

Ancestry.com, Osing is an old spirit rendered new: “I began this as a game but soon enough / it turned into something I had to live for” (p.53).

--Marck L. Beggs



***In the Creole Twilight: Poems and Songs from Louisiana Folklore.* By Joshua Clegg Caffery. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 63, notes. \$22.50, hardcover)**

Joshua Clegg Caffery, a folklorist by training, is fascinated by the way that ancient stories and song forms persist into the present. Speaking in 2014 at the Library of Congress, Caffery cited J. R. R. Tolkien’s comment that *Beowulf* resounds in English consciousness as “a memory over the hills, an echo of an echo” (Library of Congress, “Traditional Music of Coastal Louisiana: 1934 Lomax Recordings,” YouTube 9 May 2014) and suggested that Louisiana folklore reverberates in similar fashion: “As there are no hills in South Louisiana, we might say memories over the marshes or faint lights in the swamp” (“Traditional Music”).

Caffery, who grew up on Bayou Têche near Franklin, Louisiana, is also a musician—a founder of The Red Stick Ramblers and long-time member of Feufollet—for whom the close ties between song and lyric poetry are para-

mount. His first book, *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana*, traces Alan and John Lomax’s 1934 collection trip into the Louisiana countryside, building on their field recordings of folksongs and folklore. In homage to the Lomaxes, Caffery called for a more authentic appropriation of old forms—“antiquarian in a good way” (“Traditional Music”)—rather than overly glib borrowings such as the sprinklings of fiddle and French that sometimes pass for Louisiana culture. Now his recently published book of original poetry, *In the Creole Twilight*, appears to fulfill his own directive by reworking vintage material with awareness and appreciation of its roots. Comparable use of Arkansas folklore exists in poet Greg Brownderville’s first book, *Deep Down in the Delta*, although Brownderville’s renderings of Woodruff County lore are more prose-based, less purely lyrical than Caffery’s.

In the Creole Twilight abounds with traditional forms, from villanelle to pastourelle, from concrete poem to a list poem made of local proverbs. Many of the poems are ballads, loosely speaking: while they lack the intricate stanzaic pattern of literary ballads in the strictest sense, they have strong narrative elements, regular stanzas, and frequent refrains. Their content is a juicy mélange of love, murder, and revenge, the stuff of fairy tales cast in cypress-filtered light. Ghosts and omens, legends and enchantments recur, the dire matter unfurling with relish through thumping rhyme and wheeling refrains. Throughout the collection the poet plays the role of fiddler-bard, who summons listeners—

Come all you fine young children,
Those who are wise and willing to hear.
Those who are brave will all gather near,
And all are advised now to listen.
“The Feufollet of Irish Bend” (1–4)
—entertains them, and sends them on their way:
The fiddler arrives and you form the ring.
Someone has to start the song,
And that is why you sing.

“The Poet Begg for Charity” (21–23)

The book is enjoyable as both scholarship and entertainment, and even in an overall strong collection certain poems shine. “Sunfish and Loom,” a dialogic poem based on shapeshifting, turns local images into a mercurial, tender chase. “The Loup-Garou” takes a staple of Louisiana ghost lore and gives it a psychological spin—suggesting that monsters are but phantoms of our terrible estrangements. “A Letter to Pierre Grouillet,” “The Ring and the Cormorant,” and “Claude Martin’s Last Requests” are entrancing and accomplished renditions of old tales. Many settings tease at the changes and continuities from olden times to new, with such contemporary twists as gender reversals; modern idiom such as “store-bought boots” (“Sunfish and Loom,” 9) and “good old boy” (“Captain Russel,” 28); and artifacts of our day from phones to toy dinosaurs.

An informative notes section illuminates the poems’ origins and broader literary context, including a “nod to George Herbert” and classical parallels. Sometimes Caffery relates his creative process: “I wrote this poem one morning after having spent the previous evening reading to my daughter from Dr. Seuss.” His conversational, quietly humorous tone is more like a songwriter’s patter than academic annotation.

The notes affirm the folksongs’ endurance and prevalence as well as their complex lineage. Beyond the familiar distinction in south Louisiana cultures between Cajun or Acadian (France–Nova Scotia–Louisiana) and Creole (direct-from-France French, Spanish, Indian, and African), Caffery’s work lifts up less-recognized strands, including Portuguese, Alsatian, Irish, English, and Haitian.

Transferring oral lyrics to the page presents challenges. Poets must establish meter, place rhyme and refrain correctly, and echo the original diction and syntax without being singsong or stilted. Ideally, they keep the delights of vocal song—repetition and surprise, the pleasure of the beat and the pleasure of deviation—

while launching and sustaining subtler themes. This is a tall order, and Caffery does not always manage it to perfection. For example, in “Giantess Bride,” “Home from the Forest,” “The Crow and the Swallow,” and “The Shepherdess Queen,” the meter lurches from iambs to anapests, tetrameter to trimeter to pentameter, in ways unrelated to the sense of the lines. Metrical fillers, such as “you see” (“The Crow and the Swallow,” 5) and “both great and small” (“Home from the Forest,” 43), detract from the finesse of the rhyme or are simply incorrect, as in “Captain Russel has a field / filled with bulgur wheat” (“Captain Russel,” 22)—for “bulgur,” despite its satisfying rhythm, does not pertain to wheat in the field. More enjambment, along the lines of “A Paper of Pins” or “I Sent a Swallow First,” would have relieved the thud of mostly end-stopped lines; in “Wooden Leg” and “Blackbird’s Heart,” unnecessary commas further clip the line endings. Such issues might go unnoticed in sung lyrics but are jarring on the printed page.

Still, these are minor distractions, and the book succeeds overwhelmingly in several important ways: It manifests the vigor and ongoing relevance of the folk tradition. It extends the life of many old tales and songs, not only preserving them and making them more widely available but doing so in an attractive hardbound volume with the added assets of pen-and-ink drawings by the author and cover art by his wife, Claire Caffery. Any slight flaws are integral to its art, like calluses squeaking on strings or distresses in the grain of a cypress armoire—proof, in the end, that *In the Creole Twilight* is the real thing.

--Hope Coulter



***Hot Music, Ragmentation, and the Bluing of American Literature.* By Steven C. Tracy. (Tuscaloosa: Uni-**