

*The Book of the Black Star*, by Albert Wendt. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002. ISBN 1-86940-283-9; 55 pages, unnumbered; illustrations, glossary and notes. US\$10.95.

From its blue-black cover to its slender spine, in disquieting lines and enigmatic letters, *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt's new volume of poems, explodes upon its pages like a black hole in space, sucking us into the universe of mystery that the philosopher Gabriel Marcel says only death invites us to enter. Wendt's signature, underscored by timelines to spring and summer 2001, and the recurring Samoan ligature "le fetu uliuli" (the black star) are the only constants in this shape-shifting threnody lamenting the loss of fellow poets, of love, of language, and, eventually for us all, of life itself. We have come to learn from this unflinching Samoan writer the intimate details of Pacific colonialism—the dead waters of Vape, villages strewn with garbage, young men tattooed with needles full of heroin rather than ritual ink, the 'ietōga and titi of the tāupou (fine mat and feather waistband worn by the ceremonial virgin) transfigured into the jeans of Britney Spears, the 'ava (kava) ceremony drowned in Vailima beer. Those images are here—"the autopsy / found his blood / had turned BLACK" ("Sam's Quest"); "Tonight he'll dream of flying along / the bone-dry bed of a river / DEAD from a century of drought" ("Red")—but what strikes this reader as a new drift in Wendt's ongoing fiction is the celebration on every page of the violent trembling of paradox.

Or, in the words of William Blake:

"Without contraries is no progression." The basic contraries of these poems are words and line drawings which sometimes shape spirals of phrases into a chambered nautilus, or drip on the page like blood or tears, or carve the horn of a new moon out of the last syllable of "darkness." Like ideographs or petroglyphs, these fusions (identified on the jacket blurb as "imagetexts") tweak a mind steeped in the symbol/syllable representation of the alphabet the missionaries brought with psalms and pens to Polynesia. Thus, the conventional western invocation to the muse that opens the book, "Black Star / were / you born / during the first / DAWN / before TAGALOA-A-LAGI / invented the ALPHABET / of / OMENS?" curves its opening spondee over lines that morph from the whiskers of a Durer rabbit to the hair-raised scalp of a cartoon character with an "o" and an "n" for eyes. The capitals of "DAWN" are shrouded as if in the wings of a gigantic bat, and the period under the question mark blows up into five white pentacles with a black center, creature of sea and sky. Wendt's many readers who share his love of poetry will feel in this lyric the pulse of Keats' "Bright star were I as steadfast as thou art" and hear as well the Samoan syllables that name the Supreme God of Creation, with its untranslatable "ng" song, washing up against the ominous English alphabet.

No matter how often it is inscribed "like a small / black bubble at the bottom lefthand corner" ("Easter Sunday") of these poems, the palpable music of le fetu uliuli resists the monosyllabic hammer of its translation, "black star": Life, death; light, dark;

eros, thanatos; white, black; joy, grief; sacred, profane—like “BLOOD or ENERGY / that springs from the universe’s heart” squats “fullweight” on the head of the young poet, Sam, who is both awakened and devoured by its force (“On Our Way”). “Vanimonimo”—translated in the glossary, happily placed at the beginning of the book, as “the Space-that-appears-and-disappears”—is the mouth of “that other / holy poet walking out / of the tomb” in “Easter Sunday” and “the long SAD silence before / TAGALOAALAGI uttered / the FIRST WORD / + gave TONGUE to our pain” (“Creatures”). Language, vocabulary, dictionary, alphabet—these are the modernist and postmodernist tropes that surface in these poems as elusive and beautiful as light on shoals. But the stanzaic balance and formal elegance achieved after so much anguish in “Dictionary”—where we await the birth of the lizard god to a woman who, like us, is admonished to “savali i le ala o le fetu uliuli” (walk in the path of the black star)—finally shatters. The drawn images, too—a cross circled by peace; batwings arching into a rainbow over a parclete; an oasis of music and hope in the midst of mayhem—finally collapse into violence and incoherence. The blood of the sacrificial lamb implied in “Easter Sunday” careers into human eating human heart (“Cannibals”), a bleakness and devastation consistent with the tragic vision of Albert Wendt.

*The Book of the Black Star* resists the traditional apotheosis of the western elegy in which the dead poet—Lycadis, Adonais—ascends to the realm of the gods. The speaker and the reader of these poems could cry

with Shelley near the end of his elegy for John Keats: “I am borne darkling, fearfully, afar,” but the last three lines of that poem—“Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven / the soul of Adonais, like a star / beacons from the abode where the Eternals are”—are the opposite of Wendt’s lamenting prophecy for Sam: “One day you / will see / the BLACK STAR / racing by + know / IT won’t return.” Here, the image of the black star rockets toward the words of the poem, and in the last three pages the “mere anarchy” of language is blown like body parts across the page. Pieces of sentences are lopped off, love-hate poems worthy of Catullus slash out, and the book ends with a fragment: “out of the / BLACK” in which the last word, veiled in ink, is reflected in frail letters as if on white, dead water above which the black star recedes. Whether or not this phrase connects to the ellipsis of the penultimate poem, “ta’u mai loa . . .” (tell me now) and whether or not these contraries are progression in the Blakean sense are proper mysteries to conclude the lines of these roiling, turbulent pictographs.

NELL ALTIZER

*Gig Harbor, Washington*

\* \* \*