In Your
Mother's Skin*
by Jean Howard
with photos by
Alice Q. Hargrave

Tia Chucha Press

Reviewed by
Daniel Gallik

define better in so few lines such major hunks of our urban environment today, and what the people trying to exist inside them feel. The poem has the echoes of the quiet desperation expressed by Thoreau that common people for centuries have felt about their lives among the masses. But the viewpoint is at once refreshing and terrifying, because it is expressed by a woman about the women who live such lives, trapped in small rooms in tenements with only a piece of

powerful steel to have as their constant trustworthy friend. You say you are not used to powerful poems written by women? Get used to it.

Part two. Heartthrob.

Photo: a lush terrace garden in the ante-bellum South showing in black and white the columns of a crumbling plantation. Poem: "Revenge: Mint Juleps Before Daybreak." Photo: a dulled old time clock with metal clap on top threatening to tingle your time to get up, face the world. Poem: "5 A.M.: Burned." Then later on page 34, a poem: "He followed Girls." Tough and what it is to be a lost man looking, "That he, a young man,/more a kid,/would walk right by;/even say hello/or a sentence here or there/to turn their heads;/that he could test them;/with just plain words;/that his blood was speeding;/to his brave and eventful hands;/that underpants/were being ripped;/in the future that posed/teeter-totter like in his/next two steps." The violence inside the walking ego in the street. And then at the end, "As he sees the room/ pinning him again/onto his own accelerating track/of hand/and

truth/and how all girls are better/this way/fast and felt and left there." The violence inside the ego, the fear, too, of being denied and rejected and left without--so the better to leave women alone after the quick abusive touch and then, be alone yourself. You feel their power, your power, but then the powerlessness of humans in cities. So you follow and get "your feel" and that defines you.

The Folks. Photo: The center of a blossom focused and unfocused, fading to black as you radiate out from the lovely point in the middle. Poem: "Catching Grasshoppers." Little Janet seeing through perceptive eyes, young eyes, ". . . alfalfa sprig... grasshoppers ignite from amidst/weed madness, . . . shocked fuchsia,... Sun like ice bleaching/sky to white threads." And the poet is older and Janet is older. She is thirty. "I'll see/her legs dreaming/milkweed" and at the end of the poem, "I'll see her

wrists cuffed/by vapors/the ghosts of moist topsoil/trying to pin her back." The poet sees a child and the poet sees the same person older and nothing has changed with this innocent except the call of nature and the years tearing away at the flesh.

If you buy this book you will read of other mysteries, other tragedies, other dramas of real life. You cannot escape from the real world. You cannot escape. The poems and the photographs will not allow you to escape. This is us, even we who sit comfortably in houses in the suburbs. We have flown from the cities, but their anger calls us back.

Go out and buy this book of poetry with its tough and mysterious photographs. If you are not afraid.