



This Waiting for Love: Helene Johnson, Poet of the Harlem Renaissance

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This volume brings together all of the known poetry and a selection of correspondence by an enormously talented but underappreciated poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Cousin of novelist Dorothy West and friend of Zora Neale Hurston, Helene Johnson (1905--1995) first gained literary prominence when James Weldon Johnson and Robert Frost selected three of her poems for prizes in a 1926 competition. During the late 1920s and early 1930s her poetry appeared in various small magazines, such as the Saturday Evening Quill, Palms, Opportunity, and Harlem. In 1933 Johnson married, and two years later her last published poem, "Let Me Sing My Song," appeared in Challenge, the journal West had founded to revive the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

In his well-researched introduction, Verner D. Mitchell reconstructs Johnson's life, the details of which have long been veiled from public view, and places her in the context of a vital literary tradition. In addition to discussing her relationship with West, Hurston, and other black women writers, he explores the distinctive, at times radical, qualities of her work. Ever willing to defy the genteel conventions that governed women's writing, Johnson wrote poems on erotic themes and engaged the aesthetic, gender, and racial politics of her time.

Cheryl A. Wall's foreword also celebrates Johnson's talent, particularly the ease with which she moved among various verse forms -- from the rigor of the sonnet to the improvisational creativity of free black vernacular. "An unexpected and most welcome gift," This Waiting for Love, Wall writes, is "an enduring tribute" to "the vibrant poetry of Helene Johnson."

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