

Book and Media Reviews

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The Bond of Time: An Epic Love Poem, by John Puhiaata Pule. Canterbury, NZ: Canterbury University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-927145-56-2, xii + 88 pages. Paper, NZ\$25.00.

Niuean poet and artist John Pule's *The Bond of Time*, written when he was twenty-one, first appeared in a run limited to a hundred copies in 1985. A second edition came out in 1998 when Pule was the Pacific Writing Forum's Writer-in-Residence at the University of the South Pacific. As Jeffrey Paparoa Holman notes in his introduction to the present edition, it has garnered little visibility in New Zealand, but the poem has remained present as text in Pule's paintings, as referenced in art catalogs, and in the memories of those who have read it or seen it performed. In publishing this third edition, the Canterbury University Press makes available once more, in a handsome paperback, a vibrant work that anticipates much of the poet/artist's extraordinary vision of the Pacific.

The poem's eighty-eight pages are tightly structured in form, each containing five unrhymed five-line stanzas of verse, each line roughly the same length; the orderliness of the stanzas belies a significant turmoil built into the poem's imagery and flow, as an ocean surface hides worlds of subaqueous complexity or a sleeping person appears motionless while expansive dreams actively occupy her mind.

Readers who approach *The Bond of Time* as an epic love poem expecting a coherent love story might become frustrated; narrative conventions of plot, setting, and character are diffuse, discontinuous, and erratic.

Instead, Pule's poem conjures up constellations as it interweaves varied images, scenes, words, and motifs, suggesting continuity and chronology. Pule conveys the fecundity of the natural world in the poem's repetition of references to dolphins, whales, turtles, crabs, butterflies, ants, doves, sparrows, katipo and tui (a spider and a bird species, both indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand), oceans, mountains, fruits, vegetables, as well as sleep, dreams, knives, bruises, and misfortune. While the appearance of any of these and many other motifs might seem commonplace in isolation, the rhythm of their significant repetition across the epic time and space of the poem produces a gradual familiarity with the figures that populate it. Not unlike some of his paintings, Pule's patterned arrangement of motifs makes them pulse with energy. Since he is an artist capable in many different genres and media, it should come as no surprise that Pule contemplates the affordances and conventions of poetic language, as when the speaker provocatively mixes sensorial language: "A whole repertory of symbols dances / to the tune of love-lyrics, a sculpture of / snow and yam rises from your flesh" (62).

If it is not a conventional narrative, neither is *The Bond of Time* a conventional love poem. While the speaker declares his love for the female addressee with euphoric sexual imagery, such words flow freely into miserable images of hatred, violence, suffering, and misfortune. The speaker narrates one prurient scene in which "as my hands toward / your breast roam, you inhale air of / ecstasy, and we love and love / again and sleep, so

gentle a sleep” (12), which is followed immediately by a stanza expressing dire conflict: “Your eyes close over in dagger and / glass; you breathe onto me anger and / black hate with holes of traps and / nets. What pain did we not suffer? / What bruises have not yet been done?” (13) Pule’s vision of love is volatile, regularly jolting between such extreme passions and opening the reader’s eyes to both love’s beauty and its horror, which, Pule suggests, may be mutually constitutive.

The poetic landscape that Pule creates is a dreamy phantasmagoria that constantly pushes the reader’s imagination with lurid imagery. The poem’s opening lines are evocative and grotesque: “Dolphins, nectarines and turtles, / and all at once, they jump out from your / mouth” (1). Reminiscent of the excruciating first scene of Luis Buñuel’s surrealist movie *Un Chien Andalou*, Pule’s imagery assaults the reader directly using the second-person pronoun and depicting a sudden bodily discharge of unusual figures; from the outset, Pule signals that the poem’s environment follows a different set of rules under which the poet may manipulate the reader almost at will. However, the same image also assigns an important role to the reader/addressee, from whose mouth emerge these marine animals and fruit, suggesting that the creative magic of storytelling is collaborative and dialogic.

As its title suggests, *The Bond of Time* is an extended exploration of the concept of time. Pule examines the temporality of love and its languages: the experience of love and its representation are “timeless” as they recur throughout epic and mythic separa-

tions of time and, paradoxically, are also contextually specific and temporally situated. Lover’s time, for Pule, can be at once extended, foreshortened, telescoped, agitated, and immersive. Part of the paradox of time in the poem is expressed in the persistence of the speaker’s present-historic tense, which gives the sense that the poem’s images are both specific moments and abstractions: “We watch sunsets atop any of the four / hills near the house; fill my heart with / your presence, and I can take you in my / arms and say, I love you” (28). Recognizing his boundedness in the vast oceans of epic time, Pule’s speaker vows to be maximally present and open to the senses.

As much as it deals with time, Pule’s poem is also constantly engaged with the idea of space, particularly the fluid geographies across which flow culture, memory, people, plants, and animals in time. The speaker follows the lines quoted above by declaring, “And I can see / in your eyes that I Love You is home” (28), which further suggests the slightly altered formulation, that home is a source and object of love. While the poem assumes no fixed settings, the dreamy landscape is given specific touch points such as names of cities, streets, rivers, and mountains. Pule gives special attention to his ancestral home in Niue, his adopted home in Aotearoa, and other places in the Pacific, but he also frequently refers to Asian and European places and their cultural artifacts. The love Pule represents occurs across vastly different places, and the particularities of place are part of what makes the speaker’s love vibrant and alive. But the speaker’s love is also a love for places and spaces he occu-

pies (and that tenaciously occupy his thoughts). Conversely, his representation of pain from the struggles of love is clearly concomitant with harm done to the land and environment when he expresses, “The way the islands are wrecked / by tall sky-scrapers, and trees are / barren. The way the shores are polluted / and people die of strange disease, is / the way you have spoken your sad life” (87).

Reading *The Bond of Time* is often difficult, sometimes gut-wrenching, and ultimately a rewarding experience, especially in Pule’s sublimely beautiful lines. This reviewer was frequently looking up words and names, always finding that the references enriched and complicated his understanding. Since *The Bond of Time* ends with an apparent indictment of “something called Eschatology” (88), it is fitting to end this review by saying that Pule’s poem—in its beautiful new edition—offers no final answers to questions about love, language, time, and space, but many ways of experiencing them. Pule sends out a call for readers to dare more vision and to appreciate the richness of life in a heightened way.

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Dark Sparring: Poems, by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1869407865, 98 pages, audio CD. Paper, NZ\$27.99.

My own father’s death in 2009 was unexpected, from a heart attack while out on a routine evening jog. Grief fell like dense rain forest—a more

rugged, shifting, and half-lit terrain than I could have anticipated. Prior to that, I had thought of death as the journey of the departed. Thereafter, I found it to be a journey of those remaining. Selina Tusitala Marsh’s *Dark Sparring* is about death and the journey through grief, perfectly paired like sparring partners. It exposes the narrator’s loss of a parent and her redemptive, albeit unusual, journey back through her involvement in Muay Thai kickboxing. *Dark Sparring* is superbly titled; the use of assonance is characteristic within Marsh’s poems, while this collection arguably progresses beyond her earlier works via the “sober realism” it exemplifies (16). There is a willingness, a readiness to sit with our dead. The collection *Dark Sparring* is purposefully narrow, cohesive, and dark; like a fly delicately spun in a spider’s web, it is a well-chosen meal.

The first part of *Dark Sparring*, comprising fifteen poems, explores place. It is deliciously local, traversing the region marked out by Epeli Hau‘ofa’s 1993 essay “Our Sea of Islands” and continuing a talanoa (conversation) by other Pasifika artists and writers seeking to make sense of Pasifika geographies and selves through space and place. In this section, Marsh also calls to mind Albert Wendt’s 1996 article “Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body,” which described the significance of the Samoan concept of va, or relational space: “Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving