

Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves

J. Drew Lanham

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J. Drew Lanham's *Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves* is a stunning amalgamation of literary prose and poetry.

Biology connects Lanham's two worlds of wildlife and Black being. His entries are close studies of the rhythms and respective intricacies of both, written with the awareness that "every poem isn't an ode to joy, and yes, sometimes there is sadness, or anger within the words." One entry wonders "why Black lives don't matter beyond marches or unarmed Negroes dying." Through curiosity and questioning, the book probes how Lanham handles troubling social ills himself: "Fuck—now I gotta have that talk with my son once again."

In other sensuous entries, Lanham turns "to the wild things," acting as a witness to nature's allure. The conflation of his naturalist and activist identities is clearest in poems like "Nine New Revelations for the Black Bird-Watcher," wherein he wonders "if some white people tell crows and ravens how impressed they are with their articulate intelligence." By way of duality, Lanham implies that suffering and joy can exist in concurrence. His voice is softer, even delicate in his nature pieces; his social prose validates rage and exhaustion. This tension is the book's most poignant triumph.

The expression of joy is radicalized in "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves" as his pleasure from "the steady run stream" or "the silent spring" becomes an act of resistance against the racism and war that plague societies—and Black bodies specifically. The book ends with a glossary of terms accompanied by lyrical definitions (ex: "Fall: What autumn does when the wind undresses it.").

Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves is a melodious collection—an ode to choosing joy and to the resilience that such choosing requires.

BROOKE SHANNON (March / April 2024)

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