

Dolace McLean

PARADISE LOST ... AND FOUND



The exquisitely beautiful poems contained in Jacqueline Bishop's debut collection, *Fauna*, strike the reader less like poetry and more like a narrative, compelled by a need to look back at the past in order to create the future. The sense of narrative compunction begins with the expressions contained in the first poem, *An End, Or Maybe A Beginning*, in which the speaker asks for forgiveness for telling stories that she may not remember "right ... after ... after .../ God knows how many years" (13). Despite the possibility of the failure of memory, however, the poems insist that they be told, again and again, to whomever will stop and listen before they "come to an end – a closing/of the circle of myth and memory." In their insistence, the poems present an opportunity for Bishop to remember past experiences and stories running into each other like Yeats's ever widening gyre. Indeed, in their insistence, the poems force Bishop always to look back, like Lot's wife, in a heroic attempt to confront the memories that terrify, but which memories also have the power to liberate the psyche and transform the soul.

Divided into four sections, the poems are grouped into large categories that fall roughly along the lines of family, flowers, women, and the island of Jamaica. At their core, however, all the poems come together around the myths of creation and the memories of paradise that have the power to shape a life. In this collection, paradise is a specific place, the island of Jamaica, and paradise is shaped by a specific person, namely the great grandmother, who fulfills the maternal longings of someone whose mother was long lost, "not felt, not touched" (24). The strong maternal image of the great grandmother in the collection conflates the island with the mother as a cultural site of nurturing that shapes the experience of paradise as decidedly feminine.

In the first section, the great grandmother first appears in the poem *Before Electricity*, in which an old man tells his great grandchild the story of love between him and “a true Jamaican woman” (14) that spans sixty-one years and brings twelve children into existence. Two poems later in *Girl* the great grandmother speaks when she tells her great grand daughter the story of a “navel-string which blossomed/a patch of first flowers” (16), and then names the granddaughter in honor of the blossoms, the old woman’s own “red ginger” (16). With the act of naming, the great grandmother engages in the artist’s preoccupation with remaking the world by thinking about “What to put in?/What to leave out?” (43) of the life of the little girl that she is shaping. But like *Yoshitoshi’s Women*, the great grandmother sensitively conceives and molds the details of a life by giving her great granddaughter the name of something beautiful, the name of a flower, and a legacy that promises that more beautiful things will come from this flower to grace the world.

In speaking to the *Girl* of the collection, the great grandmother instructs the grand daughter on how to live as her “great grandma’s child” in a world where “star-apples -/them will bind you up” and “Spirits can take the shape of animals” (17-18). In her speaking, the great grandmother becomes the creative life force that teaches the little girl how to take freely of the world and make it her own even as spirits take the shape of male serpents that await with “evil intent in their glowing red eyes”(26) to destroy paradise. Notably, there is an absence of the father, a male figure merely relegated to the edge of “few pictures” that are “never in focus” (24). In the instances where the father appears, he is a frustrated “master painter”, a failed creator who “never seemed to get it right/could never paint us back-once and for all-/the genesis-/his beautiful garden (19). The absence of the father underscores a narrative of patriarchal tyranny, which comes out in one of the most haunting poems in the collection when a male figure ruins *The Smell of Mango* for a seven year old girl as he “raises himself up, /pulls the zipper on his pants” (25) and commits an act of unspeakable violence against her.

In an unforgettable second section, readers are introduced to the flora of paradise where exotic flowers display their exuberant personalities as they speak about themselves and to each other in a series of poems. Characters such as the drunken and swearing *Ixora*, the *Love Bush* filled with shameless desire, and the wild *Canna Lily* are but three of the all-female flowers cast that make an appearance as the representative *Fauna* among which Red Ginger makes an appearance in *Full Bloom* to recite a blessing that honors the “green-giving voice” (39) of Bishop’s prayer poems.

In the third set of poems, the life-giving energy of women is represented by competing

images of Eve and Lilith. In many of the poems, Eve represents the first mother who failed in her task to preserve paradise for the safety of future generations. Eve/first mother internalizes her failure deep enough to inflict its punishments on her daughters: “All those years when my mother knew exactly/what my grandfather was doing, she knew,/and she let it continue. Her excuse: It happened to me too” (26) And yet Bishop redeems the first mother, by acknowledging that perhaps Eve had been given an unfair burden in the first place, and can conceive of “Eve’s decision to listen to the snake” as a form of bravery in approaching the unknown” (55). While Eve represents the failure the mother who is complicit in the evil of the serpent, Lilith represents the dark and frightening specter of female empowerment that western patriarchy confines to “tattered/and un-translated texts,/so carefully hidden in the stacks....” (56).

Ironically, it is through the image of Lilith, a woman who craved an identity of her own, that Bishop pays homage to women as nurturers, muses, life-givers, and as people who sacrifice of themselves so that other can blossom. In this section, readers meet a nine-year-old-girl, “bud barely coming into flower” (46), who surrenders her body to a grandfather that threatens her apple tree with a cutlass, in exchange for the fruits that will eventually feed many who come and eat of the tree. It is a similar spirit that leads *Joan of Arc* to sacrifice herself although “No one took the time to record/ the details about her” (53) for the sake of posterity; and a similar spirit which compels a woman in Kenya to plant trees into a greenbelt in *Carnage*, a poem dedicated to Nobel peace prize winner, Wangari Maathai.

When reading *The Apple Tree* and *Carnage* together, the rape of the nine year old is conflated with the destruction of the earth and the element of continuous female sacrifice; the little girl for a tree that will live and nurture others beyond her pain, and the woman bent over faithfully planting trees one by one. In the poem *Don’t You Know This Woman* an old slave woman asks what is to become of her after Emancipation when Massa Backra, like all other exploiters, has taken everything and let her go with nothing. The next six poems respond to the old slave woman by telling her that she, like a work of art, is a careful blend of “Leaving in what is essential, taking out what/is not” (44). In the final analysis, the old slave woman becomes an *Island Juice Blend*; exotic, open to exploitation, but nevertheless possessed of a spirit and a presence outside of her exploited image.

It is after readers come to understand women in their historical and cultural complexities that Bishop takes us back to the ultimate mother, the island-paradise that is the beautiful *Xamayca* -- land of wood and water. In this section, Bishop assigns the island-paradise the role

of mother, who while it appears to be a victim, is also a victor who holds the promise of redemption. In this section, the island-paradise beckons, over Africa, *The Mountain In The Distance*, through the archipelago of Caribbean islands right back to the great grandmother, so that the little girl goes back to the island/mother to become the great grandmother herself. Thus, the island-paradise is the site of oppression but also the place of resistance where the narratives of myth and memory present an alternative to the history of the loss of innocence and make it possible to regain paradise. In this section, a male figure is used as a trope of loss when *Pa* cannot remember his own offspring. This loss of memory brings the collection full circle so that the latter poems resonate with the sentiments of the opening poem when a little girl she realizes that there is still more to become and embraces the transformative power of vagrancy, transience and migration, which are also a part of the legacy of Jamaican *Fauna*. Here the bird is an appropriate symbol for the children of the island-paradise who must spread their wings and fly so they can end up in New York, at the Metropolitan Museum imagining the myths of their own lives in a place of imaginative release and freedom, where being beyond anything imaginable, is possible.

With this collection Jacqueline Bishop offers a narrative of female empowerment that reflect choices about what is essential to leave in and what is necessary to take out so that the stories of myth and memory create a meaningful life,

“Never mind, you will fly.

You will fly! Your wings

Have not, despite what they tell you, been clipped” (55).

Indeed, as the closing poem indicates, the future is not only possible, it is in progress with the noise of the world fading as the power of art to remake the world begins to take place. Red Ginger, we await more.

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