

Peter Balakian. *Reply from Wilderness Island*. (Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow Press, 1988) 79 pp., \$10.95 paper.

Reply from Wilderness Island is Peter Balakian's third published collection of poetry. As with his two earlier works, *Father Fisheye* (1979) and *Sad Days of Light* (1983), this most recent one brings together the personal and the historical, as the poet further discovers connections between an American identity and an Armenian ancestry. The first section of the volume is a series of poems about the poet's late father. Though none of the poems in this section is long, their cumulative impact evokes the strong yet elusive presence of a man imprinted in a son's imagination:

There is an imprint
of scissored teeth
bound into my head,
your hands still swimming
in the skin
like fins that turn
and cut behind my eyes.

The second section begins with a longer imaginative monologue, "Thoreau at Nauset," which explores questions which concern Balakian in general, particularly the challenge of discovering an ethos humane and sturdy enough to withstand the storms and chances of history. This piece is followed by a short series of poems about Armenia, an image and a historical reality far away from the New England grays of Thoreau's Cape Cod. Yet as the persona of Thoreau states, "History is ever present," and one of the beauties of Balakian's work is his ability to span the distance between native and ancestral turf through imagery. Thus, in "Thinking of Camellia While Walking a Sugar Plantation in Louisiana," images of "bleeding pink camellias" in old Constantinople (once a dominant center of population for the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire) are echoed in the "winter-blooming," "albino white" camellias of the American South, where once "the slave quarters were/by the sugar refining mills." Staring at the hueless flowers, the speaker begins to understand "what whiteness winds my two worlds together," that is, the horror and the moral void that lie at the center of both his Armenian and American past. In succeeding poems, the universal symbol of flowers keeps extending the relationships between all peoples who've been exterminated or exiled. Balakian generally manages to make these links without moralizing or preaching; relying instead on imagery which is vivid, clear, and true to his feelings, he leads the reader to an experience of what history *does*.

Like small islands in an ocean, the poems about Armenia are followed by yet others which envelop these like waves and place them in a larger, natural cycle of death and rebirth. "Mussel Shell," the last poem of the second section, is representative of this movement. Confronted with the

infinite and relentlessness of nature's forms and processes after a day of fishing, the speaker switches from the way of action to the way of submission, even closing his eyes in order to take part in that awesome transformation:

I must come and learn to stutter once again
while all around me empty snails and clams
are taking in and letting go
their viscid selves which wane
and bloat over the many ages
until they are something not one of us can see.

Only this process of "taking in and letting go," which mimics the movements of the ocean, frees all creatures to grow beyond the limits of the known. Eventually it may even reconcile us to the deaths of fathers and nations.

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Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 424 pp., \$25.00.

According to Bell, his book is "a comprehensive sociopsychological, sociocultural interpretive history of the Afro-American novel. It seeks to unearth, identify, describe, and analyze some of the major thematic, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the Afro-American novel from its beginning in 1853 to 1983." This quotation about the book's scope and intention, as well as its title, are indicative of the strengths and weaknesses (mainly the latter) of the entire study. For one thing, it is an understood fact that just as there are African-American experiences, there are also literary traditions. Whereas one study of *one* tradition (such as Barbara Christian's on black wimmin novelists) would be another much needed work, Bell's title, alone, suggests that he has homogenized Afro-American literature. Then, the scope and intention of the above quotation are entirely too grandiose, too all-encompassing, for one book (maybe a multi-volume work could, eventually, cover all these angles). In short, the book unfortunately attempts to live up to its goals. Bell tries to address all the issues he raises, but in the process, only raises more concerns and questions.

Since the scope of the work is so broad, it includes several general flaws. Derived from a discussion of "more than 150 novels by approximately one hundred representative novelists, giving close attention to forty-one—most of whom have published at least two novels and all of whom