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Poetry Book Review

by Kevin McLaughlin

The Book of Totality by Yun Wang
Salmon Poetry, 2015

We have a special feature for our readers. Our very first in-house review of a published poetry book, written by none other than our Haiku editor Kevin McLaughlin. By my reading of his review, Kevin is surely an all-out advocate for Dr. Wang's poetic imagery, underneath/beyond her telescope, wearing her other top hat as an accomplished cosmologist. *S. Ye Laird*

Approximately 13.8 billion years ago The Big Bang, a singularity, set loose time, energy, matter, and gravity; the Universe was born. After about 400,000 years temperatures began to cool, gravity forced particles to clump together, forming the first stars. Galaxies came into existence.

Yun Wang's "The Book of Totality" has, metaphorically, simulated a Big Bang. Time, energy, matter, photons, and gravity have been set loose in the form of images, poetic conceits, and similes, interspersed with prose poetry intertwining her vision, recurring figures and Chinese allusions into a cosmology the reader will eagerly travel through, reading poem after poem, most likely in one joyous, compelling reading. Yun Wang is a startlingly effective comingling of Rimbaud, physics, Poe, and a first rate story teller.

I first became aware of Yun Wang when my fellow editor S. Ye asked Yun to send me a copy of her published poetry book, "The Book of Totality", fifty five highly innovative poems. I was stunned. I couldn't believe a poet of this stature was alive and writing, and I had previously been unaware of her work. I was asked to write a book review for BTS magazine. I wondered why I was writing the piece, not some established critic from The New York Times Book Review. I immediately went to Amazon to order copies of Wang's other works. I read Wang's poems a second time and began having doubts that I could express the book's place in the literary canon.

Objects appear out of nothingness/make space curve around them/we curve in this curved space.

Space Journal: Passage

Yun Wang was born in 1964 in Gaoping, a small town near Zunyi in Guizhou Province. Her father was tortured and imprisoned during China's Cultural Revolution. If you read carefully you can see his shade pass in and out of her poems. She earned her Bachelor's degree in physics from Tsinghua University, and then emigrated to the United States where she earned her masters and doctorates, also in physics, from Carnegie Mellon University. She was a professor at the University of Oklahoma until 2018. She has also been a senior research scientist at the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) since 2015.

Nor need poetry and spirituality be mutually exclusive.

References to Buddhism run throughout the text. I am familiar with the variations on the Siddhartha Gautama myths. Briefly: Siddhartha was the Prince of the Shakya clan. His father attempted to spare the Prince knowledge of the suffering that permeates the planet. But in his unsupervised travels, he learned about sickness, old age and death. He took to the woods, and subjected himself to privations of the flesh, attempting to discover the path to the liberation from suffering. One night, while meditating beneath a Bodhi tree, he realized the Four Noble Truths.

Contrast the straightforward narrative in Wang's delicate poetic recognition of the boy who would become the Buddha with this excerpt from Wang's "Three Lotus Ponds".

A boy had three lotus ponds:
sky blue bloomed in one, sunrise pink in another
Ivory white in the third.

He had three palaces: one for the cold
season, another for the hot season, another
for the rainy months. Leaning on carved
sandalwood panels, he listened to musicians
starry eyed women plucking strings.
Their slender white fingers shone in the mist.

One day he left the palace for a walk.
He saw a wailing crowd by the Ganges
a corpse on the funeral pyre.
As it burned he felt the change within him.

Years later
a bowl of water became the ocean.
He became the Buddha.

It would be interesting to see how college students would explicate one of Yun Wang's Rimbaud-like prose poems. If poetry can be defined as the best words in the best order, Wang is a craftswoman, a craftswoman inspired by the gods and goddesses who bless "secluded path thick with plum petals" and enable their followers to "send a transforming eye off into distant obscurities". Frequently she intersperses two narratives that enhance one another in the

She dreamed of ten cold palaces with ninety nine beauties in them.

The Elder Beauty

Wang was declared a Fellow of the American Physical Society in 2012 for "her leadership in dark energy research, especially in developing a robust and consistent framework for analysis and interpreting cosmological data..."

A white peacock landed on her back , pulled her hair with sharp beak.

The Elder Beauty

Wang's poetry has been published in the Kenyon Review, Cinnamon Review, Green Mountain Review, International Quarterly, Poet Lore, Box Car Poetry Review and many others. Yes, she is gifted in two fields once believed to be dissimilar. The dragonfly of genius seldom lands on a bamboo leaf. For Yun Wang, two dragonflies landed on two leaves.

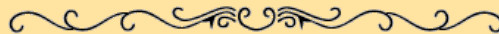
Perfume of white gardenias choked her.

The Elder Beauty

There is no reason why science and art should be mutually exclusive. Look at the photos of distant galaxies sent back from the Hubble Telescope: Are they not the equal of any modern or post-modern art? Wang is a highly respected physicist. The cosmos is part of her natural world. In this excerpt from "A Map of the Universe", she transmutes science into poetry.

A Map of the Universe

A great wall of galaxies spans billions of light years.
A woman searches for planets around other stars.
A man flies an airplane into a skyscraper.
Dark bushes of matter expand
Branch off, clump to ignite
Star clusters: roses bloom
Into an empty Universe.
Brain waves from billions flood a tiny planet.
Chubby teens surf the web for forbidden games.
Skeletal toddlers whimper in fly-infested mud huts.
Naked man and woman twine.
Tinkling pull of dark petals
Shapes dreams. Stars hum
From the black rose in the sky.



Mirages of Indiscretion

by Yun Wang

The man in a wheelchair contemplated Wagner and the shrinking death of stars.
Warps in the fabric of space and time.

You contemplate cherry blossoms on my blouse.

The wife conjured Helen and Paris from silenced scripts.
Her lover lit a French cigarette, stood beneath red oaks outside the house.

You traveled three continents with a backpack. I dream of women you assisted.

The nurse cried watching *Days of Our Lives*, plucked a rose from the garden.
The man contemplated a white rose in a pink vase.

body of the poem. The following is a selection from her magnificent "Black Horse".

She dreams of slender willows in water.

A lanky man in pale silk gazes at her

Turns into a crane.

She once played xiao for a king at dusk. Ruby-throated Thrushes answered from the bamboos. She studied the moon's tear marks, fingered jade bedrails, considered a scholar who gazed at her and turned away. She wrote poems on white silk, burned them as the king snored.

In "Catcher in the Rye," Salinger's Holden Caulfield thinks of an author and wishes he could spend a day with the writer, just a typical day. For me, that writer would be Yun Wang.

A girl wreathed in purple gardenias/ names the leaves of a water oak/ after stars in the Milky Way.

Space Journal: The Imaginary Guardian

Kevin McLaughlin



Dr. Yun Wang with her son Sam, to whom her 2nd poetry collection "The Book of Totality" is dedicated.

You quote Nietzsche to mock my theory of the cosmos.

The man divorced his wife of twenty-five years, married his nurse.
You gave up astronomy in disgust, entered medical school in a desert.

Prescience

by Yun Wang

I am afraid to write for you.
Fear that the lure of poetry's dark corridors
will foreshadow your life.
Fear that plain good wishes
(such as those versed by Su Dong-Po for his infant son)
will tempt Fate to contradiction.

A matrix of fish leaps for the moon.
The sea sends signals through the air.
Someone searches for the signature of water
beyond the veil of stars.

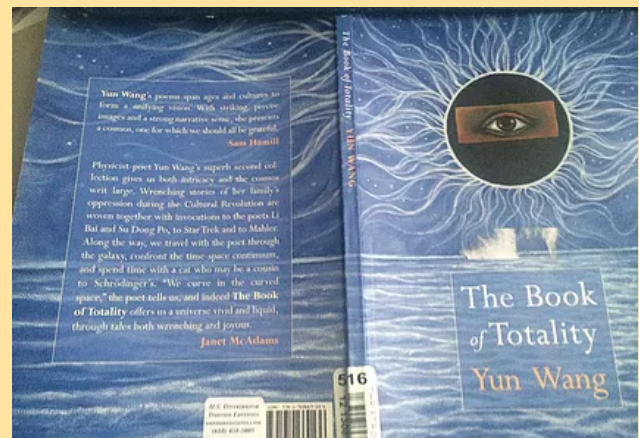
You have climbed ashore from my dream.
Pushing your tiny feet against my lap
you try to stand up.

**"Mirages of Indiscretion" & "Prescience"
are published in Yun Wang's "The Book
of Totality" by Salmon Poetry Press
(2015). US distributor:
DuFourEditions.com (610) 458-5005**

Yun Wang's poems span ages and cultures to form a unifying vision. With striking, precise images and a strong narrative sense, she presents a cosmos, one for which we should all be grateful. -- **Sam Hamill**

The Book of Totality
Yun Wang
ISBN: 978-1-910669-13-6
Page Count: 90
Publication Date: Friday, March 13, 2015
Cover Artwork: Susan Sheppard, West Virginia
poet and artist. Oil on canvas.

source:
[http://www.salmonpoetry.com/details.php?
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