ForeWord Reviews

American Girl
Cynie Cory
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Much of the literary iconography of Northern Michigan has been drawn in the masculine tradition of Hemingway and Jim Harrison. Hard drinking and blood sports predominate; the legends and characters that inhabit literature from this terrain are wild, raw, and overwhelmingly male. This collection of achingly beautiful, subversive poems, which won the 2002 New Issues Poetry Prize, dares the reader to venture beyond that traditional paradigm. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop who grew up in Marquette, Michigan, Cory challenges readers to explore winter-bound Michigan through the eyes of a woman who leaves it for the world, and once far away, finds herself "in the warm South, sick for home, that North star." This is the long missing half of the story, and it is visceral and unflinching about the ways in which place informs our identity and longings.

The first section, "Everything About Winter," explores a female childhood in Northern Michigan. In the territory of .410 shotguns and six-inch buck knives, women move though their lives as wary as deer. In "Fishing," the young narrator embarks on a rite of passage with her father, when she is forced to slit the belly of a fish: "the sweet, putrid smell of escaping life flaring my nose / like a hungry dog and [my father] gave me a swig because I was such a sport, and he was so proud. I was beaming, despite my hate, despite my fear, and the schnapps / was my friend, so I asked for more."

In "To Tell a Story (Cleaning Fish)," the narrator explains, "I misunderstood everything. I was perpendicular to it." The familiar rouses a sense of threat, not comfort: "Had I walked in the direction of the North Star—where it beckoned / on the edge of the peninsula, North? It was my downfall." A searing paradox lurks at the core of these poems: home exerts an irresistible pull, yet once there, the narrator is a stranger—not safe or comforted, but at risk of grave injury, "a bird stunned before it falls / from the limb of a tree; my heart moved / beyond the amputated moon."

In the book's second section, "Under the Theater of Stars" and third section, "American Girl," the adult narrator moves from the bitter North to a tropical paradise of iguanas, hibiscus, and cacti (Cory now teaches at Florida State University in Tallahassee). Still, the "American Girl" seems to be only passing through the sun-drenched land of the Southern Cross. Instead, the aesthetic of this collection's poems is deeply evocative of "In Praise of Shadows," Junichiro

Tanizaki's text on the Japanese fascination with the realm of dusk and shadows. Cory delivers a windswept moonscape, sad kisses, broken windows and broken stars, "where everything is a dark bird is singing" ("The Theory of Everything"). In the Northern Michigan literary tradition, Cory proves herself to be a fierce and courageous explorer of wilderness—the precarious, stunning landscape of the human heart.

Melanie Drane