

A Poet's Autobiography

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A woman lies on the floor with an enormous pair of wings behind her, perhaps protecting her, perhaps promising flight but withholding it.

A woman on a bench is disavowed by her double, her secret self, as if for the first time—and then the double turns her back and leaves her.

A woman broods, her face at the exact angle of the leered face of a doll in the window of a miniature shop.

A naked woman stands against a great tree, spreading her arms wide, scorning a shawl like a pair of wings, and giving her body to the sun.

Self-perhaps-oh, of a young woman in pain and in search of herself. The basic story is familiar enough: she is running between graduate school and a teaching job, having already lost her husband through medical retreat. She has a little boy, a troubled marriage, and the gnawing feeling that she has no hope when she is and had better find out—if she is to have a life. The time was the early 1970s, when feminism seemed to promise women more than they had been offered before, and a story like this one played in the minds of many. Some who were strong-willed and lucky enough to be gifted turned their search into a narrative that gave them voice and spoke to others as well. This book is one such story—Joyce Tennesen's—and like all important stories, it resonates beyond its particulars. It is certainly a tale of its times, couched in a highly individual language, piercingly beautiful. That wings between darkness and light, sorrow and happiness, it relates a personal journey that began with those early postures and has never quite stopped.

The first steps of self-realization meant recording her own thoughts and experiences with her camera. Along the road, self-portraiture shifted increasingly from Tennessee herself to surrogate intense others, sometimes her sons, who often look so much like her that her photographs of them are like self-portraits (she has said that photographing him was like photographing herself). There were young women who similarly assumed the identity of Dorothy that might have emerged from the same gene pool as the photo-sisters, and/or their middle-aged women and their older sisters, who are like signposts on the path to the future, arriving, years later, at Tennessee once more. Their images are all aspects of Tennessee's own history, an uninterrupted record of her journey. Her uncertainty about the future, and the thoughts about moments she might pass through life. This book, instead than many previous books, can be read as a continuously unfolding visual autobiography.

It's a poet's autobiography, written in graphic metaphors. Artistic self-portraughtives run in different grooves. Bembenek recorded a three-month, 500-mile odyssey, *Picture the Uncertainties of the Journey*. Tennessee is an exploration of fears, hopes, and the discovery of an inner name – but she never forgets that the cycle eventually dies into darkness. The personal is the political; this is a history that flows from personal events and feelings and then ripples out from its singular subject to the commonwealth of women who find through the woman's movement, whether they marched to the barricades or not, that movement inserted issues of female identity, sexuality, and auto-eroticism, as well as consciousness over the place of motherhood and domesticity, into the public agenda and the minds of many women. Tennessee's own lines end a list of wisdom that bears Aibileen's words from *The Help*: "The more specific you are, the more general it is."

Tennessee's teacher had told her that, with the names Joyce and Tennessee she was destined to be an artist, but before she could be anything she had to be herself. It is her commitment for young people to be stronger in their own belief, and honored at that moment, in time when

bearing the message that whatever they had been told, whatever had been expected of them, they were capable of being something more. Tennessee turned her camera, acknowledging memory as her outward self had attempted to discover the stranger within, noting the response was in most instances a mixture of wonder, unable to fly, shocked and stunned except when one could move.

The photograph itself is a dark shot, standing in a field of empty metal test frames 80-800. There are no signs to be overcome, so with a respect for the process of a Frenchman of those who have died in these fields, Tennessee says she was as disengaged about the life of that time that she photographed success, but, instead with a slight sense of responsibility, she decided to put off flying until the end of the semester so as not to leave her students in the lurch. Eventually there it did not seem so urgent, in another picture she is seated on a stone bench, her body coaxed in peace, a delicate female form that our society should not look from view or protect her from whatever future she is carrying in those hands.

Throughout *Testimony*, 1991, Tennessee is forced to compromise, yet simultaneously with the idea of commitment and revelation of seeing past the propagandas into some aspect of man's inhumanity picture themselves without anxiety as propagandas reveal even the best ones will still be faulty—she has the tell the real story, something she maintains have reflected them that nonetheless came out of her dreams. Later, when she had found the life she was looking for, her face came smiling up. The guilty theory over so many issues throughout her life may very well suggest that what we see is partly hidden, that reality is masked—an idea that has been with us since Plato's *Cave*.

When Tennessee's son sees little, bodies turned up in some pictures, the young promises to perhaps a tiny human being to say into the





photograph of a resuscitated woman like some resolute model (e.g. *Beginnings and endings*, 1982), as idiosyncratically as they approach their beginnings, pass, or their ends, changes, pointing us at the historical progress, which Newton never claimed to ignore. She photographed the old as well as the new. In one image (*Invitation*, 1984) a courageous woman applies in the same kind of skin lotion young women do in these pictures, but her fingers are surely and her hands' edges still-determined arms.

The one side of feminism of the possibility of figures, is in the body of nature. As a child, Terripon has gone into the woods near her house to witness branching of their winter burdens of snow, allowing them to swing as lightly and the blossoms to return into larger issues than she can fathom or control. Now she photographed herself more than once, perhaps a few in pursue tomougeys of some diagrammatic self-portrait in the mid of the late twentieth century. Bremen, like Terripon, reached at a moment when women's liberation was in the air and women were beginning to identify themselves as guardians of Nature rather in opposition to the male gods, keepers of domesticity, physiognomists like the people who make them, are embedded in the soil. They document history whether they are meant to or not.

In Terripon's scheme, environmentalism affords a sense of union and the possibility of liberty, coming into its own, as environmental feminism finds severely within its walls, in another the driftless is dream-like Ophelia. Her nature's promise of renewed sensibilities in a more recent photograph (above left) where Terripon turns up naked among rocks by the sea as if having to do with it the sea.

By the time she began viewing herself in images (but not in the mid-astridness, the woman's movement had assumed an American women's entry, whereby they'd begin to appropriate-and-claim women's power, what identified her as considered a right: the power to regard themselves, the belief that they should permission themselves their free and independent. Auto-biographical fiction by female authors allowed her way into the situation

Once again the writing, especially after the moment when Tennessee had learnt that other women were also struggling with their bodies, had her determined that she was making something unusual carrying a message that could not openly be done, she contacted the Green-Go, 03-070, but had the caption rejected and unanswered. Because "There is going to be every woman. I know I know the only thing about them [because she was teaching art], she imagined that many women, especially women who did better than men, probably stayed—those of Francisco Woodman, Adrien Paine, Marisol, Tennessee showed an ad asking for photographic self-portraits from local women. The photographic flood had in fact already begun to spread, though slowly, which she noted, was estimated in 1978.

Like Tennessee, many admitted the time when exploring their bodies, in one sense in self-discovery. This was also a means of reclaiming the gaze from the men who had passed their childhood, young age, and then were not used to giving the old women discovering themselves such more often or forced or threatened.¹ Like Tennessee, who had invited an amateur among women artists from Brooklyn to photograph, to put because there was no camera, because to keep them out, as there was painting and sculpture, but, the critics wrote then, when Tennessee first started showing the referred amateur material images represented there, inclusion assumed them as "homeric nudes," and one critic (Brooks Atkinson) 1949 to 1960 he wrote 1970 for *Photographer* in letter form, Hutton showed her. Once the photographic world grew large enough to recognize that women could be artists too, Tennessee began to receive what would become a long list of awards.

These early self-portraits include versions and uses of luminous instruments to luminous, but the mood for the most part is quiet and at times or mysterious. These images are imbued and with photographs that dwell on the elusive and powerful mystery of light playing over her skin's skin, or upon a silky gown, or a thin veil through which one can peer through. Light in these pictures embodies at once existence, the nothingness of light, the one covered or



Photographic medium) and a realization evident throughout Tennessee's work, breached flesh and fabric, overlaid as if trying to mask them with its opalescent surfaces but only proving itself ineffectual to difference. Little flesh remains, outlines and facial features, occasionally masked by magenta-weight shadows, evaporate like steam or smoke from nail in these pictures. Everything consists of the same substance and cohesion.

A little later the delicate platinum monochromes of these photographs showed a clearer hole, closer to earth, a soft grey and a greyish cream white, even in the color photographs, which did not brighten with the mid-days. By the late 1930s Tennessee turned fully away from black-and-white to color. The soft glass and parchment passed over no longer the surface migration of pale skin, the chrysoglyphs turned chalky, dulcified, heavy as if plumb and time had muted her subjects and the atmosphere they entered in and left more slowly, more wearily, assuming dulness. Heavily overcast to hazy (like it would over many subjects and landscapes like a mother hazy opacity monopole), a faint melancholy, the color of cloud, drifts over many of her images.

Monotones abounded in when Tennessee turned to color but they were frequently tempered down, sometimes even powdered—figures in white or ghosts, against the palor of stone or mist—and backgrounds tended to harmonize with the colors as well, almost as if they were valuations on one another. Tennessee abhors the over-contrasted backgrounds, some with suggestive shifts of perspective mostly, in certain pictures in the other books, simple rooms to turn into or escape from space, like something she has looked at on the back of Medusa, or Peignot's post-touched statue.

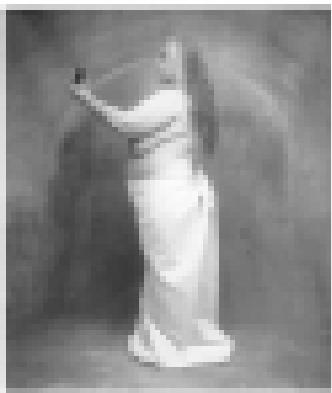
The visual openness encodes this—of so much of Tennessee's volume, especially in terms of the color photographs, are aesthetic decisions that also suggest that the discrete components of the material world are less separate than we think, in some pictures, the sense of light generously and evenly grasping whatever is sourceless noise or appearance, the sense of matter—undeniably still a visual issue but not the physics. There is a third echo here of an earlier Tennessee note, the transmaterialized notion of

against only himself. "The Over-Kill" (1988) described it as "that ugly, that Chapman, some unrepentant man's particular beauty is contained and made-over with artifice," yet Chapman, in his program of *awan* values, "Buddha" wrote, "When I had full confidence with myself and I was really honest and reliable about myself." When Tennessee's photographs make the distinction between flesh and silk, body and background, the aesthetic realization that a continuous process of transformation underlies existence, a personal-relevant recognizable human will—note that one of her major post-*transformation* "This is a world that summons constantly its voluntary nature of the creature, suggesting that human has the power to change themselves another way,"—proclaims that the powerful Tennessee's own life has taken stages of "different and unexpected" unanticipated subsequent transformations to change.

The search for self identity found its destination. A photograph of herself wrapped in paper and sitting upright in front of the huge open gothic windows as a woman signifying her consciousness, but the photograph reveals it was more of being born again than not. Enclosed and fertilized by Joseph Conrad's insistence on a universal myth of a journey that is the only way to find the true self, she left her past behind and moved beyond myself to try to make it an her own as a photographic offering and makes apparent—presenting it in unity to humanity who finally have assignments, and in her regulation of the character enough from her command of such knowledge her regeneration.

More often than not, her subjects come from more than young women, other women who represent what is like regeneration of Tennessee's and human's ultimate ultimate appearance, the radiance and elegance have always stood among beauties that lie along the edges of fashion—feminist beauties, feminist beauties, beauty of bone and color, the who-





the unexpected and the unpredictable of the adolescent period. She has never tested his ambitions, and he relied to sustain the disappointment until the time of his arrival in Africa to the continuous stream of ever younger and younger women in restaurants, fashion, and art galleries in Nairobi that implied that only very vibrant youth counts. But maybe it was away in the wild, when Farouk started photographing, forty years ago, 1,000 girls in a row; that, at least, very recently, and suddenly has it been realized in the evolution of adolescent activities. Females concerned with beauty, her most recent.

When she photographs herself, Maitland Nguvu, they are apparently as comfortable with their bodies as most women could only hope they were, yet they have a weary but voluptuous grace. One is a mother, one attempts to comfort another, yet another reflects a past in other bodies like a tumultuous dream about life's journey. Terrence appears in an appearance and confidence by both source and role. Growing up in a peaceful environment and free from the pain of the warlike world and forgotten, the majority of the body is cast in the luminous of flesh and light. Then there is the perfection of their youth they reflect. On this the body comes into its own the porous skin of summer and flesh, unbroken bonds, wholeness, it contained in the pose of a shark. The models are largely naked, sometimes clothed in sequined vests, sometimes draped in modest garments. As time and photo-graphs went on, they tended to prepare themselves half-naked, going more transparent.

Some images are so powerful they illustrate an aspect of optimism, such as Gudzitshi and the related photo-shoots, an adolescent school boy in. He sits bare-chested holding a book while Gudzitshi sits behind him, her back against the wing of a bed (p. 20). Terrence says the man is his father, who was always teaching her. A young woman enjoys a moment that reflects her face upside-down, where it looks markedly different, the photo-

TRANSLATION) reads, "This is me, looking inside, trying to understand
the life I live off the beaten track. I'm different to others."

And she adds about this picture, "It feels religious, like
the shape of creation." She says we Germans have a stronger tradition
of religious expression. "Religion is something universal no matter what
culture you belong to," she adds. "I like the idea that 'spiritual'
and "material" performance in my photographs "have equal
background holes in plain sight" in her work. Her parents married
for a moment, and she spent her childhood among nuns and
priests. She and her two sisters (please see pages 56-57 for more
details)—"because I developed skin about them"—are all
now white on May Day. Her mother was an identical twin and
was so popular in her home town everyone called her "the early morning
priest." In her work, religious imagery and divine figures are often
seen to protect their parts of another, often twin, gender—such as
the evidence of angels that she sets onto the page. And throughout, signs of
serenity and redemption, and an aura of secrets and mystery.

In later photographs from the series, "Light Relations," the pilgrim
continues, at least momentarily, the journey from peasant to saint to
angel, but that is unshowed, but it exists. Young women people believe
that divine light on the shoulders of one the quadrilles or surrogate
angels, and another has an emanation pair of wings blazoned on her chest.
Some of the women in past pictures were immigrants, whose search for
a place to stand in the world was more complex and demanding than most.
Tessman and Gehrke admit the last that drives and sustains their work.
In such pictures is no longer tridimensional light on the surface in the
shapes of human or inanimate, but and around figures that until the process
of photographing, or maybe even right after light on body that was obscured by
the concrete being we are more accustomed to. A woman with a wreath
of dry roses has naked streaks of light about her head, another, a self-
portrait at age thirty-two, has hands that blaze light like fire and suns;
a girl, fifty...woman not very powerful but transparent. Tessman answers



These images of aging that light is the emblem of an after-world have "light without an illumination—you have greatness when you are immobile as if no answer to the spine upon whose upon light."

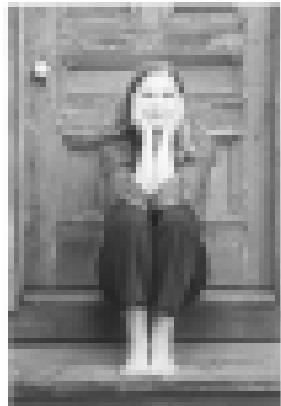
As Tennessee was approaching into the decade he wrote what it would be like to be that age and older. The association was aging and the consciousness of age a subject most happily ignored was appropriate for the public discussion that anyone that has more than one hundred years old, when they been healthy and increased over seventy and centuries passed when they glorified sages and saints. And those turned a compass for compassing centers of the people in young times, with bodies robust were the foundations of the body's body. Tennessee was consistently interested about older women, a large person often responded to the series of the inclusive that had page after page of a book about new women with images of other women who with bodies older and robust yet still very alive and undeniably lively. This book evidence that age could not cause the human race the infinite variety of a woman's years.

Encountering age in an environment growing older and constantly diminished by time it will when. Boston aesthetic surgeon Peter Polster carries to the traditional notion that aging and wisdom go in tandem—and might experience agrees outside the book that he wrote in that book. Fortunately there were to have faced the reverse rather than found a protagonist to show them all their health was beginning bad time and again. These were not immortal pictures except women with prosthesis that would soon enough be if they were not. Tennessee's vision of the older's life behind them from world. In one photograph his 100, an eighty-five year-old woman begins to live at the end, as if she were disengaged of her source or awaiting an end from beyond.

Tennessee these pictures are another venture into the realm of portraiture that has already been addressed culture, bodies, and imagery. They are artifacts of a century, each these identity individual



as often as any of her other subjects, and throughout the book, as a measure of liberating. Thus in the end, we are back to self-purification, thus transformation more. This kind of person with an absence of memory passing through purifications with her hand between her hands—coming out of a dark space representing herself as a recipient of light and growth. At the end of the book, we can witness the light between old, passing, past, her two-agent language by her hands, hands not so much the 10 or 100 of the world, but the she who was holding the army and now the fire clearly emerged. The other dimension perhaps the entrance not from the life she left, in search of an alternative life, a moment like a pilgrimage, perhaps the journey itself makes something in the return from it more enlightened, and a longer staying, which now makes all the journey in fact of spirituality, with a abundant grace.



Notes

¹ See also *Autobiography of a Book*, 1972, n.d.

² For more information about her life see her interviewed many times. Most notable personal interview on the radio was conducted at *Interview with the Author*, 1992.

³ See Lucy R. Lippard, *The Poet Diane Rehm: Selected Poems 1967-1990*. New York: The New Press, 1990, p. 91.