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Black Life
By Dorothea Lasky

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Review by Kristin Abraham

Awe

“Ever Read a Book Called *Awe*?” asks the title of a poem from Dorothea Lasky’s second full-length book, *Black Life*. If you haven’t read it, you might want to consider doing so because *Black Life* is very nearly a sequel to—possibly more of a *continuation of*—*Awe*, which is Lasky’s highly successful first full-length book, published by Wave Books in 2007. Both books flirt with awe, loneliness, love; and both books are megaphones for the quirky, contemporary, Lily Tomlin-esque voice that is so uniquely Dorothea Lasky’s. The books aren’t identical, though; they are a progression, the progression of a central thought and evidence of the progression of a poet’s art.

Sure, you can read *Black Life* and appreciate it without having read *Awe*, but you may miss the chance to appreciate the poetic progression and subtler allusions to Lasky’s previous work, even though some of her allusions aren’t so subtle (“Ever Read a Book Called, *Awe*,” for instance, doesn’t exactly elude our attention. Lasky seems to be especially proud of *Awe*—after all, it’s not every day that a poet overtly writes a poem about her first book and publishes it in her second book (“I wrote it. That’s my book. / I wrote that book. I wrote that one.”).

(So wonderfully childlike, so in awe of herself, herself.)

This isn’t pride in the sense of boastfulness; Lasky seems nearly in disbelief and very thankful that the book was published:

Some people read it. They said,
We will make your book.
I said, Really? I love you.
They said, We love you, too.
I said, Good then
I will love you forever.

(So precocious, so in awe. So Edith Ann in a big rocking chair talking about making a sandwich. So much Lily Tomlin, too.)

Even if you haven’t read *Awe*, the concept of awe in general is important to *Black Life*. Lasky tells us:

When you sit in a landscape of snow
And you’re a bird, that’s Awe
When you look over a big green field
And the dead soldiers lie all around you, that’s Love
That’s Love and Awe.

Love

(Edith Ann adds "And that's the truth.")

And that's also a major focus of *Black Life*. This nearly free-associative writing from a speaker who often sounds more like a little girl stunned by the world, than a grown woman / poet, is recurrent throughout the book. The speaker (sometimes referring to herself as Dorothea, sometimes as Dottie (*Edith Ann?*)) is awed by nearly everything around her, but she also establishes a more mature, cheerless (*gloomy? black, even?*) voice that poses some very serious questions.

How do we "survive in this world"? How do we live in this blackness? Lasky wants to know. "It's a lonely world," she says, and—of her poetry—"Inside here are many moments / In which I have screamed in pain," but the words are "flat," she says, and they will never reveal this pain, or any emotion, for that matter: "All around you is death and atheism." (*Flat.*)

(Surely I can't feel her pain exactly—she's right— but surely and at the same time I feel her sadness just as I feel the texture of the paper on which that sadness is printed.

The words aren't flat; the death and atheism are flat.)

(Lily, what do you say? "I personally think we developed language because of our deep need to complain." Well, that's about right, I suppose.

Dorothea? Comments, questions, concerns? Agree or disagree?)

The words in these poems are far from flat; of course language can't get at any "exact" thing, but it tries, Lasky has tried, and if the reader tries, s/he will find that in these poems Lasky has succeeded. I can't think of many other books of poetry I have read that explore such a range of emotions in such an effective way. The poems in *Black Life* not only make their readers experience sadness (*sad, sad, defeat*), loneliness, and pain, but they also swing to awe, love, happiness, and joy (*especially joy!*):

I am talking about Sunday sadness with ties and ribbons

I am talking about a life of being beaten and then a day spent in costumes

I am talking about children, the children

Who cry out in their stylized laughs

At what a great grand world this is

So pretty in its sunshine that comes on down

On you when you are ready to receive it

Sun

And “style is joy,” Lasky tells us.

(Poetry has style; poetry is style; poetry is joy. I think she tells us this, too. That’s not flat words. That’s felt. Emotional resonance and a soft piece of cloth: felted wool, for instance.)

(Lily? Your thoughts?)

“Remember, we’re all in this alone.”

Dorothea? Comments, questions, concerns? Agree or disagree?)

(Dorothea, can you hear me?)

I feel like Barbra Streisand in Yentl. Sing along, if you’d like, Reader:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwCPAo5e_F8

I’ve lit my “flickering candle.” How ‘bout you and yours?

Flickering —

Barbra Streisand in Yentl singing to Lily Tomlin / Edith Ann—)

The poems in *Black Life* absolutely sting and shine, often all at once. But the “shine” is what ultimately shows Lasky’s remarkable talents; I’ve read many great poems that are philosophical, many that are humorous, and many more that are sad or depressing, but I haven’t read many great poems that are joyful, that celebrate life. I don’t even think I realized this until I found myself “joying along” to *Black Life*.

(“Papa (Dorothea) can you hear me?”

“May the light of this flickering candle illuminate the night

the way your spirit illuminates my soul.”)

Life

Lasky shows balance and a practical, worldly reason with the range of emotions that she invites into her poems; this balance becomes the closest representation of how our daily / weekly / yearly experiences are balanced. Yes, the world is black, and yes it can be lonely and loveless, yes “we all suffer,” (*Lily says “things are going to get a lot worse before they get worse.”*) but “that has everything to do with poetics”; and joy, too, has everything to do with poetics.

Lasky teaches us this; she teaches us the only thing we can do is to first acknowledge it, live with it, then celebrate the bad with the good:

....Read Plath. Hell, read Stein. She was a woman and she would have approved of you—you man, you woman, you dog. Bark your last breath while we all swim along a river. There are children playing around you. They know more than you will ever know.

“I remember everything you taught me, every book I’ve ever read”

“Can all the words in all the books help me face what lies ahead?”

Balance:

Not your empty life you write down with no mediation
But a full life full of love
That I write down with partial mediation
Not the whole truth of bitterness with no bitter shell
But a full life of bitterness with no empty shell
But a joyous and colorful one

“Papa can you find me in the night?”

“Papa can you help me not be frightened?”

The speaker (*Dorothea, Dottie*) is trying to teach her readers; she wants to shake us up and shock us into listening to her, and Lasky finds a way to talk directly to us, the readers. This is where we find *Black Life* diverging significantly from *Awe*. Lasky has discovered a speaker who has torn down any “fourth wall” and decided to speak directly to readers. There’s a fabulous stage quality to this voice—a lyric, “over-the-shoulder” to her audience—that earns our attention, along with a good laugh:

Belief

Hi everybody
It's Dorothea, Dorothea Lasky
I have done something very wrong and
I am so very sorry about it

(Can't you see her: Edith Ann / Dottie in a giant rocking chair, legs curled under her, her pulling on the toes and tongues of her shoes?)

(Dorothea? Can you hear me?)

"Even though the night is filled with voices"?

"The night is so much darker, the wind is so much colder, the world I see is so much bigger now that I'm alone.")

Lasky uses this address to her readers to make us feel some connection in spite of loneliness, a terrific "we're-in-this-together-so-laugh-and-joy-and-pain-along-with-me" (*entertain the alternatives in your one, definitive / fixed life*) appeal that at times is borderline confessional (*borderline ironic*). This kind of voice is utterly original and is ultimately what makes Lasky a poet like none other:

Reader.
By now you know
That I am scary and sad
But that I am not scared to be

(Dorothea? "Can you hear me praying?"

I think I'm praying with you?)

She seems to write over and over:

It is a black life, but I don't want to die
I don't want to die, I don't ever want to die.

It may be a risk for a poet to address her readers so directly, one-on-one, with this honesty (*Lily says "What if it's boring - or if it's not boring, it might be too*

Joy

revealing, or worse, it might be too revealing and still be boring?"), but the childlike persona and often borderline-irreverent humor that Lasky invokes is part of what makes her poetry compelling, original, and most importantly: believable.

Black Life is a must-read; poetry that can connect with readers on so many different planes of emotion and with such a blunt, head-on, direct address, is poetry that cannot be overlooked. Dorothea Lasky is a poet who cannot be ignored.

("I feel so much smaller"

"the moon is twice as lonely and the stars are half as bright"

"Papa how I love you"

"Papa how I need you"

"How I miss you kissing me good night.")

("[Dorothea] please forgive me.")