

The Loneliness of Islands: Collected Poems 1976–2000, by Satendra Nandan. Nadi: Ivy Press International, 2007. ISBN 978-982-366-015-8, xiii, +241 pages, excerpts of reviews. F\$24.95.

The meditation of John Donne led to the common phrase, “No man is an island.” However, for Donne and for many writers faced with the melancholy brought forth by crisis and doubt, the emotions associated with fragmentation and loss are assuaged by the recognition that “every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” This quote by Donne best describes the sentiments captured in the latest release by Satendra Nandan. *The Loneliness of Islands* is a masterful contemplation of the poet’s persona and motivation in a place as stunning and as traumatizing as Fiji.

There is no denying that the political upheavals of the past twenty years have scarred the literary imagination in what were formally known as the Cannibal Islands. For Nandan, who once served as the minister of health for the short-lived Bavadra government, there is no divorcing the political from the personal. Much of his work since the 1987 coup and his subsequent departure from Fiji has been committed to deconstructing the myth of racialized nationalism and exploring the power of writing to address injustice. Some of Nandan’s more political poems from previously published collections can again be found here. Readers will quickly recognize old favorites that are frequently cited as the foundation for girmitya (indentured Indian laborer) literary representation: “Lines Across Black

Waters,” “Arjuna’s Anguish,” and “Siddarth.” Through the invocation of Hindu and Buddhist myths, these earlier lyrics reflect the development of exilic wandering, suffering, and return as philosophically empowering metaphors for Fiji-Indian history and identity.

The debut of forty-three new poems reflects a further evolution in Nandan’s craft in that the bitterness of the Indo-Fijian experience is acknowledged as posing a fundamental problem for the poet, whose continual rumination on suffering can lead to moments of utter despair. In fact, the opening of *Loneliness* with the fragmentary prose piece, “To Be a Poet,” depicts the death of a patriarch at a typewriter housing a blank piece of paper. The blankness of paper compounds the tragedy of death—the father spends his whole life in search of truth, but leaves without having ever issued forth a manuscript. In the next poem, “The Loneliness of Islands,” this loss for words becomes clearly associated with “That yearning, this longing / For a place that is / No more” (9). In the historical context of Fiji, land and the ability to call it home have been at the center of racially motivated political upheavals. While memory of place for the poet evokes images of cane cutters and their graves, he acknowledges that the labor and sacrifice of these people did not guarantee undeniable inclusion; instead, Nandan’s allusion to Judas’s betrayal of Jesus serves as an indirect reference to the calls for the expulsion of Indo-Fijians from political office (as was the case in the 1987 and 2000 coups) and from the country itself, even as recently as 2004 with Senator

Adi Litia Cakobau's proposal to the Fiji Senate.

A sign of change in Nandan's newer work is reflected in the lyrical disassociation with specific history and in his greater attention to the larger philosophical (and more universal) concerns regarding poetry's role in comprehending moments of crisis. The modified terza rima verse form in "Nativity" echoes the descent of Dante into hell and his face-to-face encounter with human misery and suffering. As Nandan's poem makes clear, suffering for the Indo-Fijian comes in the form of an unceasing "persecution [that] is most abhorrent" (30). Ceaseless agony, which by implication leads to the perpetual reinscription of racial divides, eventually warps the soul: "I've begun to walk with a snarl / Like the well-fed pedigreed breed" (30). In turn, the soul begins to question faith in the divine: "I raise a prayer, salt water in my hand. / Will he come to rescue me again? / The Savior of my pitiless soul / From a desert, a healing fountain: Will he hear my call when dogs howl?" (31). These questions lead to the greater problem of art in general in "Wailoaloa Beach." This poem engages in a rendition of a famous Matthew Arnold poem ("Dover Beach"); like the narrator in that poem, Nandan enunciates, "The sea is moving beyond my reach" (33). In the dark night, the only lights ascertainable are those of a funeral pyre and of a tourist boat—symbols of a "dead" link to the Indian past and of the kitsch materialism necessary for the tourism industry. Cognizant of these lesser illuminations and perhaps of the lack of a grandiose ontology, the poet confronts a painful truth:

"What is human except human pain?" (34).

Pain is revisited in the middle passage of the book, which features older poems confronting the girit experience of dislocation, cultural loss, and brutal exploitation at the hands of the sugar industry in Fiji. But choosing not to close the book with these more political and darker lyrics, the poet instead maneuvers the reader to a more insightful understanding of art's role in negotiating crisis. Citing T S Eliot's famous lines, "These fragments / I have shored against my ruins," Nandan celebrates the ability of poetry to express love for ideals that have been lost and/or shattered. Nandan writes of the first rose that is plucked and blooms and by implication later withers. He entertains "no sense of guilt or dread / Only a rose bereft, broken, / Lay in [his] garden / But for a day it was red" (218). That fleeting moment of brilliant hue, rather than the destructive act of cutting or the subsequent fading of the flower, is what poetry captures best—and this sentiment emerges as the force that carries the writer to epiphany. True, objects of human love are fleeting, whether those objects are actual people or a nation. But in the ebb and flow of the tide of human existence, the lyric poet's craft gives voice to agape and to a profound adoration of "what we've lost forever," though "Rarely the dying of a single tree diminishes a whole orchard" ("Ivy," 228). Much like his contemporary, Salman Rushdie, Nandan also finds that it is possible to love a broken mirror all the more because it is broken.

Nandan's ingenious weaving of Western and Indian traditions via the

girit voice achieves an unprecedented level of universality that is a welcome and refreshing change to the provincial isolation of Indo-Fijian writing. His skill in deploying and adapting metrical rhythms and traditional forms squarely situates Fiji poetry in the Western canon and brings the Pacific into mainstream recognition as a force in literature. *The Loneliness of Islands* thus makes for an interesting comparison to similar experiments undertaken by Derek Walcott in the Caribbean and by Seamus Heaney in Ireland.

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Varua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia, edited by Frank Stewart, Kareva Mateatea-Allain, and Alexander Dale Mawyer. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0-8248-3019-9; xxi + 196 pages, photos, art, references, and glossary. US\$29.95.

I had the pleasure of attending, at Honolulu's Bishop Museum, one of several celebrations and launches of *Varua Tupu*, which is a special French Polynesian issue of *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal*. A large number of Hawai'i-based writers and intellectuals were also present for the celebration so that a spirit of Polynesian reconnection and excitement filled the air. Indeed one of the major sponsors for the event was the Pacific Writers' Connection. The greatest joy was getting to meet some of the writers and editors, such as Rai a Mai, Flora Devatine, Alexander Dale Mawyer, and Kareva Mateatea-Allain.

After the welcome by the Hawaiian delegation, we were shown a slide show detailing the life of Hawaiian artist Bobby Holcomb who had lived in Huahine, Tahiti, until his untimely death. His sumptuous artwork adorns the journal cover, which depicts a side close-up of an intricately tattooed man blowing on a shell to coax out a little crab. Like the carapace, the tattoo adorns the man in a divinely protective and identifying series of patterns, and the outstretched feelers and eyes of the crab in its shell reach out toward the breath that fills its shell cradled and cauled in the man's palm. This counterbalancing between natural, human, and divine elements is a feature of other work by Holcomb, such as the detail from "Ruahatu, God of the Ocean," where the god carries a stone marae or sacred temple to Huahine. The two moving and entertaining accounts of Holcomb's work and life reveal his close association with Salvador Dali. Other Holcomb images reveal a mixture of mythological and realist elements that have the daring flavor of surrealism.

The photographic essay by Michel Chansin of Fa'a'a, the largest town in Tahiti, provides the rich political and economic reality of the region. Photographs from the 2004 presidential elections, which Oscar Temaru won, show his rapturous supporters, while candid shots of the material economic conditions also manage to convey the vitality of the people and the president's work that lies ahead.

For the uninitiated, there is a useful introduction to the history and literature of French Polynesia by the editors. This anthology is a small part of a parallel universe of franco-