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REVIEWS

Gerald Vizenor. **Almost Ashore: Selected Poems.** Salt Publishing.

Reviewed by Tom Gannon

The epigraph to Sherman Alexie's "Nature Poem" poses the hypothetical question "If you're an Indian, why don't you write nature poetry?" Alexie proceeds to satirize such expectations in this dark poem in which Indian firefighters are treated less than kindly by good, revered "Mother Nature." But the literary fact remains that much contemporary Native poetry is still more concertedly inflected by a positive regard for the natural world than mainstream Anglo-American verse (*pace* Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver). Moreover, the Native poet's characteristic passion for the land is inevitably intertwined with an earnest exploration of his or her own *human* nature and identity: in other words, the question of what it is to be an "Indian" always involves what nature and place "out there" has to do in defining such an identity.

I just lied to you. The preceding paragraph would have been a fitting segue to many a recent collection of Native American verse, by poets unaware that neither this identity or this interconnection with "nature" is transparently unproblematic—or worse yet, by poets more than willing to strike the *pose*. More so than any other Native writer, Gerald Vizenor has fought against such stereotypes of the literary "Indian," including the seemingly irresistible conflation of "Native" & "Nature" (see especially his essay, "The Tragic Wisdom of Salamanders"). And so if one expects to find breezy descriptions of "real nature" in Vizenor's recent collection of selected poems (*Almost Ashore*, 2006), one might initially feel vastly disappointed. If these poems are "stories of wild / seasons" ("Bear Walkers"), they are *not* Wordsworth cavorting with the daffodils, or scaling the peaks of the Lake District in the fever of youth; nor are they some mystic indigene rattling the gourd or waving the eagle feather over the (reservation) homeland. Instead, Vizenor's poetic *modus operandi* has long been one of haiku-esque suggestiveness, or (in terms of Euro-American literature) of literary impressionism—a style which rather disallows, for one thing, any such overt disingenuous poses.

Vizenor's favorite words in these poems (by sheer frequency of occurrence) are characteristically cryptic, including "tease," "trace(s)," "shadows," and even "silence"; and the reader unfamiliar with the poet's post-structuralist theoretical prose may well feel "teased" beyond all rightful measure. This is indeed a poetry of evanescence, in which "every shadow" is "an eternal tease" ("Natural Duty"); the writings herein are mere "ru-

mors of silence," mere "trace[s] of poetry" ("Paul Celan"). But one doesn't have to be initiated into Vizenor's notion of the "postindian" trickster who would deconstruct all essentialisms or be familiar with his Baudrillardian critique of "reality" as simulation to intuit that this is a poetry of severe epistemological skepticism (think *traces*)—a corpus in which the problems of representation are intensified even more in a postmodern era wherein nature has become a discursive (and recursive) artifact, in which "the trees / endure / on postcards" ("Camp Grounds"). Admittedly, though a fervent acolyte, I feel that Vizenor the intellectualizing theorist at times overrides Vizenor the poet here, in, for instance, his various uses of crucial neologisms from his expository prose (e.g., "survivance" and "manifest moteliers"). (Moreover, a poet is usually better off *being* ironic rather than invoking the word "irony," as he does several times in this collection.) At last, one scarce has a chance in approaching a passage like the following with any acumen, without having some background in Vizenor's theoretical pyrotechnics: "native storiers / by chance / and ruse / untrace / my seasons / certainties / curses / run thin / as shadows / and silence / in early light" ("Window Ice").

But I lied to you again (or played the postindian trickster). Among the tenuous "shadows" that are these lines, "nature" *does* erupt into the text, in intermittent flashes of brilliance, "lights" of the real against the discursive darkness, as it were. Very much *real* in these poems is the Anishinaabe "totem" species, the Sandhill Crane, whose "great dance" the poet evokes as a Native act of survival well worth noting; and rampant throughout are the ravens and crows who serve both as prototypical native tricksters and real birds, of another "discourse," eternally disrupting the flow of human words. Thus "three crows / blue in the bright / winter sun / trickster poses / in the birch" ("Crow Stories") inhabit this text as a haunting alter-reality; likewise, those "woodland tricksters / silent ravens / balanced / in the white pine" ("Hand Prints") connote a natural equilibrium (or "Natural Duty," to quote the title of this work's final section of poems) that contemporary humankind can now only admire—in poetry.

In accord with the original aesthetic of the haiku, the most successful passages from these poems are often a fine mixture of visual image + (subdued) feeling tone. The collection's middle section, "Haiku Scenes," is an earnest series of haiku sequences per se, with such three-line gems as the following: "catalpa blossoms / decorate the wet black bench / nowhere to sit" ("Mountain Snow"); "strong wind / cardinals catch the red berries / natural balance" ("Natural Balance"). And yet I still find this section of the collection to be the least interesting of the three, if for no other reason than that so many consecutive examples of one limited poetic subgenre create a sensory overload, as it were. Such "haiku" word-paintings actually work better as imagistic hiatuses within his other, longer poems, in which, say, his oblique critiques of colonial discourse or dehumanizing urbanization receive their coups de grâce via poetic snapshots of "noisy sparrows / under a faded / john deere sign" ("City Crumbs"), in the "eyes of animals / wary creases / at the treelines" ("Medicine Hat"); in

those moments when "redwing blackbirds / turn the sun / at the shoreline" ("Treuer Pond"), and "ruby throated / hummingbirds / inspire children / to survive" ("Paul Celan"). Especially brilliant is the meta-haiku toward the book's end, called "Tropisms" (quoted entire): "woodpeckers / hammer by rows / at dawn / five / seven / five / hemlock / haiku holes"; one is tempted to say something ecologically deep, such as "here the human author and avian subject merge as one, both makers of 'haiku'"—but Vizenor likely would have nothing to do with such a facile conflation.

And I lied to you again. As intimated above, Vizenor's difficult, distanced impressionism is hardly devoid of social content. If his tone might be deemed relatively "toneless," Vizenor's attitude yet comes through, as more than a *trace* of Native protest and resistance. Again, one doesn't need to have read Vizenor on "manifest manners" (his term for the discourse of U.S. colonialism, which defines the "Indian" by epistemological violence) to perceive that many of these poems are taking a stand against the "cultural / dominance" and, specifically, the unconscionable "treaty games" that have characterized the U.S. government's policies toward Native Americans. These are, indeed, the original New World "culture wars," of missions and missionaries, of "jesuit dominion" and "corporate colonists," of a dominion of discourse in which Christian proselytizing and colonialist-capitalist land-grabbing worked (and still work) hand in hand.

Such an ideological dominion has been fatal not only to the Native but to the land and other species, of course: "righteous armies / of abraham / mighty jesus / brothers / by his name / one god / betray the birch / white pine / beaver dams / native memory" ("Camp Grounds"); and again: "colonial missions / plunder white pine / torture the crane / close cultures / native ceremonies / for the season" ("White Earth"). There are the "cruel cities" themselves (where, famously in Vizenor's earlier writings, his father "lost at cards," uprooted from his Native place), epitome of these "new cultures [that] / change the shadows / stain the rivers" ("Tricky Auras"). And as metonym for this epitome, Vizenor meditates upon museums more than once in these poems, as the death-dealing acme of the colonial project: "noisy cultures / out of time / clutter the names / of every animal / and bird / museum bound" ("Museum Bound").

In contrast to this agenda of Euro-American dominance, Vizenor scatters throughout "traces" of hope, of Native (and animal) survival, even return, in such keywords as "wild" and "seasons" and even "chance" (i.e., nature's "native" workings outside the Western rationalist impositions of logic and order). Thus, in the context of the entire work, I would most privilege such returns, as a postmodern "Ghost Dance," if you will—a vision in which "mighty ravens . . . return / to their embassies / in the white pine" ("White Earth"), in which "sandhill cranes / return / and dance / across a meadow / near leech lake" ("Mission Road"). One can only applaud such a change in the—"seasons."

But wait: maybe this whole review has been a lie, a series of circlings around, attempts at finding a way to say what Vizenor is "saying" here. Above all, I have no doubt imposed a modernist, binary-laden narrative

upon a postmodern text that would deny such impositions. I have falsely imposed thematic hierarchies by not being able to resist marking certain *traces* in the text with the highlighter pen that is my own limited and biased subjectivity. And I think that Vizenor knew that it would happen this way.

Maxine Kumin. **Still to Mow.** W. W. Norton and Company.

Reviewed by Mihaela Moscaliuc

Fifteen previous books of poems have established Maxine Kumin as a poet of accessible complexity and quiet erudition, a keen observer of the natural world, and one of our foremost technical virtuosa. *Still to Mow* gifts us with poems rich yet clear in their tonal layerings, noble in purpose yet concrete in articulation, chiseled yet mainstream-genial.

Still to Mow accrues urgency and ethical tension as we swerve from the first section's "Landscapes" to the political poems of "Please Pay Attention" and to the revisionist narratives of "Turn It and Turn It," then back to the introspective landscapes of "Looking Back." There's a beautifully orchestrated, but not contrived, cohesiveness to this collection whose private and public journeys may appear, at first, incongruous, but whose underlying concerns emerge from a shared sense of necessity—a necessity that roots and commits the self in / to the world.

The opening poem, "Mulching," a *tour de force* and most apposite overture to a volume whose very title suggests both pending responsibility and replenishment, situates the speaker in the private space of her vegetable garden, where she's knelt to spread "sodden newspapers between broccolis, / corn sprouts, cabbage and four kinds of beans." But how can one turn into nurturing mulch "this stack of newsprint" that is all "wanton deed" and "heartbreak"—suicide bombings, starvation, "lines of people / with everything they own heaped on their heads," "the first torture revelations"? This disquieting moment in which the horrors of our times and the polluted realms of politics interject and contaminate the speaker's self-contained world and sustaining ritual reverberates throughout the volume, supplying its most memorable tenor. And if in this first poem the speaker sees herself as "a helpless citizen of a country" she "used to love," with no choice but "to root in dirt, / turning up industrious earthworms, bits // of unclaimed eggshell, wanting to ask / the earth to take [her] unquiet spirit, / bury it deep, make compost of it," in later pieces she will grow much more forceful in her indictment of "venal human nature."

Though sterner in tone and vision than previous volumes, *Still to Mow* remains affirming in the attention and dignity it bestows on both natural and human worlds. Kumin's celebratory arc / ark includes trustful and familiar dogs and horses, "electric blue" buntings, goldfinches who've "exchanged their winter costumes / for strobic lozenges of yellow," "purple cabbage hued so deep" it stains fingers and countertops magenta-blue, and "perfect parsnips" "pried / from the black gold of old soil."