

Laura Henriksen, Three Books and a Poem

01/02

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define “poetry book” as broadly as possible. Define “stand out” not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it – a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.

– Simone White

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge – *A Treatise on Stars* (New Directions, 2020)

Imane Boukaila – *Truth OMG* (Unrestricted Interest, 2021)

Akilah Oliver – *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 1999/2021)

On “she said, don’t give up” by Akilah Oliver

In Oliver’s poem, the emotional accumulation of each line instills resolve while avoiding comfort. I feel destabilized, in the stark meeting of starvation and joy, snow on distant mountains, bad men at the door. Oliver’s meditation on resistance is profoundly disinterested in forlorn hope, actively disavowing progress, mocking utopian happy futures. Against these false roads, she offers “the ability to live in faith,” a practical metaphysics, a poetics of necessity alchemized in a kiss, dignified and erotic – traits of every Oliver poem. It reminds me of Simone Weil’s lesson: “You could not be born at a better period than the present when we have lost everything.” Lovingly reissued thanks to the work of Akilah’s family and friends, Oliver sends a reminder of what matters, what death states forget, that words are more than talking, that she’s planting collard greens.

she said, don’t give up

pleasure to be here earthling in this time of
seductive tears staining the ground of our
planet. so much work to be done now.
children demystifying broken homes. a new
road travelled so many centuries before.
lovely the snow stuck to that mountain

e-flux journal #125 — march 2022
Laura Henriksen, Three Books and a Poem

beyond the suburban roof. eat. the complexity is not so much that someone is starving at the instant we come into joy. but that we can come into joy while someone is starving. can my pleasure feed someone's emptied protruding belly. how did that mystic turn the water to wine. turn the words to bread. turn the bread to spirit. it is the revolutionary imperative of this age. to be alchemist. to play god in a script rewritten and divulged of unelected leaders. the bad men are knocking on the front door. we can't ignore them while we wait to collect on our historicized rape. palestinians are not getting all their land back. native american indians are not getting north america. colorado won't be new spain again. forget the 40 acres and a mule. paraphrase. jones turned baraka was right when as jones he said he is like any other sad man here. american. the queen is dead. the british royal family a tabloid anachronism. power won't yield to idealism. quests for beauty. we know that now. we know their guns are bigger than ours. we have the same old dumb shit voodoo we've always had. faith sung in work lines. i believe in the dumbshit voodoo. i believe that faith will carry us through. i believe the earth loves to live. i believe that oprah will marry steadman and live happily ever after. i believe that the ability to live in faith is the backbone against repression. that resistance is worth more than collection on the debt owed. i believe that the forces of good will kiss evil on lips. it is simple moments like this that gives me the strength to stand in the unemployment line with dignity. bear the offhand bark of a chained pet. plot everyday subversive acts against the death state. to know that planting collard greens matters. that words are not frivolous. & freedom is more than just some people talking.

x

This poem appears by permission from *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 2021), 49. Copyright © 1999 by Akilah Oliver.

Laura Henriksen's first book, *Laura's Desires*, is forthcoming from Nightboat. She lives in Sunset Park, Lenapehoking and works at The Poetry Project.

02/02

e-flux journal #125 — march 2022
Laura Henriksen, *Three Books and a Poem*