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Bettina Judd

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Poetry. African American Studies. Women's Studies. "Bettina Judd's phenomenal debut poetry collection, *PATIENT.*, is about recovery in many senses: recovery of the subjectivity of several historical figures, through the recovery, reconstitution, and telling of their stories--among them Anarcha Westcott, Betsey Harris, Lucy Zimmerman, Joice Heth, Saartjie Baartman, and Henrietta Lacks, who were infamously 'patients' or subjects of inspection and 'plunder' by, among others, J. Marion Sims, the controversial gynecologist, and P.T. Barnum, showman and circus founder. Sims (and the speculum) and Barnum are the featured antagonists in many of these flawlessly empathetic poems, but an unnamed speaker who adds a contemporary voice to the lyric chorus implicates those in charge of her care during a present-day hospital stay at Johns Hopkins--suggesting the linkage of modern medical treatment to the traumas vulnerable Black women, enslaved and not, suffered at the hands of unethical scientists and physicians in earlier eras.

In the collection's opening poem, the speaker reckons, '...verdicts come in a bloodline' and she determines 'to recover' from 'an ordeal with medicine' by 'learn[ing] why ghosts come to me.' She ends her testimony by asking, 'Why am I patient?' (Read that line in however many nuanced ways you want.) In this profoundly layered witnessing, the subject might be 'in the dark ghetto of my body,' or 'an idea of metaphors that live where bodies cannot.' Yet even as Judd vividly evokes the precise brutalities visited upon the Black female body and psyche--letting us see and hear women who 'quieted / broke into many pieces'--these poems also speak of 'shedding something,' 'another kind of sloughing.' Ultimately, *PATIENT.* enacts a healing and move toward wholeness, recovery of, as one speaker puts it, 'spirit [that] flees the body and / its treacherous / tearing.'"--Sharan Strange

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