

Kristen Rae Hill

## Insight

Valerie Nieman. *Leopard Lady: A Life in Verse*. Press 53 (2018).

When I was a child, my mother took me to see a palm reader. Her shop was set up in a small white house, much like the home Dinah retires to at the end of Valerie Nieman's collection *Leopard Lady: A Life in Verse*. Dinah has psychic abilities too, which provide her with insight into people's intimate lives. She shares some of this knowledge, while other pieces she hoards away from prying eyes until she is the only one left to preserve the lives of those who are lost. Nieman has woven together poetry full of longing that ultimately focuses on valuing the voices of people pushed to the fringes of society.

The first half of the collection introduces Dinah as a young, black girl living with white guardians named the Gastons after her mother dies in childbirth and the "Landlady took me out that rented room / ... / and gave me over to the Gastons" ("Birth Day, 1935"). Dinah leaves the Gastons with a man who abandons her at the carnival, and Mrs. Elderia, the Gypsy Queen, takes her in:

The old woman with her bent hands  
 ...asked,  
     *Child, where are you to go?*  
 No place, ma'am. I have no place to go.  
     *Did he leave you then?*  
 Yes, ma'am. As you said, only sooner  
 Than I expected. ("Destroyed by Fire Flood and Ice")

Mrs. Elderia learns Dinah possesses psychic sight and offers to teach her the craft: "*Now, if you want to learn / to read palms then I will teach you*" ("The Hunt"). Dinah accepts the offer and, after Mrs. Elderia dies, takes over the woman's tent. In this way, Dinah finds her place at the carnival.

One poem from the collection, "The Leopard Lady Finds Lost Things," showcases Dinah's access to secrets. In the poem, two boys visit Dinah for help finding a lost watch. Though neither of the boys shares the secret, Dinah has a vision of an intimate moment between the boys when the watch was set aside: "His mouth gapes like a catfish, and I see / through his eyes the creek called Alder Branch, / a stone ledge by two paces of scuffled sand, two bodies naked under the moon." Dinah tells the boy where to find his watch, but she does

## *Kestrel*

not probe the boys' relationship; she simply lets them leave her tent without addressing what she has seen. In this way, Dinah regards the secrets of others with a quiet understanding and without judgment.

In the second half of the collection, a new speaker is introduced: The Professor. The Professor is fresh from seminary school and needs work, so he becomes an announcer at the carnival. By this time, Dinah has developed spots on her skin, earning her the title of Leopard Lady. The two bond when spots form on The Professor's skin due to a heart condition: "My spotted friend / rests her hand by mine, photograph / and negative" ("The Professor: Abracadabra"). Dinah and The Professor discuss their relationship, describing it as, "*philia*, between those who have endured / together, and have known loss and sacrifice" ("The Professor's Suit"). This friendship extends to the end of the collection when Dinah quits the carnival and sets up her own shop with the money The Professor leaves her after his death.

Loss is Dinah's final meditation as she contemplates the difficult life she has lived: "We are none of us more / than a handful of spit and dust. / We live and then we are melted into air" ("Ghost Riders (Coney Island Museum, 1980)"). While Dinah claims nothing remains of the carnival or the people she has committed her life to, she doesn't forget:

I see them all, Mrs. Elderia, Shelby,  
advance men and talkers,  
freaks banished from the banner line  
as folks got so they weren't any more  
willing to consider how unlikely  
bodies was . . .

(“Ghost Riders (Coney Island Museum, 1980)”)

The carnival is not lost to Dinah, and she remembers and gives life to those from her past.

Dinah accesses the stories around her through her abilities. She loses people throughout her life but holds onto them through these tales. Dinah's life is transitory; she wanders, first away from the Gastons and later the carnival, leaving whatever new place she finds. By holding onto these stories, Dinah maintains stability and finds a place to call home. Nieman's characters struggle because they have been pushed to the edges of society where they must profit from their strangeness. Even so, they find companionship with one another.



Valerie Nieman is a founding editor of *Kestrel*; subsequently, her work appeared in Issues 27 and 36.