

Reflections on *Now and Then: SELECTED LONGER POEMS* by J. Chester Johnson

Reviewed by Melinda Thomsen

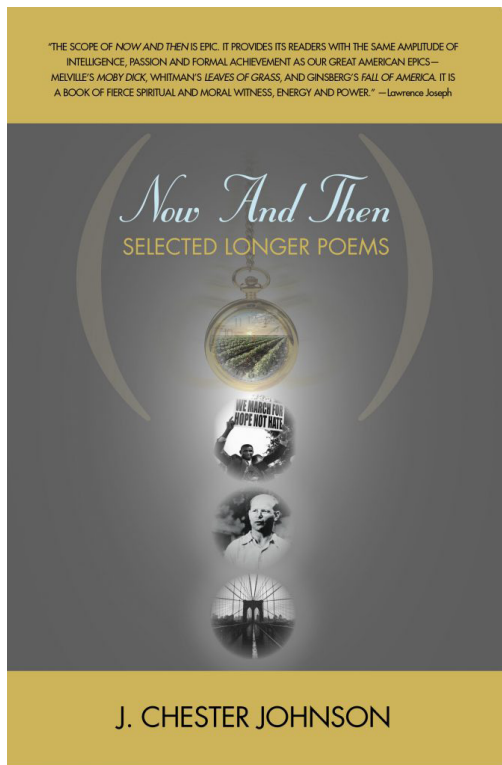
“Stop Being Normal”

J. Chester Johnson’s important collection *Now And Then: SELECTED LONGER POEMS* includes poems that reflect almost four decades of writing. “The Mixer,” “Meditation on Civil Rights Activists,” “Martin,” and “For Conduct and Innocents” are housed in the Civil Rights Archives at Queens College in the J. Chester Johnson Collection, and as historical documents, these poems are crucial to our national identity as Americans, and define us personally and spiritually.

Longer poems demand so much of a reader that they present a good platform for addressing topics as complex as racial tensions. Johnson’s poems make their demands, but the driving force behind them addresses the questions and anxieties we all face. On Johnson’s website, he admits that this book is as close to an autobiography that he will ever write. In fact, this should represent an autobiography of anyone who reads these poems.

While I was reading the collection, I felt the themes and obsessions rising to the surface, but they didn’t really coalesce until I came midway through the book. The poems “Home,” “Exile,” and “Lazarus” illuminated the power of the earlier poems “The Mixer” and “January 12th, 1967.” Reading this book more as an autobiography and less as a historical account helped me connect directly to this time in history. By understanding a reason why Johnson wrote long poems on these topics helped me pinpoint his outrage, an outrage introduced in “The Mixer.”

“The Mixer” recounts the poet’s time spent with his old friend Bill, a white man who married a black woman he met while picking crops. Bill and Lucy enjoyed each other’s company as they worked, “Love would pour a secret / For them... [but Bill’s father’s] wilder / voice could shatter the rows, “You leave that black / Woman or for her, there will be / Nothing left of you” (7). The beginning of Bill’s story lays the foundation for his life as an outcast. The poem



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opens as Bill is dying, and the scene is set metaphorically, “a bold winter rain kept crushing the day, / and voices could be heard quickened to the shacks / ...whispers that everybody sensed something/ Unusual to be happening, so/ Rumors were clinging cold to the houses: / A few reports had him dead already...”(6-7) It feels like the house itself has become the womb that Bill inhabits. These lines skirt between narrative and metaphor. Here the house with the relentless rain, almost reflect the oppressive life that Bill has lived. As he dies, “Slapping over the tin roof, a downpour / Of rain will eat greedily on a house – / Rain spell as though birth signs came out again / For the end and earth elements washed him / Cleanly” (8-9).

Bill decides to marry Lucy, but his farming work rarely pays well. His family grows quickly, and he receives the name, the Mixer, when “as babies started to come in bunches / With skin playfully a sweet, meek color / Of tan; hair wrinkled of nature enough; / And

blended for new grace” (8). Bill and Lucy later apply for welfare when the farmers turn to machines, and less to hired hands. The machines stripped pickers like Bill of most of his income, and even his thumb, which he lost after getting his hand caught in one. At certain points in the poem, Bill drifts in and out of consciousness as the story unfolds. Five people are sitting with Bill: his wife, daughter, her boyfriend, the poet, and another friend. We come to learn that Bill’s lifestyle was one that threatened the norms of the small town of Monticello in Arkansas, “You just became more like him and / Didn’t try to see yourself the way you / Had before, all firsthand, ever again” (12). His influence was felt, and part of that must have been from the happiness he derived from Lucy, for their love “ever gradually grew steady / And fresh – if apiece, they would share and weren’t / Denied – a good deal of living slowly / together and not many fights” (13).

Although they apparently had a good life, their children had to face their racial questions as they entered the adult world. The

eldest son felt that he had to “choose” to be black. He left Arkansas for Chicago because, “white men will help white men, and that’s it. Black men / will help black men”(15). As Bill dies, the story finishes by explaining the choice that the eldest son made. The poem leads us through Bill’s life slowly so we can spend time with him and understand how important he was to his community. He was one of the first to marry a woman of a different race, solely because he loved her; regardless of the dictates his historical time imposed upon him.



The poem “Of Time Divided” offers the reader a key to even more appreciate “The Mixer” narrative, and seemingly anchors the collection, midway through the book, and in the middle of the poem, this stanza appears:

*Lazarus, come forth,
For someone invites me
To stop being normal;
Someone must order
Things done
And people places...
So, I Lazarus, came forth...(145)*

This poem opens from Lazarus’s point of view, as he explains who he is (“I am Lazarus”) and the repetition builds as Lazarus seems to understand his role in his resurrection. Later other voices enter the poem, people call for him to come outside, and even the one ordering him, repeatedly encourages him, “Lazarus, come forth” (144-145). At the end, the poet adds his voice to ask him a question, “So, Lazarus... You can now tell us: Has / The still separate world / Made this one / A little less apart ”(148)? In many ways in “The Mixer,” Bill lives out the same choice that Lazarus makes. He must exit the tomb. Lazarus’s second chance of life is one that will probably be lived out as a public spectacle. He is unique and set apart from society by what life dealt him. Understanding not only the bravery of someone like Bill to choose a life opposed to society’s norms, but to understand it in light of Lazarus’s case. Perhaps Bill did fully not choose his life, either. He fell in love with Lucy and marrying her was what he was called to do, even during segregation.

I also found reading the poem “January 12, 1967” through eyes of Lazarus enlightening as it offered a way to “see” how the day progresses for the poet. For, considering the poet as one who has left his “tomb” of Arkansas, and after a 1200 mile drive with no sleep at all, arrives in New York City. There is an allusion in the second stanza to Lazarus, “At home, Mother – / A laugh hanging out on the words – will joke, ‘You / Look like death in a new white suit’” (23). So, the metaphor of exiting the tomb of Arkansas fits. The

poet has jumped in his car to spend some time with his New York friends Victor and Mary-Helen, who at one point in their past invited him to visit them in the city. The invitation sounds polite, though as the poet reflects, “Even if I do not prefer them, friends’ll defer / And ask each other when I’ll arrive, but are friends, / So immediate to the City, friends at all” (23)? Unfortunately, as the day progresses, the poet starts to realize how arriving in such a place, alone, and without a confirmation of his invitation can resemble entering a new realm, or in the least, be a bad idea.

The description of the city permeates this piece. You get a sense of its inhabitants whose racial tensions seem to inflame themselves in hate, “But that’s over / If they keep this crap going, Let ‘em riot – / So, get us mad enough” (26). Our “Lazarus” doesn’t recognize his new environment and feels like he’s driving blindly. As he continues to drive through the city, the syntax varies, from fragmented to reflective sentences; here is his response to the new neon surroundings:

*Such neon testimony. 24-hour
Parking. A flagellated Little Car. Cities
Weren’t inseminated for cars- that’s the truth
A curb jutting at an exposed tire bumps
Constant dizziness. The lot is empty.
A lazy dog chews a hat by a disabled
Fence. Anyone here? I switch off the motor;
Cantankerously, Little Car snatches and stalls;
The details of the trip deposited amid
A machine – New York City invitation (28).*

There is a lot of back and forth syntactically that adds to this day of not knowing. The poet places himself within his new surroundings, which take on a life of their own and begin to barge in on him. His Little Car even bucks at this environment, where so much has stopped “being normal.”

Through out the collection, Johnson reveals a journey through historical events that epitomize a Lazarus-type experience. The stunning, life changing days, people, or events Johnson sets down for future generations is a gift to America. In these current times, a look back at what people have suffered in our country should resurrect us to less “normal” lives that honor our civil rights activists from Jonathan Daniels, W.E.B. De Bois, Ida B. Welles-Barnett, Martin Luther King, Jr. to even fictional ones like “The Mixer.”

Melinda Thomsen’s chapbooks *Naming Rights and Field Rations* are from Finishing Line Press. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Stone Coast Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Comstock Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Kakalak*. She’s an Advisory Editor for *Tar River Poetry* and teaches composition at Pitt Community College in North Carolina.