

THE BEAUTIFUL ONE HAS COME

Hillel Wright

The *Beautiful One Has Come* is the title story of this collection of 12 stories, and is a translation of “Nefertiti”, the name of that legendary Queen of ancient Egypt. Billed as a “collection about expatriates in Cuba, Egypt, Australia, Japan and France,” the book divides into two sections. The first six stories, first or third person narratives, do indeed portray experiences, some unique, some mundane, of people living in cultures alien to their own. This includes Japanese living in Cuba, Egypt, Australia and France, a gay Hawaiian living in a small Japanese island town, and an American woman married to a Japanese man, also in small town Japan.

These stories display Kamata’s sharp eye for seemingly insignificant details which later prove to be essential, often ironic, facts. They also reveal her well-tempered sense of humor, which falls just shy of cynicism. In “Hawaiian Hips”, a tale of Victor, a gay Hawaiian hula teacher in love with Jiro, a closeted, local Japanese businessman who he met while the latter was vacationing on Maui, the narrator, an American woman married to another local Japanese businessman and a member of Victor’s hula class, becomes her teacher’s confidante.

As Victor’s relationship problems intensify, the narrator spends more and more time with him at a little bar across from the town hall where the hula class meets. These meetings provide her with some relief from the stresses and boredom of her everyday routine: “I can tell by the way he drinks,” she says; “by the furrows on his forehead, that Victor is in pain. The agony of love is hard to conceal. I listen to his story and pour him another drink because I want to help him, but I’m secretly thrilled. This is better than a soap opera.”

Except for the expatriate theme and settings, the first six stories are unrelated. Beginning with “Mandala”, which foreshadows the last five stories, the book turns to a group of related stories, all dealing with the gynecological and obstetrical complications of an American woman living in Japan with her Japanese husband, a high school teacher and baseball coach. Her medical problems lead first to a pregnancy by in vitro fertilization, which then leads to the conception of twins, a boy and a girl. But the couple’s initial joy becomes a long and trying ordeal when she is forced to give them birth by C-section after just 28 weeks in the womb, and a three-month-long period of incubation in hospital changes the placid lives of the parents as the preemies struggle to survive and the parents struggle to cope, and finally, to adapt.

Kamata tells the story of the birthing and incubation trauma in the story “You’re So Lucky” using the second person address narrative technique: “But then you see your newborn twins are trussed up with wires and tubes.” She then goes on to tell the same story from the father’s perspective, told by a third person narrator: “...Coach Hideki Yamada...slept only a few hours the night before, having stayed at the hospital with his wife Christine until after midnight, after which he’d gone home and worried about the batting order for another couple of hours.”

Since the bio notes tell us that Kamata was editor of the anthology *Love You to Pieces: Creative Writers on Raising a Child with Special Needs*, we might be tempted to see the last five stories as autobiographical. However, as she showed in her formidably well-edited and compiled anthology *The Broken Bridge*, which featured fiction from expatriate writers in “literary” Japan, Kamata understands the broader range of fic-

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The Beautiful One Has Come
Suzanne Kamata
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Suzanne Kamata

SONGS FROM A YAH! BOW

John Carroll

Scott Ezell’s inspiration for *Songs from a Yahi Bow* was the hundredth anniversary of Ishi’s surrender to white settlers in the Mount Lassen foothills of northern California. Ishi (a name given to him, for he never revealed his true name) was the last surviving member of the Yahi or Mill Creeks, a sub-group of the Yana tribe. His tribe was systematically wiped out in a process that can only be called genocide, the common fate of Native Americans due in part, at least in this region, to the “trauma of California gold,” as Thomas Merton describes it. Ishi’s story became more widely known when Theodore Kroeber published his 1961 biography *Ishi in Two Worlds*.

When Ishi was first discovered crouching in the tall grass by a slaughterhouse in the vicinity of Oroville, California, the first instinct of the teenager who found him was to club him with a pig gambrel since no Yahi had been seen in the area for twelve years and they had generally been considered a threat to the white settlers. Ishi and the few remaining members of his family had been in hiding all that time. Ishi was rescued by a professor from the anthropology department at Berkeley and he lived out his remaining four years in San Francisco in an anthropological museum where he worked as caretaker and sometimes “live exhibit.” Known as “the last wild American Indian,” Ishi died of tuberculosis in 1916. Gary Snyder has referred to Ishi as “the patron Bodhisattva of our Northern California nation.”

Scott Ezell has attempted to put together what he calls not an anthology but a work whose “parts combine into an integrated whole.” These parts include Mike O’Connor’s poem-cycle from the 1970s entitled “Song of Ishi”; “Quatrains for Ishi” by Yusef Komunyakaa from his *Thieves of Paradise*; Scott Ezell’s own collection entitled “Ishi”; and finally, an essay by Thomas Merton from the 1960s, “Ishi: A Meditation.” Inserted between these selections is a series of paintings by Jeff Hengst. As an integrated whole, the work is tasteful and evocative.

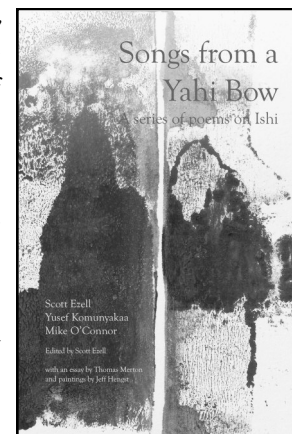
In some ways the book is an effort to see our modern world through Ishi’s eyes. For example, O’Connor writes “A plane is nothing when you see the Hawk/Don’t feel bad, but a skyscraper/is a poor mountain.” This same reflection on what would Ishi think is apparent in O’Connor’s “Thinking of Ishi While Reading the Want Ads.” Naturally, this kind of thinking brings out the contrasts and conflicts between the two worlds, Ishi’s and ours. Ezell writes “I am a benevolent bear,/wasted with circus tricks . . . /we are chains and cages,/we are free.”

Ezell’s particular focus, as he suggests in his introduction, is his “own sense of living in two worlds,” for which he finds an obvious and direct connection with Ishi. Ezell eloquently writes:

Ishi existed in public consciousness as “what we have destroyed”; and by the 21st century maybe we have begun to recognize him as “what we are”—and to realize as industrial society paves over ecosystems, languages, and indigenous cultures, we destroy not some abstraction or “other,” but ourselves, and that the erosion of human and natural diversity diminishes us all.

Much of Mike O’Connor’s poetry attempts to catalogue that lost world: “You know the joy/the acorn’s ripeness brings.” He often uses an array of imagery to effect this recreation: “Fawn cry, arrow whiz,/snake rattle, coyote yip,/water fall, timber creak,/fire crackle and wind pine roar.”

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Songs from a Yahi Bow: Poems about Ishi.
Scott Ezell, ed.
Empty Bowl, 2010



Ishi

MOONLIGHT IN THE REDEMPITIVE FOREST

Marjorie Romme

Michael Daley's *Moonlight in the Redemptive Forest* is a strongly affecting book, from its striking black and white cover art, "The Child's Song," by Gae Pilon, to the unexpected delights of its accompanying CD, "Frankie The Milkman's Song & Other Poems," composed and read by Daley, accompanied by Brad Killion on guitar. This is a keeper, a book that *should* be read aloud, word by word, line by line, to an audience, if possible, even if only an audience of one.

The patterns in this tight, strongly textured, beautifully crafted, intensely personal collection of poems are not formal, not regular in any conventional way, and readers who are bothered by this may find it easy to get lost in the tangle of shifting times, places, pronouns and tenses, a certain ambiguousness, the persistence of elusive meanings, characters who may be real (and relative), borrowed, reimagined, or flat-out fictional. But as the late Canadian poet Robin Skelton demanded of us, "Why should the novelists have all the fun?"

Daley's language is, as always, intricate and thrillingly evocative, served up in a modified stream-of-consciousness style not unlike that of Eliot, Joyce, or Wolff — a postmodernist feast for the discerning reader.

Nothing in these poems is absolute, except their emotional content, the passion — and occasional humor — with which they are told. Close attention is required to get all the juice from them, as the poet definitely tells his stories slant. Still, there is a narrative of sorts, its shifting shape much like that of the traditional shaman's journey into darkness, transformation, and the return.

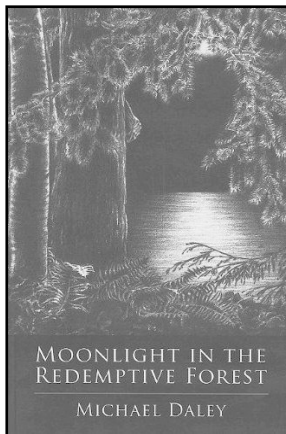
Among significant hinges in this collection are "The Child's Song," so dreamlike, "On Air," and the desperately bitter, funny/sad "The Pariah's Tale," especially the Pariah himself, who seems to have dropped in on us like that man who fell from the moon, afflicted with global amnesia, yet able to survive by doing things that alienate him — even more than he already is — from the unfamiliar country and people around him, stealing fish from the gulls, dropping his pants to the neighbors.

The last lines of this poem are a sucker punch to the gut: "Who will love me? Who will want me now? ... I have drifted so far from the map now everybody's angry." It's the question we all ask, pretty much every day of our lives. The speaker's plaintive cry reminds me of that old man of Chaucer's, knocking on the earth, pleading, "Mother! Let me in!"

There are deep affinities, which took me a while to unravel, between "The Pariah's Tale" and "The Second Father's Tale." Together, they make a darker forest, a more luminous moonlight, for "The Child's Song" to shine through. "On Air," its speaker in so many ways Daley himself, his childhood and adolescence, his drifting, and the sense of redemption at finding himself at home here in the Pacific Northwest, acts as a very long coda to "The Child's Song."

Elusive meanings — part of the complexity we look for in poetry — are everywhere in *Moonlight*, if one pays attention and has done the necessary reading. I don't at all mind admitting Daley has sent me back to Eliot and Chaucer...maybe even to Ashbery, though I'm still thinking about him — that perpetual sense of listening, through the wrong end of a drinking glass pressed against a motel room door, to a quiet and somehow disjointed conversation taking place in the room on the other side, frustrates me right out of my skin, and to begin with, Daley did too.

The poems in *Moonlight* seem almost hallucinogenic, but that's the way memory and consciousness work. Listening to the CD that accompanies the book, hearing the poet speak his poem, "Frankie the Milkman" and others, points up the humor, the despite-everything buoyancy of the cozily humdrum everyday that co-exists, in this



Moonlight in the Redemptive Forest
Michael Daley
Pleasure Boat Studio: A
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Michael Daley

collection, with what I can only describe as despair. I *love* that.

It's true that to me — surely I'm not alone — cozies (and Hobbit Holes) often seem safer places to be than the forest, so alien to us in these latter days. But when push comes to shove, few of us seem able to resist the its wild call, though gooseflesh rising along our limbs signals our recognition of dangerous territory ahead, where no moonlight shows us the path, and total darkness threatens to steal our sense of direction, our awareness that others of our kind, and still others not entirely unlike us, are out there too, stumbling around among the roots of ancient, closely crowded trees.

Like most of us, I have — now and then, here and there — made myself an at least temporary pariah. I've been lost in woods of one sort or another many times in my life, desperately afraid of never being found, never finding my way. Oh yes, I do *so* vividly remember crying out, "Who will love me? Who will want me now?"

In *Moonlight*, Daley shows us the forest *is* redemptive, moonlight does shine there, at least here and there, now and then — and remade by the journey through it, we can find our way, if we persist, mind our own and the world's past, and attend to the present, to the wild world around us. At least, I would like to think we can.

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tion's possibilities. Her strength as a short story writer is her control of strong emotional situations, and in this latest collection of her own work she uses finely honed powers of observation and mastery of narrative techniques to avoid the pitfalls of pathos which might trap a less talented author.

Hillel Wright is editor of Jungle Crows: a Tokyo Expatriate Anthology. His new book, River Road: a novel of 6 stories, a sequel to his 2006 novel Border Town, is forthcoming from Printed Matter Press in April 2012.

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Ezell does some of the same, but most often his effective imagery moves beyond simple nostalgia: "reams of light stack page by page/across the slush and bray/of slaughterhouse corrals." Or, "sirens unzip the sky . . . /old bums with birdnest beards/suck wine and nicotine/by the back doors/of strip tease matinees—"

In contrast, Yusef Komunyakaa dramatizes Ishi's arrival in this new "home":

*when they swoop on you hobbled there
almost naked, encircled by barking dogs
at daybreak beside a slaughterhouse
in Oroville, outside Paradise,*

*California, draped in a canvas scrap
matted with dung & grass seed,
slacked-jawed men aim rifles
at your groin. Wild Man*

Merton's essay concludes the collection. His emphasis is on the issue of genocide with a particular focus on a comparison between the Indian Wars and the Vietnam War. The essay, however, still feels modern if one considers all the issues of so-called collateral damage and drone warfare.

Ezell has put together a fine collection. His attempt at an integrated wholeness is manifested in the theme. What is home? What is being at home? Where is home for us today in a world that feels for many increasingly foreign and ironically, or not, more and more engorged with homeless peoples. The final line of Ezell's poem resonates with this theme: "die at home wherever you may be." Ishi comes to represent for him then "an example of regeneration, and the integrity and suppleness of spirit that may come with being 'home' in one's own skin."

John Carroll is a longtime contributor to PRRB. His most recent book is The Plastic Heart (Ekstasis).