

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***She Returns to the Floating World***

by Jeannine Hall Gailey

Kitsune Books, 2011

130 pages

\$12.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Christine Cutler

I was assigned poems from Jeannine Hall Gailey's *Becoming The Villainess* for a contemporary poetry class. It was late, I was tired, and I couldn't imagine how anyone could adapt characters from mythology, comic books and fairy tales into women grappling with struggles of the modern world. I was wrong. Captivated by the wickedly funny, violent and sometimes sad heroines, I read the entire collection that evening.

Similarly, I was a bit cautious in reading *She Returns to the Floating World*, in which Gailey interweaves Japanese myths, fables and legends with modern life and pop culture. My hesitance with the second collection of poems was due to the fact that I know very little about Japanese *anime* and almost nothing about Japanese folklore. Once again, I need not have worried. While I probably missed subtle references to Japanese culture, I—and every other reader—can understand the motifs of love, loss, destruction, hope and despair in Gailey's flowing lyrics.

Separated into five sections, the poems wander through the real world (Knoxville, Phoenix, Tokyo, Seattle) as well as through the imaginary worlds of space, the future, and *anime*. The themes of danger and loss are omnipresent. Gailey makes numerous references to her childhood in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, home of the atom bomb, and to the destructive power not only of the bomb but also of its afterlife, with its "radioactive mud," "poisoned forests," "mutated farm animals," and trees "growing radioactive fruit." The bomb, which was supposed to bring peace breeds destruction instead.

In "Little Girls, Atom Bombs," Gailey subtly references the harmful effects of nuclear power:

. . .

I grew up in Oak Ridge, all my friends  
physicists' daughters, sons of nuclear engineers.  
Behind our school, the giant-domed houses of bombs.  
We played in snow measured by a geiger counter. . .

There is a sense of normalcy until we read the last phrase of this stanza and realize the unseen evil even in a place untouched by actual bombing.

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In “Chaos Theory,” Gailey describes flowers and tomatoes that have doubled and tripled “. . . in size and variety,/ magentas, pinks and red so bright they blinded. . .” Similarly, it is not until the last stanza that she mentions the radiation poisoning suffered by the janitor who owned the garden.

In one of the most poignant poems in the book, “Postcard from the Suburbs of Seattle to the Suburbs of Tokyo,” Gailey puts blame on her own shoulders for the devastation of nuclear power. In the end, though, she offers both hope and an apology. Consider the last three stanzas:

. . .

I grew up in the birthplace  
of bombs that poisoned children,  
burned holes into your sacred earth.  
Their poison is part of me.  
In the shelter of a shrine, a small girl  
holds an umbrella. She becomes a white bird.  
She whispers and a thousand cranes  
pile up inside me, spill out onto these pages.  
Forgive me, ghosts, for my hard,  
unbeautiful hands, for my tripping tongue,  
as you demand a healed future, some untorn prayer.

*She Returns to the Floating World* encourages multiple readings because so many emotions and messages spew from the poems at once. During one of my readings, I noticed that while Gailey’s lyrics bring the picture into sharp focus, there is rarely any sound save for the warbling of a bird or rustle of leaves. The lack of noise mimics the quiet after nuclear annihilation.

The title refers to *ukiyo-e*—literally translated, “pictures of the floating world”—a genre of Japanese woodblock prints which became popular after the unification of Japan in the 16th century, not only because mass production made them affordable for even commoners, but also because the prints portrayed courtesans, sumo wrestlers, geisha and entertainers—the beautiful people—and depicted scenes of a more carefree existence. Gailey’s shape-shifters—men and women as foxes, girls as birds, the disappearing women, the magic hand glider flights—represent her attempt to create her own fantasy *ukiyo-e* world without destruction, devastation, evil. *She Returns to the Floating World* is a well-crafted and delightful collection of poems that will take readers on a journey with Gailey beyond the chaos of the modern world into the potential of the future.

**Tamura Ryuichi: On the Life & Work of a 20th Century Master**

Edited by Takako Lento and Wayne Miller

Pleiades Press, 2011

172 pages

\$12.99 (paper)

Reviewed by Chet Weise

Tamura Ryuichi's WWII military service required him to man a gun emplacement awaiting invasion by the United States. Many of his friends had already died in *kamikaze* missions. The invasion of Japan never came. Instead US nuclear strikes ended the war and, paradoxically, saved Tamura from what he believed would be his imminent death. Another influence from the West, T.S. Eliot, gripped Tamura so intensely that he became a Wasteland poet—i.e., a member of a group of Japanese poets who published a journal entitled *The Wasteland* and plunged headlong into modernism. The poems and essays in the collection *Tamura Ryuichi: On the Life & Work of a 20th Century Master* explore symbiotic relationships and collisions between the poet and Japan and the poet and the West. And it is fascinating for American readers to see the effects of these explorations on a non-Western person and his art.

In his Introduction, editor Wayne Miller says his own advocacy for Tamura is born of the poet's ability to wed "deeply dark and unflinching" poetry with "sharply engaged political and historical concerns" and still remain "deeply personal." Ironically, Tamura himself attested that the most powerful modern Japanese poem was composed by the Japanese High command on December 8th (western hemisphere dateline—December 7th), 1941: "Before dawn this morning, the 8th, the Imperial Army and Navy entered a condition of combat with American and British forces in the Western Pacific."

Here are a few lines from Tamura's poem "Far Country": "My joy and sadness / are even simpler things / like killing people from a far country / there's no need for words." The reader feels the poem's emotive leap from the personal to global to political and back to personal. The lines also un-bundle Tamura's prominent themes: 1) paradox 2) fear and 3) language vs war, censorship, and nationalism.

Paradox also fills these lines from "Four Thousand Days and Nights": "In order for a poem to be born / we must kill / we must kill many / we shoot down, assassinate, poison many we love." However, the paradox works on two levels. Figuratively, the poet must sacrifice ("kill") and bear all, but Tamura, also, literally, saw WWII create poetry from death and madness. Tamura bluntly states, "There needs to be more poems written based on the

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very fear of human existence itself.” The poem “Every Morning after Killing Thousands of Angels” is an example:

I read a boy's poem called  
“Every Morning after Killing Thousands of Angels”  
I forget the poem, but the title won't leave me  
I drink some coffee  
read a paper read by millions

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the only part I trust  
is the financial page  
a completely blank space governed  
by the mechanics of capital and pure speculation.

The oddly detached speaker goes on to interview the boy regarding killing angels. His own conclusion chills: “I've got to go out and live / after killing / killing thousands of angels.”

Translator Christopher Drake stresses that Tamura founded a style outside of the old traditional, anti-philosophical, and highly compressed Japanese lyrical forms. His rebellion came in response to the explicit censorship and nationalism of WWII and the implicit censorship inherent in the strict rules of traditional Japanese poetry. Consequently, the poet both re-claims Japanese language from WWII dominance and also introduces more individualism into Japanese poetry. “The House of Man” clearly shows Tamura's wish to do so:

my idea of going home is not based on political belief or religious creed  
I just want to see with my own eyes  
the collapse of the house of man  
the deconstruction of my language  
of course my house is not made of your words  
my house is made of my words

Once again Tamura addresses paradox, and the individual vs. history/society, but this time, he includes his language as an all-important part of his “house.”

Miller points out in the Introduction that Tamura is one of the most prominent figures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese literature, and he compares his influence on Japanese poetry to Zbigniew Herbert or Tadeusz Rozewicz's on Polish poetry or Celan's on German poetry. After reading the excellent selection of poems and essays in *Tamura Ryuichi: On the Life & Work of a 20th Century Master*, I find it easy to see why. Ultimately, Tamura creates something new out of the wasteland of post-WWII Japan, thus helping Japan to reassess its past and form its future.

## ***Inheritance***

by Steven Reigns

Sibling Rivalry Press, 2011

80 pages

\$14.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by J. Andrew Goodman

Herbert Hoover claimed that living the American Dream meant owning a house with a white picket fence and having two cars for every garage. He also said it meant having two kids, a boy and a girl, everything chiefly concerned with security, comfort, and legacy. But, what we're missing in this recipe is character and history, we're missing "the secrets we kept" as Steven Reigns says in this confessional collection of poetry that chronicles his life since conception. Each poem is dedicated to a pivotal event or series of events, detailing emotional and sexual abuse, broken relationships, and the passing of old friends.

Reigns has a voice that demands his story be listened to. It yearns for acceptance from family, friends, lovers, but it is tempered with a "look at me now" attitude that's been delivered from years of self-consciousness. In "What Are You Going to Pay For That With? Your Good Looks?" he replies simply and assertively, "Yes." This stance actually comes off as playful and without the ennui of high school melodrama. In fact, besides a couple of lackluster similes, nothing in the collection could be considered boring.

What Reigns does best in this collection is convey his experiences and his desires without censorship. Raw, is the word that comes to mind. In the third poem of the collection, "Playing With the Doll," Reigns recalls how the giant-sized Patty Play Pal in his family's basement became the prelude to his own molestation by his neighbor Josh:

He'd throw the naked doll down face first,  
press his thick body against  
the jaundiced glow of her synthetic skin.  
He'd writhe on top of her,  
a young boy of nine grinding his hips  
into the part of her legs, where if she were flesh, there would be a hole.

What makes this poem fascinating is its conclusion. After Reigns is given the same treatment as the doll, his mother accuses and reprimands him for having touched the doll inappropriately when she finds it face first on the

floor. This tension sets a precedent for the remainder of the collection, which intensifies once Reigns has confessed that he is a homosexual. He becomes the target of his mother's passive aggressiveness and ever more the "stone-faced doll that took it."

Reigns also delves into his romantic relationships, sometimes in explicitly sexual poems, such as "Biting" and "Everyone is Being Versatile But Me." In this regard, he isn't as coy as say Sharon Olds, but his explicitness contributes to his pervasive, raw voice. Other poems in this vein are about ex-boyfriends or old lovers who have denounced their homosexuality—the author never questions his own sexuality, which provides a confidence that is both refreshing and admirable. Reigns also discusses a plight among the gay community, something that hasn't been addressed much in queer literature the past two years: AIDS. A number of Reigns' poems are dedicated to friends he's lost to the disease, including "Italo" and "The Dead," but one is dedicated to the believed progenitor of the disease. "Gaetan Dugas" is an incredibly moving poem that seeks to separate the disease and its consequences from the man. In this poem, Reigns imagines Dugas, the flight attendant, not his notoriety for spreading disease:

You pointing with two fingers to the exits and aisle lights,  
miming how to use the oxygen mask and life vest.  
I like this image, you were interested in saving lives,  
not killing.  
You liked to serve and please.  
That is what you did,  
offered love wrapped in barbed wire, not knowing  
and the unknowing is why  
I forgive you.

Homosexuality is often, and wrongly, considered a disease, so in many ways this poem embodies the entire collection, down to the disparities between Steven Reigns and his family. There is what we are and what we appear to be. What we appear to be is often different, defined by what we want, or what others wanted before us. *Inheritance* is about this face-value legacy. And, with high hopes, we can find what Steven Reigns has found beyond it, acceptance.

## ***How They Were Found***

by Matt Bell

Keyhole Press, 2010

280 pages

\$20.99 (paperback)

Reviewed by Jason Campagna

Matt Bell's short story collection *How They Were Found* takes the reader on a spellbinding trip down the "rabbit hole" of the author's mind. While traveling through twisted landscapes, the reader experiences the stories through the lens of an altered state of perception. Frankly, the fantasy aspect of the writing may not be for everyone; however, I found the stories to be compelling enough to keep me turning the page.

The title evokes the imagery of a crime scene where bodies lie undisturbed. It is up to the reader not so much to solve the mystery of their demise as to understand what really happened and who these people really were. The writing style reminded me somewhat of Kurt Vonnegut's in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the rules of the universe can suddenly shift beneath the reader's feet. Bell manages to pull off these shifts and still give enough detail to anchor the reader. Overall, the stories lean toward dark imagery, while at the same time injecting an occasional dose of humor.

In "The Cartographer's Girl", a heartbroken map-maker desperately seeks out his missing girlfriend by creating maps based on their relationship together. By such means, while exploring the hidden clues of her life, he endeavors to locate the hidden sanctuary to which his love has stolen away. The use of glyphs in this tale proved somewhat confusing at first, but as the glyphs melted into the lines of the page and became grafted into a map-key of the story, their purpose became apparent.

Bell creates a post-apocalyptic world in "The Receiving Tower," where the last refuge of humanity struggles to remember the old world while desperately searching for future hope. Their survival is threatened by the tyrannical rule of a Captain who quickly brings death to those who disobey his rules. The story will be familiar to those who grew up in the Cold War era, when fear of our pending nuclear destruction played out frequently in literature, cinema, and television. Possibly, it also points out the dangers that still exist with non-state nuclear proliferation.

In "Hold On To Your Vacuum," Bell creates a dream-like world where the protagonist is entered into a game with no clear rules except, as the title suggests, to keep a vacuum cleaner at hand. In fact, reading Bell here

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reminds me of listening to Pink Floyd's *Wall* album, where students are taught to conform to whatever twisted philosophy to which the government holds. A sinister teacher runs around killing contestants over and over again with a power drill, while the contestants relive the failed moments of their lives. Contestants, desperate to figure out the rules of the game between punishments, also try to discover a way to beat the teacher at his own game. This story gives a prime example of Bell's humor; I couldn't help but find funny the concept of a protagonist holding on to a vacuum cleaner during sex.

A good target audience for the collection would be readers aged between sixteen and thirty nine. Readers who enjoy dark fiction bordering on noir would be well at home in it, and it might also be well received in undergraduate classroom settings. Overall, I enjoyed *How They Were Found*, but from a literary standpoint, I would give it mixed results. As with Haruki Murakami, in Bell's hands a seemingly "normal" story can rapidly fall off the cliff into the realm of the mythological and surreal. Bell's work may be well received in some circles, but it may not be for everyone.