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Lindsay Diehl

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

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Passion for Poetry and the Natural World

Late Moon by PAMELA PORTER

Ronsdale, 2013 \$15.95

The Family China by ANN SHIN

Brick Books, 2013 \$20.00

Reviewed by LINDSAY DIEHL

American poet W. S. Merwin once admitted that, “The thing that makes me want to write is the same thing that makes me love that blade of grass.” For him, poetic inspiration is closely tied to an appreciation of the natural world; it is a connection that he can “trace all the way back into early childhood.” Merwin’s statements about the intertwining relationship between poetry and nature appear to hold particular resonance for Canadian poets Pamela Porter and Ann Shin, who in their most recent collections of poetry evoke a relationship with the land—the trees, animals, and birds—as a rich source of creative insight and expression, in order to explore the intricacies of their respective family histories.

In her sixth book of poetry, *Late Moon*, award-winning poet Pamela Porter employs her characteristic mode of writing—the short lyric poem—to delve into an unfamiliar and personal topic. As Porter explains in the book’s “Afterward,” the poems in *Late Moon* represent an attempt to come to terms with questions about her paternity. These questions arise from the fact that she was never able to meet her biological father; her mother died without sharing the “secret” of his identity. The book thus provides Porter with a means to imagine and engage with her father, as well as work through some of the anger and pain

associated with her inability to have a relationship with him. Correspondingly, various themes, images, and symbols tend to recur in the poems, subtly accruing to suggest an underlying conception of the poetic spirit as an internalized “wildness” or a graced ability to endure hardship. Certainly, Porter seems to find a way to articulate and navigate through her grief, by appealing to a greater power found concurrently in poetry and the natural world.

In many of Porter’s poems, the speakers indicate that a vital energy has moved into their bodies to provide them with much needed strength and intuition—in “Poetry,” for instance, the speaker confides that, “Poetry entered me / a bird of purred smoke / as if from a smothered fire;” it now hides in the recesses of her being and sometimes sits “up in me . . . promising that we could tell the truth / she and I / promising we could tell everything.” Likewise, in “To Speak of Him,” the speaker finds some solace in aspects of the natural world. Throughout the poem, she describes her father in various ways—as “*absent / meaning winter, a long darkness,*” as well as “*silent, / the light of the afternoon leaving the doorway.*” By the end of the poem, however, the speaker finds a way to answer the absence and the silence of her father, by aligning herself with

. . . the sound of geese /
beating their wings and crying to the
night, /
all these have entered me: /
canyon, shadow, mountain, /
a long season, /
the frozen moon, and the
rain.

In *Late Moon*, imagery of the moon, owls, and birds are frequent, as symbols from the natural world that help to convey mystery

and mourning, but also perceptiveness and vision. Like the speaker in “The News from Here,” then, readers of this collection may find themselves admiring the “hummingbirds [who] / went about weaving their nests / with twigs impossibly small / wound with the treads of loss.” Readers may take away consolation from the persistence and beauty of both poetry and the natural world in the face of difficulty and privation.

If the natural world in Porter’s *Late Moon* is sometimes evoked as a spirit that can enter and inspire one’s body, in Ann Shin’s second collection of poetry, *The Family China*, it remains more enigmatic—it is capable of nourishing the senses, but is also separate and inaccessible like a dream. For example, in “Forgotten Fields,” the first of five interconnected long poems, Shin problematizes any sense of easy relationship between the speaker and the landscape. The poem opens with a family of South Korean immigrants papering “the insides of a farmhouse gone to bush.” Initially, the family seems able to domesticate the farmhouse—it “mellowed and ripened” under their care. Life assumed a certain rhythm and purpose: “Trees sprouted apples, cherries dropped from heavy boughs.” Nonetheless, a trace of darkness lingers to haunt the outwardly idyllic space; the speaker confesses that the wallpaper that the family once hung “Now . . . peels like petals drying on the stem.” Indeed, it seems the farmhouse could never meet the family’s “dreams of a safe haven beside the fields,” because of ensuing personal tragedy, but also because of larger urban developments. So, the speaker shares that her mother, who tended the property “with the assurance of one who could see order in chaos,” is now crippled by an accident; the house in total decline.

Similarly, the speaker shows that, while the family worked on their farm,

The practiced hand of progress /
did its surgery on our village, /
its skin razed concrete-smooth, /
raspberry thickets, knotted roots
and stones /
peeled back . . . /
A crop of beige houses sprout up
erect, /
the celebrated seeds of eugenic
success.

Thus, the speaker comes to recognize of her family that, “we appear and disappear / like reflections in a puddle, / echoed in this landscape / but not of it.” Despite her belief that nature can haul “our senses back to a place of belonging,” she also concludes that “pastoral imagery ain’t / getting me nowhere.”

The subsequent poems in this collection turn to focus the human struggles that emerge in interpersonal relationships. In these poems, nature is less of a direct focus; however, territory remains a metaphor to convey the difficulties resulting from the intricate maps of human relations. In describing her deteriorating relationship with her husband, for instance, the speaker in “Factory of Discontent” admits that, “Our frontiers are internal now / border crossings subject to new regulations.” The source of marital problems seems linked to the speaker’s sense of displacement: “I distrust the land, all feelings . . . The earth falls away and my hands / hold an idea beneath my feet.” Throughout these poems, one of Shin’s most affective poetic techniques is to include tangential asides as footnotes on the margins of the page. These footnotes are associated with particular words in the poems—so, for example, in the above poem, the word “hands” is highlighted and

the footnote defines the word by telling a story about the speaker's first meeting with her husband's father, a moment in which the speaker senses, "I am solid, / entitled to my place / on earth." The footnote provides a history of interactions to deepen the topic of the poem—but it also works to highlight the speaker's complicated sense of belonging. It would appear that belonging is associated not only with feeling accepted by one's friends and family, but also with having a place "on earth." Therefore, in *The Family China*, belonging emerges as a sense of being clearly situated within both human and physical geographies. For Shin, furthermore, poetry—with its stunning ability to identify and pursue certain truths—seems the bonding agent that can negotiate and make evident the pertinent connections between the two. As the closing lines of the collection express, "[A]ll the pieces . . . come together now, the years settle like formed-to-fit pieces, / culled and reshaped for my body."

magazines, including *Fireweed*, *Geist*, *Lake*, and *The Capilano Review*.

Works Cited

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LINDSAY DIEHL is currently pursuing a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies at University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus, with the support of a doctoral scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her research interests include postcolonial and Canadian literature, ecofeminist theory, and critical animal studies. Her poems and short stories have been published in various literary