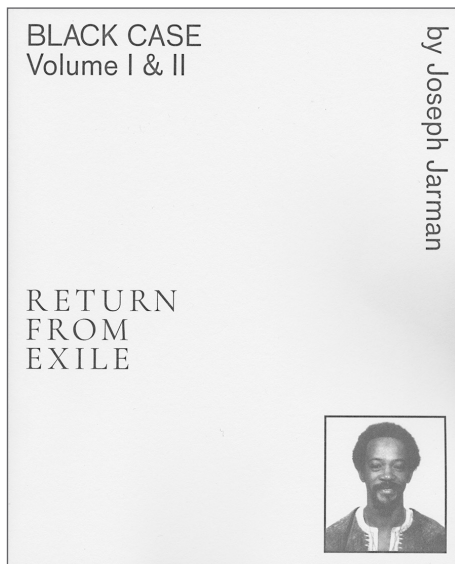


# BLACK CASE VOLUME I & II

## RETURN FROM EXILE

Joseph Jarman

Blank Forms Editions / After: Still (\$20)



A collection of writings, musical scores, and photographs by Joseph Jarman, a founding member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, *Black Case Volume I & II: Return from Exile* offers a world to wrap the mind around. The book is an important representation both of and beyond the Black Arts Movement; a psychedelic love letter to the power of music; and a beautiful record of an artist living and working in 20th-century America. Published by Jarman in 1977, this new reprint reflects the enduring character of the original while offering context and consideration via impressive introductions by Thulani Davis and Brent Hayes Edwards.

As Edwards notes, *Black Case* was created by Jarman out of numerous influences and in very specific contexts. Contemporaries and predecessors are anchors; jazz musicians like John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman make appearances, as do the voices of Amiri Baraka, Amos Tutuola, and Muhal Richard Abrams, to name a few. Art, and Black Art specifically, informs and lives within this text. As a representation of a world much larger than the writer, the “black case” of the book’s title can be interpreted as a collection of cultural artifacts and wisdom from fantastic, empowered thinkers and doers, along with an argument about initiation and experience within Jarman’s own personal history as an African American artist.

The experience is mostly reflective of the ebb and flow of music and society in the poet’s waking life: “moon lights / lovers nights / flames of youth / breath inward / hot JAZZ / blows.” Edwards explains that many of the pieces included in *Black Case* are the titles of musical and performance works available on albums to which Jarman contributed: “the intriguing implication is that these instrumental performances somehow capture the full range of the texts even when they do not include the language at all.” The unique dynamic between the content within *Black Case* and the author’s musical recordings and performances adds an additional layer of life and movement to the work.

As suggested by the subtitle, Jarman’s task is to describe the experience of exile, and the return from it. But what is exile? The journeys inward and outward are not only through music. As Edwards elucidates, Jarman’s writing was influenced by many uncomfortable journeys and experiences. Jarman experienced major tragedy while at war in Vietnam, staring the death of peers in the face; shortly after, he explored the continental United States and Mexico, moving from geography to geography, from landscape to landscape. We see these worlds of movement, life, and loss appear in crisp, intense moments that read like aphorisms or prayers:

Meditation – that we cease to seek  
the destruction of our brothers –  
through the conditioned thoughts  
of selfishness, greed, lust, and war –  
that we seek within us to reach  
out of our self protecting self  
seeking egotism; to reach  
for the ever glowing light –

Yet importantly, these meditations often dissipate right on the page:

to create the will  
to control  
only nothing  
there our need  
our  
object  
to be  
air  
to  
be  
air  
to  
be  
air  
only

The poetry and overall creativity within *Black Case* responds to “exile” by bringing forward heart and life, urgency and explosion—but these bursts are complemented by intellect and a passionate commitment to personal growth and elevation. Throughout his adult life, Jarman discovered the potency of the realities of the city (namely Chicago), the intricacies and attractions of Buddhism, and a love for martial arts; the language describes the release that resulted from surrendering to this relentless opportunity of spirit.

A fascinating theme throughout *Black Case* is the expanse that follows minimalism and stillness on the page. The poems harnessing such energy allude to questions such as where does creation happen, what is the potential energy within that creation, and how should we react to it? Some poems are effective in converting that energy into movement that can be further harnessed:

should chant secret songs to

bring blood to ourselves a whole

World-flower power,hip power,  
green power,love power,black power,

yellow power,music power,cosmic power,

world of words poets – not free men tick

your voice  
to tears

away and what we only do

This beautiful, kinetic energy is at times general and at others specific. In much of the writing, the power referred to is Black Power, both the historical movement (a photo of George Jackson taken by Thulani Davis in 1970 is included) but also any individual's interpretation. Jarman's "return from exile" is a spark of inspiration, of joy, and of undeniable urgency:

is it possible  
can you look at your black skin  
your black self if you got one  
and then do it it is  
time  
say do it yes  
go sing –  
the sound the music it is fire.

That urgency carries the book, nearly fifty years later, from cover to cover. The reader has countless opportunities to go beyond *Black Case*, or to simply enjoy what has been reproduced on the page to celebrate the inspirational world of Jarman and his peers.

— Greg Bem

# CHAPBOOK REVIEW

## AMALGAM

Sotère Torregian  
Ugly Duckling Presse (\$12)

Sotère Torregian's *Amalgam* traverses alchemical surrealist pathways with playful aggrandizement. His first epigraph, "notary sojack!" from Smokey Stover Comics, is the Gaelic manner of announcing Merry Christmas any time of year. From within his "cathedral of Old Gold cigarettes" Torregian merrily invites readers into this all-too-short smattering of poems from the 1960s to the present. His second epigraph, from Wallace Stevens's "Adagia," affirms "French and English constitute a single language," which bespeaks Torregian's routine blending of French with English. One poem ("Manifeste"), entirely in French, sets itself "vers la démolition de tous les poétiques" ("towards

demolishing all poetics"). In another the poet identifies himself as part of a proud lineage: "I surrealist Avenger Revolutionary acolyte of Leon Trotsky / and the heroes SACCO AND VANZETTI of Braintree Mass." Although the poet encourages "that remnant piece of barbed-wire / . . . from the Berlin Wall" be "shove[d] . . . up the nose of those who still defend / the 'White Man's burden,'" he still seeks beauty: "I haven't any Fatwas or any Encyclical Letters to write / to blossom into flowers today." Or as another poem reports, "It's 11.30 p.m. again And I'm / not opening the door to anyone." The poet is writing!

— Patrick James Dunagan

