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An NEA Fellow,
**Martha Modena
Vertreace** is

associate professor
of English and poet-
in-residence at
Kennedy-King
College, Chicago.

Her books of poetry
include *Second
House* from the
Corner, Under A
Cat's-Eye Moon,
and *Oracle Bones*,
which placed Hon-
ourable Mention
with White Eagle
Coffee Store Press
Chapbook Contest.

Cinnabar is pub-
lished by Flume
Press, 1995, the
first prize winner in
its chapbook
contest. That

volume also placed
Honourable
Mention with Alms
House Press Chap-
book Competition.

Her recent collec-
tion, *Light Caught
Bending*, published
by Diehard Publi-
shers, Edinburgh,
Scotland, won a
Scottish Arts
Council Grant, the
first award to a
writer who is not
British.

A children's book,
Kelly in the Mirror,
is published by
Albert Whitman
Publishers, Morton
Grove, Illinois.

Vertreace has
earned four Illinois
Arts Council
Literary Awards
and an Illinois Arts
Council Fellowship,



Chantress for Dead Queens

A final salute in hieroglyphics: Hathor, god-
dess of women,
love, queens, beneath the sycamore sacred
to herself, while seventeen male servants
bore

wine jars, beef, geese, baskets in ecstatic
blue...

on the white limestone tablet at Sakkara, the
door

through which Nadjat-m-Peet, lady-in-
waiting,

came to receive her boon from devotees
awaiting

her favours, this favourite of Pharaoh Teti,
this woman.

Peet, the nicknamed her. Come through the
pale door

and kiss your earthly lovers. Duty sacred
to the dead, she stepped beyond blue
shadow, accepted prayers of supplicants,
bore

away the essence of the gifts they bore
to her, the chantress, to await

her magic— songs she crafted of blue
ibis feathers, crocodile teeth; dances spun for
women

who walked like the Nile in flood, writhing
sand; sacred
rattles she shook to make Earth's door

quiver to her own heartbeat. Near the door
to his own pyramid, the pharaoh bore
her body, where Queens Khuit and Iput,
sacred

to himself, also awaited
the mating of Isis and Osiris. For a small
woman,

a small tomb, thirteen feet long, seven feet
wide blue

chamber in death's womb. Mystery,
wrapped in blue,

veiled her, as delta sand hid her door
centuries ago— a lesser queen? or common
woman

steeped in regal power who bore
the dignity of her own waiting
cave, protection for her sacred

clay, protection for her sacred
soul? Dunes walked over her secrets. In the
blue
night of Egypt, who waited
where mattered. Archaeologist outside her
door
called in vain, they who bore
no offerings of grain, lotus, honey, to this
woman—

they who saw no woman as sacred,
nor bore her songs, her blue rattles, nor
learned
to dance their waiting as she opened the
door.

Shawabti

(African women who carry heavy loads on
their heads with apparent ease
mastered a walking technique that
conserves energy)

From timeless dark of royal tombs,
archaeologists
draw forth hundreds of stone statuettes
carved

like mummies. Their afterworld: to awaken
as slaves
whose labor for the king buys his salvation.
Nubian,

one figurine, broad nose, thick lips,
resembles the woman
whose photo I find among my father's
things,

whose black skin fits his description of my
grandmother.
On her wooden porch, open Bible on her
lap, she dozes

in her rocker. The shutter catches her before
gravity
pulls her through my father's face as if he
gives birth

to her; as if the creak of stars blazes into
memory: the way
rains comes—first the thick smell of silver, a
grey cool

of clouds falling as she tells stories of floods
my father
will tell me—of buffalo fish on the ceiling,
work horses

listening through their shivering skins.

as well as an award for Excellence in Professional Writing, from the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. Gwendolyn Brooks presented her with the award 'Significant Illinois Poet', which Brooks has established.

She was a Fellow at the Hawthornden International Writers' Retreat, in Lasswade, Midlothian, Scotland; Eastern Washington University, Cheney, chose her as Poetry Fellow, when she was in residence at the Writers Centre Dublin, Ireland.

Her poem, Song of God's People, was set to music by Tom Weisflog and performed at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church's Quasiquicentennial Celebration, with choir and organ.

These are Martha's first set of poems to be printed in Africa.

Martha Mubvumba

Another find—
an alabaster jar, viscera of a queen inside, its
fragile lid

chiseled like her head. What dreams did my
grandmother
weave into her plaits? What dreams
scrubbed raw

on my mother's washboard? A scientist
thinks African women
practice piling more weight as they walked
upright or lean

forward as if into a storm, the burden
steadied by a strap
which loops across their foreheads,

becoming more perfect pendulums, he says,
as if that is all there is to it—learning to
balance
so they can bear more.

Buying Talismans on Custer Street

No mammy dolls anywhere;
stalls of Ashanti fertility dolls,
to leave for forest spirits, with silver coins
and food

in trade for missing children,
lost daughters of plantain wandering
among the trees; palm rugs woven with a
hole to free

evil spirits;
Zulu love beads. Twilight mixing with rain,
under a paisley umbrella, a Nigerian women
nods

as I choose
from a teak box a leather bracelet,
its wide band top-stitched with cowries.

To get a good man,
she says, walking toward me in a cloud
of blue cotton, her dress and headwrap
embroidered

with red hibiscus.
Darker than I am, hips, breasts rounder,
sexier than mine, she smiles as if she owns
me,
touching my arm
as my five-dollar bill slips
down her front. Near her chair, sandalwood

curls from a brass burner. She gives me
her story, as if that is why I came:

from her fertile cave, a river of black babies.
In the heart of the house, the centre of the
room,

on a throne-stool, she sits in a double-ring
of children. Earth yields a nanny goat, a hen

as sacrifice; water, a giant round fish,
a snail, azu-ntu fish. To bless the womb
which opened

to ten, women came, keepers of the rite, who
smear
her pelvis, feet, under her seat, a libation of
blood.

Then a meal of a snail, chicken, azu-ntu fish.
Four times
she is seated, four times lifted up, then
receives
the children's blessings of good health, long
life,
music for her husband.

She ties on the bracelet,
to please your ancestors, she says,
then holds my hand while she reads my
future

as a thunderstorm
catches fire, as night becomes
a lion, my very breath, its roar.

When the Time Is Right

At river's crossing, the train slows—
something to do with switches.
Sitting next to me, a man
lifts his glasses to his forehead,
marks a page in *Migratory Birds*,
grosbeak: black wings,
rose shield afloat on its white breast.
from color plates to me, to living birds.

What will that farmhouse in the distance,
painted with hex-circles, lure
to such brown flatness? Tornadoes
whose acrid bite of lemon-scented fear
roil midsummer sky. For now, fizzled heads
of dandelions cluster in new grass,
gold coins scattered for a child's party,
Wood barns of corn-fed cows seem
like pictures from kitchen calendars
of yearling bulls without blemish,

white churches with real steeples.

The train jerks me from a dream—
my mother bends over me. Touching
black ground, her braids root
like willow branches. A forest
shoots up, oaks taller than mountains
where female bodies melt into the Earth,
rise on leathery wings—
then pulls its load past fields
where leaves are weeks green,
not yet warm enough for seed.

A modern seer-jade earring, bluebird
tattooed on his wrist—
says my future is worth the dollar
I can afford to trade to what he knows.
I know seven years have passed
since my mother died.

Where shadows stalk the edge,
water changes from green to blue.

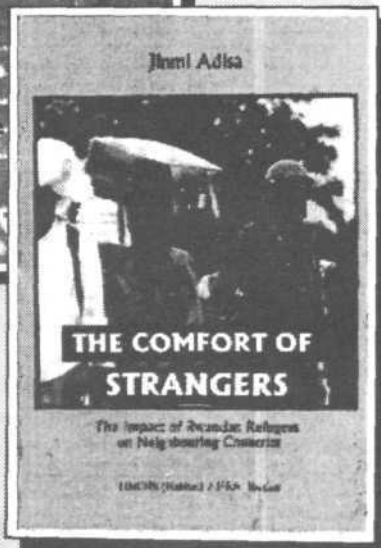
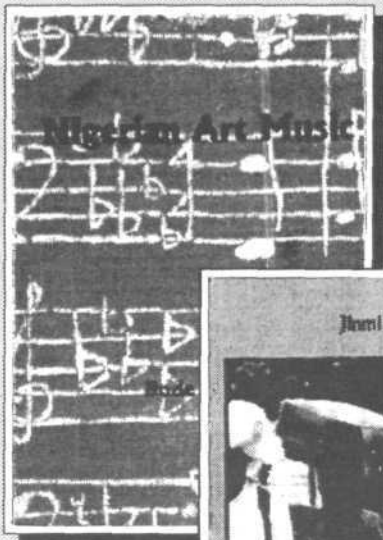
In the backwash, herons stilt
into the one-legged trance they hold
before the view-slits
of the hunters' blinds—the question:
Whether random motion reveals
more than a beaver lodge, a muskrat den,
the silver smell of a gun barrel
when God has neither gossamer wings

nor bearded face.

Lightning rakes the furrows as if a phoenix
claws ashen sky spilling
the sand-painted glyph for storm.
From a case of smuggled samples, the man
pulls out Stone Age animal bones:
carved with double-pointed blades—
barbs, single points ridged to fit
spear shafts which pinned giant catfish
spawning in the Semliki River,
Central Africa.

Then he urges a bangle in my hand,
stone sets carved in runes, oghams;
instead, I choose two leather bracelets
trimmed in copper and bronze, the sun face
of a sun god at least half-African,
he tells my black face, angling for a sale
as I fasten the clasps.

Forehead to the floor, at last at home,
I pray at my household shrine
of old photos, palm branches retted,
shaped as rosettes, to Charles Lwanga
whose Ugandan first-class relic, a bone chip,
rests in its silk straw box—
that my father still remembers me,
that my mother will herself comfort me,
come for me when the time is right. **GR**



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Published by
Institut Francais de Recherche en Afrique/French
Institute For Research in Africa (IFRA)
Located at the Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan
U.I. P. O. Box 21540 Ibadan,
Oyo State, Nigeria.