

J. Marion Sims, the legendary, now controversial, 19th century gynecologist looms large in Bettina Judd's recent collection *Patient*. Sophisticated, complex, haunting, *Patient* beckons readers to remember, to feel, to think deeply, to discover, to probe. Slavery's stench, the bodies of Black women, death, scientific racism, memory—these themes link the poems in extraordinary ways. Judd is a masterful new poet. *Patient* is unforgettable!!

—**Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Founding Director and Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies, Spelman College**

In *Patient*, Bettina Judd beautifully (and horrifically) draws on historical evidence of nineteenth-century medical experimentation on black women, scholarly explorations of the body and the archive, and personal medical history. The result is haunting in its insistence on laying bare these stories as they not only articulate experiences of the past but also resonate deeply with black women's experiences with the U.S. medical complex in the present. *Patient* is a brilliant meditation on race, gender, and science and a thrilling anthem to black women's self-knowledge.

—**Elsa Barkley Brown, Associate Professor of History and Women's Studies, University of Maryland, College Park**

Joice Heth. Lucy Zimmerman. Betsey Harris. Anarcha Wescott. Bettina Judd ensures you will remember the names of four women assaulted by science, violated by curiosity—survivors of physical invasion and torturous experiments. She presents their dignity, heretofore denied, as imagined in their own voices in conversation and parallel with a modern speaker, similarly (coldly) ensnared by a medical machine powered by detachment at best, cruelty at worst. Judd re-centers the narrative, however, to where it belongs—on the person(s) confronted, examined, in pain—not on the problem to be studied or solved. In visceral language that indicts, worships, haunts, and empowers, *Patient* illuminates “a dynasty, a bloodline, a body” imbued with the full human spectrum of emotion and brilliance.

—**Khadijah Queen, author of *Conduit* and *Black Peculiar***

patient.

poems

Bettina Judd



Black
Lawrence
Press

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*meaning is the river
of voices. meaning
is the patience of the moon.
meaning is the thread
running forever in shadow.*

—Lucille Clifton

IN 2006 I HAD AN ORDEAL WITH MEDICINE.

I must have been found guilty of something. I don't *feel* innocent here lurking with ghosts. See it happens like that. I start at a thought that is quite benign and end up peccant, debased.

I had an ordeal with medicine and was found innocent or guilty. It feels the same because I live in a haunted house. A house can be a dynasty, a bloodline, a body.

There was punishment. Like the way the body is murdered by its own weight when lynched. Not that I was wrong but that verdicts come in a bloodline.

In 2006 I had an ordeal with medicine. To recover, I learn why ghosts come to me. The research question is: Why am I patient?

Pathology.

THE RESEARCHER DISCOVERS ANARCHA,
BETSEY, LUCY

*Nurses ask me,
“How much does it hurt on a scale from one to ten?”*

Anarcha Wescott, Betsey Harris, and Lucy Zimmerman
are taken into the care of a reluctant country surgeon in
Montgomery, Alabama.

*see blood on a white hospital sheet,
tell me I am having menstrual cramps*

Betsy’s first birth,

send me home with oxycodone, ibuprofen

Lucy, months out of household duties,

after five hours in triage

Anarcha, his first vesico-vaginal fistula

and another prescription

In these three, Sims shapes his speculum, invents his
silver sutures, perfects protocol for proper handling of
the female pelvis.

we wake

Unanesthetized or addicted to opium, children born,
children disappeared. Helpless help.

THE RESEARCHER PRESENTS JOICE HETH

The curiosity that is

every

black woman blind, one paralyzed arm

doctor

profitable bones, old breasts some

students in tow

wish they could suck that they too would become
great men

each to their own speculum.

Like any other curiosity, upon her death she will be
dissected.

SHEDDING

February 10, 2006

I had the urge to scoot out of my hips but there was no blood. The smell of it but nothing. I waited until there was, until the feeling stopped. By morning I was still waiting.

The doctor tells me that cramps are contractions of the uterus. *This is why they hurt, you know?*

I am shedding something. All night I wait for his oxycodone to work, pick a scab. *This is why they hurt, you know?*

HOW TO MEASURE PAIN I

In the woman it is a checklist:

Can you imagine anything
worse than this?

If the answer is no, ask again.

INITIATION/MEMORY

Late Evening February 16, 2006

Gynecology was built on the backs of Black women, anyway.

Hospital curtain, showman's speculum, surgeon's auditorium. There is an opening here, a thrusting, a climax, a little death. Who will rise from that, and how? Why not stay dead and forget? Why do I choose to remember? You, in bed with me Anarcha. You, brushing my head Joice. Why do you mourn me and sing, as if I am the one who has died?

AFTER MEMORY

i keep on remembering mine.

—*Lucille Clifton*

It's like when a black person says: "that's racist!" to a white person and they refuse to believe. Maybe it is better to say, "This moment is steeped in a racist history. This racist history is indelibly printed on my memory. You do not want to remember, so you wish to erase mine." But it is not heard. One only hears what one hopes not to be, and that's racist.

After memory, I am absent. No table. No one on all fours. No children living or otherwise. No hymns. No nursemaids. No sideshow freaks. No experiments. No spoon. No bent handle, no wincing. Just whiskey, opium and: *Now, wasn't there some good?*