CONCH

I failed in so many ways.
I wasn’t native, and was too young
to adopt the mongrel
brio of polyglot crackers, refugees,
runaways. I didn’t like fritters or chowder,
or any attempt to render the stubborn
elastic gastropod palatable. My embouchure
never developed. Others held the spiral—
sawed off and sanded smooth—to their lips
to signal meals, a change of wind.
I merely spluttered.

But I loved its tender pinks,
the colors of secret human tissue
I had yet to witness, the colors of dawn
and sunset. I wanted to unroll
its brittle circles, to go back to the first
moment its cells knew their purpose: Milk
or Rooster, Hawk-wing or Queen.
I wanted to understand accretion, how long
it took to build a place of refuge.

I wanted to understand why
such beauty spent its life
underwater, gorgeous for no reason.

Casa Marina evokes the intense and lingering sense of place Robert
Heilman once said characterizes Southern writers—or in Candace
Black’s case, writers who came of age in the South. Infused in these
pages is the voluptuous landscape of the Florida Keys, which, like the
native Royal Poinciana, blooms “brazen as lipstick / nuns forbade us,”
its “slashes of flame / too sultry for the untried mouths of girls...”
Though looking back on her youth, she avoids the shallowness of
mere nostalgia: Black’s craft and music is downright compelling.

—William Trowbridge

In this stunning sequence of lush and musical poems unraveling the
tangled cultural marl of Key West, Candace Black’s Casa Marina re-
veals a landscape of prelapsarian beauty inextricably interwoven with
a complicated and uneasy political history of multiple occupations.
Black’s poems perform a “risky cha-cha” of tropical vegetation and
Caribbean cultures continually on the verge of breaking free from the
strict containment of convent school and military base. The conflicted
juxtaposition of these worlds creates a “climate of moist / heat and
hidden pockets of light,” in a locale both lovely and seedy.

—Lee Ann Roripaugh

Candace Black lived in Key West while her father was the commanding
officer of the Marine Corps barracks on the U.S. Naval Station. Her first
collection of poems, The Volunteer, was the 2000 winner of the Minnesota
Voices Poetry Prize from New Rivers Press. She teaches creative writing
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