

flipped eye publishing

Bottle of Life



simple words, rendered sublime

Bottle of Life

flipped eye publishing

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First Edition

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OVS Magazine - *Psalm for the City of Angels*

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PRAISE FOR *BOTTLE OF LIFE*

The poetry in Truth Thomas' *Bottle of Life* is intoxicatingly sweet, sharp, with a dash of bitter, good for the soul's health. I cannot think of another poet who makes me turn pages with such eagerness, to see what surprises the play of his language will bring, and what his seriously nifty wisdom will show me next. Go from a poem celebrating an inauguration in the virtual voice of Marvin Gaye, to another poem pointing out "No Afghani ever called me a nigger/ Dial down the swagger in your trigger/ finger," and you've got some heavy political meaning here too. I love this book and so will you.

—**Alicia Ostriker**, author of *No Heaven*

Bottle of Life is just that, an exquisitely crafted urn that holds within the beautiful struggle that each of us experiences differently. As artist, Thomas unifies our varied journeys under the banners of pain, happiness, memory, heart and joy—all the while directing words, only as a true poet can, to resonate, provoke, and reassure.

—**Felicia Pride**, author of *The Message*

Like Etheridge Knight, Lucille Clifton and Rita Dove, Truth Thomas is a brilliant chronicler of the atrocities of our violent, "soiled world." Whether writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a bombing in Iraq, death on the playgrounds, shots fired in New Orleans, the Crips and Bloods, a family member sentenced to the hell of prison life, or a friend dying in a nursing home, Truth Thomas shakes us from complacency with startling images and a voice that can't be ignored. He is a spiritual poet who can find heaven in his Mama's macaroni and cheese or Chuck Brown's "bustin' loose," or in the embrace of two lovers. He makes us believe that the armless can lift barbells. *Bottle of Love* is one hell of a book.

—**Jeff Friedman**, author of *Black Threads*

This is the language of collard greens and black-eyed peas seasoned with fatback and Big Mama's sweet tea. From Tennessee to the Gaza Strip, Truth Thomas' genius lies in his ability to take us places where we've never been before. Each page is like plucking the strings of a bass guitar, but the beat never gets too heavy, the message is always clear, the craft exquisite and masterful.

—**Randall Horton**, author of *The Lingua Franca of Ninth Street*

*For all those born beneath an angry star
Lest we forget how fragile we are...*

– Sting

Bottle of Life

For Carridella Macklin Thomas

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Up Growing

No tooth
was ever chipped
for calling a motherfucker
a “motherfucker” on a dare.
This never happened
in Takoma Park in 1969
when I was ten.
No squirrels
dropped nuts
to bear witness.
No White Oaks
bent down leaves
to see this fight
at 7600 Maple Avenue
a week after we moved
into Park Ritchie—
No lip was ever split
when a boy flexed
Three Musketeer
to claim the
Afro Sheen affections
of a girl named
Almeda Bacon.
This never went down
seven days after I
elevated up to 1801,
along with my mother,
one Tennessee transplanted
sacred black sofa,
and my stepfather:

The Jolly Green Negro.
In fact, in “one small
step for man” days,
in Jackson 5, “ABC,”
“Stop the Love you Save”
days, there were no fights,
no duels in bruises.
No stepfathers
ever broke
faces of door frames
to lattice boys in
choke hungry fingers.
No one studied war then.
No battles bled.
A half a million tons
of bombs never bounced
Betty-like
on to rice-soaked earth.
Never did a Vietnamese girl
run crying in napalm skin—
not then,
or three years later
on the cover of Time.
Never did a Knoxville,
take-no-shit woman,
scratch the mug
of a 6-foot
cheating husband,
and never
did this wannabe Shaft,
wannabe man,
wrestle a woman

to the ground—not yesterme,
yesteryou, not yesterday—
not on streets where boys
would shadow box
like Muhammad Ali,
and spin,
and shuffle
and float over
girls with names like
Alice Haxton,
or Teresa Youngblood.
And no young bloods
ever woke up,
wood of erections,
like Hank Aaron
waking up home runs.
There were no erections in 1969,
no cool Hefner
no Playboy after dark
no pinball flippers
or bomb alarm drills
("This is a test, this is only a test")
no fear of nuclear strikes
(then as now).
What there was
was "Nina, Gifted and Black,"
and Sly and Stone and
"Stand" and all were
"Superbad," but no one
dared say so.
My elder sister
may have known why

caged flight sings,
but she never
wrote it down.
Black feeling,
Black Nikki,
Black talking,
was nowhere
to be found—
not “right on,”
not “solid,”
not “Everything is everything.”
Cause everything was never
everything, like white
was never seen
as right (now as then).
What we was
was NBC glued
to “Julia” Tuesdays
and Flip Wilson
when he attacked us
with laughs
every Thursday night.
But the Devil
never made him do it—
him or Geraldine.
The Devil did not exist.
Violence did not exist—
not one year past U Street’s
blaze and broken teeth—
not the year that Hendrix
fired up Woodstock,
burned a Stratocaster up

like a joint.
Assassinations did not exist.
Riots did not exist.
Army boot wearing,
Denture Cream pressing,
fake-ass Black Panther
abusers of women,
did not exist—and none
ever filled our apartment
with spit, and heaves,
harvests of harm.
No—none of this
ever happened—much
like games of
“hide and go get it”
I never played in woods
or ice cream trucks
I never chased
with Leroy Jenkins
and Ricky Burrell
or chewing gum cigarettes
I never bought
at Maple Avenue Deli
or prayers
I never prayed
almost every night
for my stepfather to
fall
from any window
way up high.