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Bastards of the Reagan Era (Book Review)

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Bastards of the Reagan Era

By Reginald Dwayne Betts

a book review by Megan Van Horn

In Reginald Dwayne Betts' second full-length collection of poetry, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, Betts delves into the grit of the political poem head first. However, Betts goes beyond the standard rhetoric of the political poem by both being viciously biased and viciously aware, by showing his anger, but also showing another facet to the treatment of his subject matter. The title of the collection itself also mirrors this duality in the nature of his poems. His choice of the word *bastards* functions in an expletive sense, but, in conjunction with the rest of the title, refers to the children left behind by the fathers sent to prison through Reagan's policies.

Incidentally, Betts chooses to begin his collection with a duet of poems dedicated to his sons that are beseechingly soft in their language, praising their simple existence. However, the later works in the collection deal with rockier topics, as seen through a quick scan of the titles. Out of the twenty-three poems presented, four of them are titled as elegies of various kinds and eleven are all titled "For the City That Nearly Broke Me." This leads the reader into the understanding that the subject matter of Betts' poems are subsumed in rawness, in the harsh nature of the unforgiving system. In this case, the system refers to criminality, to prisons, to the loss of humanity in the justice system. Betts narrates this from beginning to end in his poem titled "Bastards of the Reagan Era" through a series of parts named for songs off the album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* by the American hip hop group Public Enemy. The last few lines of the whole extended poem, however, epitomizes the undercurrent of grief and pain throughout the collection: "...and I was / Like them, unwilling to admit one thing: / On some days I just needed my father."

The names that Betts uses in his various poems ground the subject matter into real, visceral locations and bodies. Many of his works contain lists of proper names of both people and street names to give a personal nature to the stories that he tells in each line. A poignant few lines from the last piece in the collection, "What We Know of Horses," personifies this through the description of the narrator's brother: "...Running / these streets, he was a horse— / graceful, destined to be / broken. Why admire horses?" In Betts' second collection, he hits upon all of the

criteria for political poetry with ease and grace, tackling the rage and frustration and channeling those powerful emotions into painfully personal, painfully beautiful narratives.