

**Marilyn Chin. *Dwarf Bamboo*. (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1987) 77 pp., \$9.95 paper.**

This is a more than capable first book by a Chinese American woman poet whose work evinces great potential. Marilyn Chin is a San Franciscan born in Hong Kong, raised in Oregon, and schooled in the U.S. (Chinese at Massachusetts and creative writing at Iowa). Many of her poems gathered here first saw light in journals like *Bridge*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New Letters*, *Kayak* and others.

One of the most striking qualities of Marilyn Chin's poetry is her use of imagery—tinglingly sensuous, precise, yet often expansively allusive within both Western and Asian cultural contexts. One poem, for instance, begins: “Red peonies in a slender vase / blood of a hundred strangers / Wateroat, cut wateroat / tubes in my nose and throat.” The first line is precisely visual, suggestive of an art work, be it a French impressionist still life or a Ming-Ching color print. The clipped second line is allusively resonant of Chinese poetry, beginning with its lack of article and continuing with the “hundred” strangers, a typical Chinese locution (whereas, perhaps, the Western equivalent might be *dozens* of strangers). The literal object, the reader realizes with a pleasurable aftershock of recognition, is a blood transfusion being given to a hospital patient. Instances such as this point out the qualities of Chin's image-making at its best—subtle, original, sharp, producing resonances both Asian and Western in an American context.

Chin's images are often borne on a sweeping cadence that lends grandeur to a familiar subject. Writing of the Chinese poet Ai Qing, a victim of the Cultural Revolution, Chin says: “wherever you are, don't forget me, please— / on heaven's stationery, with earth's chalk / write, do write.” The two-part cadence of the second line reinforces its images that defamiliarize and elevate a personal letter to cosmic proportions, and prepare for the briefer but even more insistent two-part cadence of the last line which must physically take the reader's breath away.

The structuring theme of Chin's book itself is Asian and American, organic and cross-cultural. The book's title posits the organic plant image and metaphor which derives from the Tang dynasty populist poet Po Chu-Yi. Elaborating the metaphor, the book's first part is entitled “The Parent Node” and consists of poems set in the Asian motherlands of China and Japan. These poems also evoke ancestors, familial ones like grandfather and uncle, literary ones like Basho; and there are poems that provide poignant, emotionally charged snapshots of life during several phases of modern Chinese history.

The second section, entitled “American Soil,” shifts its scenes to this continent; there is a drive from Boston to Long Beach, a glimpse of the Chinese American ghost town of Locke in the Sacramento valley, a vignette from the bigoted and eccentric Louisiana countryside. “We are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra” announces one poem's title,

while another poem pictures "Where We Live Now": "A white house, a wheelless car / in the backyard rusted / Mother drags a pail of diapers to the line." In many of these poems, one senses a child's point of view.

Entitled "Late Spring," the book's third section presents a more mature persona as its speaker. The poems crisscross national boundaries, resting momentarily in Hong Kong, Nagasaki, Oregon, Oakland; they explore love, sensuality, relationships, art; they ponder feminine identity, Asian American identity: "This wetsuit protects me / Wherever I go."

"American Rain" is the ironic title of the fourth and final section of the book which concludes on a mood of skepticism, if not pessimism. The long poem "American Rain" is a surrealist and nightmarish vortex of imagery whirling between beautiful blooms and the marl of the dead, between Ben Hai in Vietnam and Seaside in Oregon, between life-giving rain and death-dealing bombs. Ultimately, the book closes on a pessimistic phrase ("another thwarted Spring") in a poem dominated by inkwash-like bleakness ("a black tree on a white canvas/and a black, black crow"), for though the speaker may strive "towards the Golden Crane Pavilion," she/he is also aware that "nobody escapes Oakland."

Marilyn Chin's *Dwarf Bamboo*, then, is an organically unified volume of poems that starts with the metaphor of Chinese bamboo nodes, progresses to a transplantation on American soil, continues to maturity in spring, and undergoes an ambiguous season whether of battering or of nurturing under American rain. The whole is the product of a subtle, gifted intelligence, a redoubtable maker of images; it forms a worthwhile and intensely persuasive portrayal of a woman's sensibility grappling with the perplexity and the experience of being Asian, and American, and woman.

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**Lucha Corpi. *Delia's Song*. (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1989) 191 pp., \$8.50 paper.**

Lucha Corpi's novel, *Delia's Song*, operates on several levels which remain basically disparate; that is, we seldom have a sense of complete integration. Perhaps, finally Delia herself, must be seen as symbolic of the Chicana in search of self, although even this falters at times. Finally we cannot be sure if Delia represents all Chicana women, the educated Chicana, or the emerging Chicana. Even her name, "Artemis, the one from Delos. . . . Delia, the beautiful huntress," compounds the dilemma.