

*Doing 70* (poems)

By Hettie Jones

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“The models for the form of the poems I eventually wrote were the guys all around me,” Hettie Jones explains in a 1999 interview with Nancy M. Grace. “But what to say, that was the big question. You know, writing a woman’s life” (163). The poems in *Doing 70*, Jones’s third full-length collection, are situated at the intersection of Beat, Black Mountain, Projectivist, and New York School influences—“the guys all around [her]”—yet they re-envision these primarily masculinized lineages so that the experiences of women become the dramatic core of the collection. Women’s communities are the political and artistic center of gravity in *Doing 70*. Jones’s communitarian impulse inflects the most private-seeming elegies with a sense of cultural loss, and frames the volume’s avowedly political poems with an emphasis on the private, individual utterance as a vital source of change in a culture of redemption.

In *Doing 70*, our first intimations of what it means to be subjected to history emerge from the matrilineal bonds of family. In this way, the book stages Jones’s own “present moment of the past,” to invoke T.S. Eliot’s famous formulation with a revisionary scope that far exceeds Eliot’s patrilineal vision of literary tradition. Perhaps no better example of Jones’s commitment to matrilineal history can be found in “True Sisters, or *Caritas*,” the title poem of the volume’s third section. The poem, dedicated to Jones’s daughter, the art historian Kellie Jones, unfolds as a hybrid prose/verse serial poem whose porous genre boundaries mirror the speaker’s effort to write a personal and cultural history of both the body (“the ear’s heart”) and the mind (“what language / I learned on”): “and if I could not then / comprehend *caritas*,” the speaker writes of her attempt to understand the complex history of women’s solidarity movements in the United States, “I clearly heard its *gravitas*” (62). Reading as a continually generative family tree, the poem reveals previously obscured histories of women’s social service organizations from the nineteenth-century to the present. The recursive movement of Jones’s historical narrative eventually produces a trajectory that leads to the central figure of the poem, Hettie Blonde Tilgheman, one of the early directors of Phyllis Wheatley Club, an Oakland social service agency created during World War I. Jones hints that she was named after Tilgheman, yet, crucially, offers supporting evidence: “Absent facts one links True Sisters as one chooses: // In ’34 my mother named her second daughter Hettie” (64). In this way, history functions as a necessary fiction in *Doing 70*. Within the inevitably contingent nature of historiography—especially, in this case, in the unearthing of a secret history—the act of writing itself constitutes perhaps our most authentic historical fact. Such histories are no less vital, she argues, even if written “absent facts”; indeed, sisterhood is a critical mode of resistance in *Doing 70*, whether manifest in the form of our biological families or in the families we choose as adults. As Jones writes of the button her mother kept to commemorate the dedication of the Infants Home of Brooklyn in 1924, the alleged absence of facts is instead a symptom of a culture taught to

overlook women's communities: "The button to prove this she saved all her life, a plain truth / among her costume jewels" (63).

One of Jones's preferred forms in *Doing 70* is the elegy, and in these memorializing poems Jones renders in greater detail the lucent "plain truth" of the particulars of everyday lived experience. Jones crafts the volume's elegies from the tension between the cultural histories she wishes to narrate and the privatizing phenomena from which these histories unfold. This attention to the easily neglected particulars of dailiness, and to the self-reflexive act of documentation itself, represents of course a debt to Jones's New York School influences. In "My Neighbor the Actor," an elegy for Michael Moran, the genre of the epistolary poem displaces Jones's elegiac voice into the seemingly mundane grind of finding a parking spot in Manhattan. In decidedly conversational diction, the speaker interrupts herself periodically, alternating between expressions of spiritual doubt and a contrary faith in the continuity of an afterlife—with the speaker's confidence in the rational mind's ability to resolve this tension always, wryly, in the offing: "all those trillions of atoms you possessed / in your big agglomerate Mikeness have gone *somewhere*— / we know this, it's science" (80). The making of the poem—the speaker's unfolding quarrel with herself—is as much a memorial to Moran as is the poem's effort to redeem what has been lost. Yet, as in the other elegies in this volume, Jones does not substitute self-referential wit for expressions of grief. Indeed, the "trillions of atoms" of our dead return in continually retranslated form in the earnest words of the living, as in the poem "Preservation." And in poems such as "For Arlene Tyson at 93 Years" and "Restoration Reactivations," the dead inhere in the intimate domestic objects from which the speaker perpetually remakes herself.

With its simultaneous attention to the elegiac and the futuristic, this volume's title poem, "Doing 70: A Passion Play," can be read as a companion piece to "Seven Songs at Sixty," from Jones's first full-length collection, *Drive*. "This is what I'll become, / ashheap bone pebbles messages," Jones writes in "Seven Songs at Sixty," imagining her own dissolution and rebirth (*Drive* 103). This sentiment from *Drive* is recalled and revised in "Doing 70: A Passion Play," in which the poet's seventh decade speeds toward her as she zips down the Massachusetts Turnpike doing 70 in the passenger seat of a tow truck. Jones's artful punning, a characteristic of all her work, is forecast, too, in the poem's subtitle, suggesting in its "Passion Play" the simultaneously resurrective and erotic scene of her drive from Boston to New York with a young male tow operator. Indeed, the subtle physicality between the two as they ride in the truck's cab contradicts more than once her earlier assertion that "doing seventy means / giving up the pretty boys // you lust you lose, you hear / the cry of the crows" (29). In a culture obsessed with youth, the approach of the poet's 70th year produces a revived world as exuberant as Joanne Kyger's Bolinas while at the same time immersed in the cacophony of Frank O'Hara's New York:

It's Saturday night, New York!  
The neighbors are out! There are buses, taxis,  
bikers, bad drivers, jay walkers,  
cell phone talkers, a jabber and clank  
of outdoor eaters—

(30)

This is not an environment threatened by encroaching “ashheap” or “bone pebbles.” Instead, the energy and chatter of the city rise and recur like the continually dissipating and crashing tides of “Seven Songs at Sixty”—as restorative “messages” produced despite the speaker’s otherwise “lessening flesh” (*Drive* 102-03). Such “messages” saturate *Doing 70*. and, like the tow driver in the title poem, the reader is encouraged to “driv[e] among them all, Second Avenue / end to end” (30). The dramatic situation of the poem begins with a car disabled by a broken starter, but, as is characteristic of this volume as a whole, Jones does not linger on what is diminished or in disrepair. Instead, the poems imagine a fortuitous cohabitation of the dead and the living—all of us “lucky” to live together in the spaces that serve, however provisionally, as home (31).

#### Works Cited

- Grace, Nancy M. “Drive: Hettie Jones.” Interview with Hettie Jones. *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*. Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson. Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2004. 155-78.
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