

# BOOKS

## Rhythmic, earthy, joyous poetry

Review by Deborah S. McGee

*The White Junk of Love, Again, Translittics of Louise Labe,* by Sibyl James, Calyx Books, Corvallis, OR

Overwhelming physical attraction to another—such is the love Sibyl James celebrates in her book of poems, *The White Junk of Love, Again*.

With earthy and vivid images evoked through words of mirror-like clarity, James writes so well that reading . . . and re-reading . . . her poetry is pure pleasure. Run these lines through your ears, from #16:

*My bones breaking under your kiss,  
a pattern of crystal and pearled ivory,  
taking the shape of you, ringed w/frost.*

Such sheer joy in words and images rings throughout the collection, and for another taste, hear the way James describes an urban morning street scene, in #15: "A salsa of engines and high-spiked heels."

It's poetry to be read aloud, full with the richness, jive and rhythms of the Blues. James refers lovingly to Billie Holiday, and the voice of the book's "I" echoes Holiday and other greats from the classic Blues era. "I have run into love so hard/it looks like I painted my toenails blue," she says in #24, one of many sassy poems about the bittersweet state of being in love. In several poems, lady James sings the Blues righteous, as in #20:

*I was sucked in the thick black*

*eye of it, ripped  
in and out of your arms,  
and split like a ship howled  
into rock.  
Listing there, watching a crone  
lick her fingers  
and twist the knot.*

James' phrasing and choice of words in this collection have the long, drawled-out then rapid-fire delivery of the Blues.

Some of James' descriptions are so erotic, D.H. Lawrence would marvel they were published with so little furor. There's no mistaking her meaning in #10 when she says, "Toss yr. sweet hot hat inside my ring." Appreciation for sexuality and of her partner often has a charming lovingness about it, as in #13's final lines:

*What if the more we loved,  
breathless, lip to tongue,  
my heart spilled out?  
I'd give it.*

Beyond appreciation for her poems, those of a literary or linguistic bent will find extra delight in this volume. James based her creations upon 24 sonnets of a French Renaissance poet, Louise Labe. Translittics is the technique James employs: its practitioners, according to her introduction, use words in one language "as a base or stimulus" to create new work in another. In this case, the French and Italian 16th century originals of Labe have inspired the 20th century English poems of James.

The volume is a bilingual text, with Labe's originals on the left,

James' take-off's on the right. Eight of James' poems have no parallel text, being even more separate from the exact form of the original poetic pulse. Unfortunately, the archaic spelling of the mostly French originals makes it difficult for the average educated person to appreciate them. It would be a superb text in an upper-division Romance Languages course.

Still, at \$6.95, the book is worth it to have James' fine work around to savor. It has a great poem on Motown's The Supremes, and there's a funny, brilliant one which describes a break-up in mock-heroic terms. I love those poems, too, which underline the life-full potential of older women, as in #07's suggestions:

*Wear fat rubies at yr. throat  
lines.  
Be pleased the spring still hurts  
you bad.*

Near the end of the book, in #08, James deftly paints the picture of a woman viewed from a train. Digging potatoes, the woman bites into one to test its ripeness, "and spit(s) the dirt free." The picture is a miniature for the entire book. James is as down-to-earth as that potato digger, and her creative process has yielded poetry to sink our teeth into.

*The White Junk of Love, Again* was published last December by Corvallis' Calyx Books. It's no surprise that the publishing company has just announced the book is into its second printing.

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