

## Glenda Burgess: Art of the Discarded and Reclaimed

Elsewhere, California Dana Johnson Counterpoint Press, 2012



Elsewhere, California by Dana Johnson, is a fresh engaging novel following the unfolding life of Avery, a young African American girl growing up in inner city Los Angeles. Johnson, author of the

short story “Break Any Woman Down,” winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction, is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Southern California.

“We caint go trick or treating. The Crips went and shot somebody and the Bloods done shot em back. Me and Mama standin out front the partment building with all the other mamas and they kids. My cousin Keith got on glasses with no glass in em, a black tie with green stripes and a blue vest with his jeans. He a lawyer. I aint never heard of no lawyer before, but I guess he look awright to have no money for no real costume.” And so begins the story of Avery, sandwiched between where she finds herself now, an accomplished artist married to a wealthy Italian dwelling in the Hollywood Hills, and the rough complicated childhood revealed in session with her hypnotist. Sitting in her therapist’s office she refers to herself as “an affirmative action baby,” an artist “who was not really an artist,” a “charming, elegant liar.” Utterly ungrounded, she seeks authentic pieces of who she has been and has become. “I needed someone who would listen, yes, but also hear.”

Johnson is an accomplished writer with an ear for both startling concrete detail and cultural rhythms of speech. Young Avery thinks and speaks in the street talk cadence of the roughest neighborhoods of LA; adult Avery coolly reflects the polished modulated language of a successful university graduate. Johnson’s handling of Avery’s examination of herself as an adult is unflinching as she peels away the layers from now to then. She shows us an Avery desperate to find an identity that anchors her in her present. Avery continually defends and spurns her own art, the most personal expression of her inner being. “I had to paint away

the reactionary anger of my youth. It was as if I had discovered racism all on my own, made a record album of it and let it skip and skip. I wasn't remembering the nuances of other recordings, a record or song, a piece of art that goes all over the place and back to the place it started, like John Coltrane, like David Bowie. Before, I'd painted portraits which were, I've been told by the few people who have seen them, offensive, racist, and according to the mention in the Sentinel, 'unsettled in their critique of iconic negrobilia images.' Racist. I was twenty." Avery expresses her evolution as an African American, a woman, and an artist, through the things she has made and their stories. Her one desire is to find the truth and the theme of her own narrative.

In Avery, Dana Johnson has crafted a character with a strong voice and engaging prickliness offset by winning vulnerability, pulling the threads of revelation through Avery's story. Avery is both iconic and individual, a modern woman and a voice in the history of her particular and personal Black America. Johnson's novel circles within itself like the very music that Avery admires, her narrative no longer stuck as she explains herself and her art, "The art I do now comes from any and all things that don't seem to go together because this is what I appreciate about life and living. There is race, but there are also lots of other things. Things that aren't supposed to fit and go together but nevertheless do. I'm not very good, putting together all my pieces of discarded things. But it is also who I am."