Book Review: *No Mercy*

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approaches of other antinuclearists such as Jonathan Schell, Helen Caldicott, and Robert Jay Lifton, all of whom in one way or another "de-historicize" the problem of war and the sovereign state and thereby unwittingly promote despair of a solution. Of course this procedure is routine in the conduct of contemporary critical discourse: a text deconstructs the pretexts which in turn generate it. One wishes that it could be done without-in the old parlance-attacking one's friends. Still, Smith's last chapter is not only the most optimistic but the most forthcoming in the book, which holds out the prospect of an antinuclear politics based on confidence that history is not over, that "Humanness, at its most basic level of needs and desire, is undying," and that just as "people's narrative constructions of the world can shift and change,... ultimately, the story itself can change" (157). It is nice to be able to think so.

David Huisman


No Mercy, by nationally distinguished poet and former GVSU faculty member, Lee Upton, is a spirited yet subtle reminder of poetry's ability to reach behind the ordinary and touch something riotous. Selected by James Tate as part of the 1988 National Poetry Series, this remarkable second collection both illuminates and nourishes our contemporary human condition as we move toward the end of the 20th century. As Tate writes, "The poems are intimate in such peculiar ways that they make us savor our fragile humanity."

Upton explores the margins of everyday life, undertaking risky excursions into those moments when we slip into the subjective gap between our own ideals and reality, between private memory and public fact, between vision and event. In poems such as "The Imagination of Flowers," abstract ideas push against portraits of the mundane until the tension between the two quietly explodes. "He's rich,/ the man who watches the woman/ raking around a plaster chicken.

And/ the woman, they say, is not quite/ right. Making a plaster chicken at home/ is all it looks like to him."

Such precise and marvelously rich images, which form the infrastructure for many of these poems, call up issues that are immediately and intimately familiar—but which seldom get addressed with such exactness and honesty. The calm, conversational tone of a poem like "New Year's Eve on a Train" works to enlarge this emerging sense that behind the apparently insignificant details of everyday lingers an ever-changing something that—once recognized—for an instant transforms us: "I believe that train/ moves to another year/ and we can't help/ forgetting ourselves./ Slowly everyone becomes friendly—as if we have been/ excused from our memories./ I have changed./ Please tell me. Is the same/ the same there?" Whether through the details of a train ride, an impressionistic account of a woman by the sea, or in the distilled images of a father buying his daughter a piano, the ordinary and the inevitable collide with compelling results.

At times the world Upton renders seems seductively peaceful; these lines from "The Imagination of Flowers." "...wine at an outdoor/ party, the glass, the world/ colors, one band/ dream of direction incorpo­rated into various parts of the world./ To be looking,/ safe in a room/ best of your traveling, on, experience, or/ recalling of it, is no/ and no amount—of/ likely to change the/ of the human condition/ your property are/ what pink, in the/ decency. Mercy/ your wife is./ Your again/ but wondering./ Fine. She is fine."

With intelligence and wit, No Mercy presents a world where... it—in the present... to the end of a certain/ hill/ no ocean/ no/ chases." It is a vision in more compact terms, which insists upon the maddening balance each of us brings this world: between our dreams on one hand, and the affairs on the other. As Tate closes this volume, which is called, simply, "Happy,

In the hot white...
peculiar ways that fragile humanity."

The margins of the text suggest taking risky excursions when we slip between our own fact, between private vision; such as "The Imaginative, abstract ideas push the mundane until the two quietly explodes: an old man who watches the plaster chicken. They say, is not quite/ or chicken at home/ is fine."

and marvelously rich infrastructure for issues, call up issues that seldom get addressed sensibly and honesty. The tone of a poem like "Train" works to enhance the sense that behind the ever-changing something recognized—for an instant? I believe that train/ year/ and we can't believe ourselves. Slowly friendly—as if we have escape as if he feels the world around him too much, more than the heat on the fourth floor that presses on us today but doesn't leave him. The boy is just learning to paint. And the salesgirl in pink tennis shoes, her head bowed, wants a glass of water only. He is sick, her brother, she says. He spends all day making these. There's something wrong with him, but she's not supposed to tell us what. I take the last scene she shows, a lion or a yellow bear in snow and angry at a red bird above him. If he caught her he wouldn't let her go.

But, the poem goes on, experience, or at least our reading or recalling of it, is not so pure and perfect and no amount—or quality—of mercy is likely to change this fundamental feature of the human condition: "The branches on your property are somewhat/ red, somewhat pink, in their form of happy indecency. Mercy/ is more constant than your wife is./ You never want to see her again/ but wonder, wonder how she is./ Fine. She is fine."

With intelligence and tenderness, *No Mercy* presents a vision of life as we live it—in the present—"when we are turning to the end of a century/ where there's no hill/ no ocean/ no weeping without pur-

chases." It is a vision at once larger and more compact than what we typically choose to see. And ultimately, it is a vision which insists upon an essential appreciation for the maddening and/or magical balance each of us somehow maintains between our dreams and desires on the one hand, and the drama of actual human affairs on the other. The poem which brings this volume to its very appropriate close describes this quietly affirmative, more meditative bent, at its best; it is called, simply, "Happiness":

In the hot white dome of air here where the cicadas scream, simmer and scream, as if someone has just put them on to boil, we take our time with the salesgirl who has come to our door with pictures her brother paints. A village in clouds, three people looking at a peach in a white sky, a tiny bridge and tinier men. The title is Happiness she tells us. She is shy and doesn't expect anyone to buy anything from her. In this one darkness wants to overcome the awkward shapes on a road, smudged as if their bodies could ascend through the firs. We sink back into the heat, entering our formless world again. Her brother paints all about escape as if he feels the world around him too much, more than the heat on the fourth floor that presses on us today but doesn't leave him. The boy is just learning to paint. And the salesgirl in pink tennis shoes, her head bowed, wants a glass of water only. He is sick, her brother, she says. He spends all day making these. There's something wrong with him, but she's not supposed to tell us what. I take the last scene she shows, a lion or a yellow bear in snow and angry at a red bird above him. If he caught her he wouldn't let her go. 
This animal wants to take
the world in his mouth
and eat it slowly. If he caught her
he would still be angry.
The title of this painting appears,
the painter's sister lets us know,
on the back. It is called Happiness.
She is sorry, she says.
They are all called Happiness.

Pat Bridges

_HOME TO STAY_, ed. Sylvia Watanabe and
Carol Bruchac. Greenfield Center, N.Y.:

The sales of recent fiction like Maxine
Hong Kingston's _Tripmaster Monkey_ and
Amy Tan's _The Joy Luck Club_, and the fre­
cuency with which individual stories by
Gish Jen, Fae Myenne Ng, and Bharati
Mukherjee appear in the major periodicals
indicate the burgeoning popularity of fic­
tion written by Asian-American women.
The five named above are some current
leaders in a field whose groundwork was
in fact laid by others—Wakako Yamauchi
and Hisaye Yamamoto among them—who
have been publishing fine fiction for
years. The editors of _Home to Stay_ have
included works by all these women and
balanced the collection by embracing the
work of younger writers as well.

In her introduction, Carol Bruchac says
she was attracted to this project because
she felt it had the potential to "teach
us what it is like to live in a country which
views one as an 'outsider,' oftentimes as an
'exotic outsider.'" The traditions depicted
in this anthology, which comprises work
by women of Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese,
Indian, Filipino, Malaysian, Indonesian,
Vietnamese, and Pakistani extraction, oft­
en bears out the expectation of exoticism.

In Marie Hara's "1895 Honeymoon Hotel,"
for instance, we accompany a Japanese
picture bride on her tremulous arrival to a
brand new life in Hawaii, and one of the
principals in Diana Davenport's "House of
Skin" is a yakuza—a Japanese crime boss
tattooed from head to ankles. However,
the unexotic side of being an outsider is
certainly also present. Marnie Mueller's
"Changes" is the story of a family's adjust­
ment to confinement in the Tule Lake Inter­
ternment Center during the war, and
Yamamoto writes of a Japanese-American
woman's nightmare ride on a "Wilshire
Bus": "So clear out, all of you," says the
Caucasian antagonist, "and remember to
take every last one of your slant-eyed pic­
kaninnies with you!" Soon after, the dis­
traught woman arrives at the VA hospital
to visit her husband, where she confronts
a different prejudice. She "ran to his bed
and broke into sobs that she could not
control. Buro was amazed because it was
hardly her first visit and she had never
shown such weakness before, but solving
the mystery handily, he patted her head,
looked around smugly at his roommates,
and asked tenderly, 'What's the matter?
You've been missing me a whole lot, huh?'
And she, finally drying her eyes, sniffed
and nodded and bravely smiled and
answered him with the question, yes,
weren't women silly?"

Men are the sources of women's amaze­
ment in other stories, too—sometimes be­
because they cannot transcend, and some­
times because they do transcend, the roles
their cultures have assigned them. In

Mueller's story, the relocation of a teenage son that
other than a man.

But when the protagonist in "An Offering ofFlowers"
accomplish her father's wish, she has been taken, she does not do women any help thinking of: 
Otosan pushing wooden ribs of water eating away his palms and grooves in his finder.

A few of the stories show the foreignness in women's strangers in the alien to the civil hind as well. Lin's _The Joy Luck Club_ shows: native Chinese mother and foreignness of: women with as little Americans can.

All readers of distinguishing work feel good and achieve unusually large pass mine. I would
Hara's "An Offering of Flowers" illustrious, current implications for generations, sex
single Japanese does so moving, so darkly funny even the story actually so promoted into