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A Naming of Kin (Michael S. Harper's Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems)

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A Naming of Kin


One of the more interesting and prolific of the new poets of the seventies is the black American poet Michael Harper, whose Images of Kin is the seventh volume of poetry he has published since 1970. Nominated for the National Book Award, the collection consists of well over one hundred poems from his earlier works plus fourteen new ones, some of which were included in a recent Massachusetts Review issue on black poetry. Any idea that a retrospective of this nature may be a bit premature for someone on the scene no longer than Harper is quickly dispelled when one considers the quantity, skill, and diversity of the poems in this collection.

"Kinship" for Harper is mainly familial and racial, and the bond is a common suffering as "my Ancestors'... long scars touch ours" ("Continuous Visit"). His kin include members of his immediate family, both living and dead; black heroes, from athletes to political leaders; the oppressed blacks of Biafra and Soweto; the Negro, Indian, and Latin victims of American history. There are poems about his two sons who died in infancy, bringing much of the pain in his life; and his wife, who gives him much of the comfort and whose bread baking and photography provide him with metaphors. There are poems about the older generation caught up in the wheel of sickness and death. Harper also pays tribute to black political leaders, from the abolitionist Harriet Tubman to Martin Luther King; black writers, including Richard Wright and Robert Hayden; athletes, such as Jackie Robinson and Sugar Ray Robinson; and jazz musicians, including Miles Davis and especially John Coltrane, to whom Harper's first book is addressed.

It was the music of men like Davis and Coltrane that acted as one of the stronger aesthetic influences on Harper, who like Langston Hughes and other black poets was looking for an idigenous tradition for his poetry. The importance of jazz to him can be seen in the pithy epigraph to Images of Kin: "A friend told me / he'd risen above jazz. / I leave him there." Stronger in his earlier works than in his later, its influence is reflected in the syncopated rhythms and incantatory refrains of some of his earlier poems as well as in the short line that characterizes much of his poetry before the new ones issued here. Many
of the earlier poems have "blues" in their titles ("Blues Alabama," "Martin's Blues," "Biafra Blues"), and many of the poems are "blues" even when not specifically entitled, for Harper has much to lament in both his personal history and the history of his race. Jazz, which grew from the black experience in America, is indeed an appropriate mode for coming to grips with suffering, as Harper acknowledges in one of the poems about his dead sons: "I reach from pain / to music great enough / to bring me back . . . / we've lost a son, / the music, jazz, comes in" ("Reuben, Reuben").

Harper's poetry reflects other aspects of recent black poetry as well as the influence of jazz. There is both the effort to raise black consciousness and the concomitant militancy of the sixties and early seventies. The black-is-beautiful theme is particularly evident in Harper's first book, which opens with the poem "Brother John":

Black man:
I'm a black man;
I'm black; I am —
A black man; black —
I'm a black man;
I'm a black man;
I'm a man; black —
I am

This poem, with its jazz rhythms and incantatory repetitions, invokes such practitioners of black music as Coltrane, Davis, and Bird as a source for black pride, telling "brother" John that even though he "plays no instrument, he's a black man."

The militancy of the earlier work, expressed in the blunt, bitter observation "America needs a killing" ("Death Watch"), is fully developed in Debridement, Harper's third and most powerful book, the first section of which recalls the heroic exploits of the militant abolitionist John Brown and indirectly presents him as a model for black political activists. In "Sambo's Mistakes: An Essay," based on a satiric piece the Old Man had written in the persona of a Negro, Harper purposely and effectively exaggerates the militancy of the pre-Kansas Brown:

Weaknesses:
small good reading,
thrown money on luxury —
no capital;
servility,
talkativeness,
disunity,
sectarian bias:
eXBxpects security with whites
by tamely submitting to
indignity, contempt, wrong.

Strengths:
guns.

The new poems tend to be somewhat more mellow — in fact, the
first group is entitled “Healing Songs” — though even here the old
tensions have by no means disappeared, as in the opening poem “Crossing
Lake Michigan,” where the poet’s reverie about his daughter is
interrupted by overheard tourists:

... talk of menace
of cities, how King asked for glory
of newsprint and ate the balcony railing
in conspiracy of his lost appetite.

But this poem does not end with “America needs a killing”; instead,
the poet’s daughter wonders “what song to sing to vacationers returning
to Michigan.”

What adds another dimension to Harper’s poetry is his concern
with history, most evident in Debridement though occurring in both
his earlier and later work. “Where there is no history,” he writes,
“there is no metaphor.” In his travels, Harper is continually aware of
the dark presence of history. A visit to Bristol evokes the idealism of
Edmund Burke in ironic juxtaposition with the port’s role in the in-
famous “triangular trade” (“Bristol: Bicentenary Remembrances of
Trade”). His quarters at Yaddo bring to mind the cannibal Etienne,
whom missionaries brought from Africa in the late nineteenth century
to be trained for service and who, ironically, returns to Africa “as a
trader” (“The Battle of Saratoga [Springs] Revisited”). On a visit to
the Hampton Institute in Virginia, Harper is mesmerized by the grave-
stones of young Indians in nearby Fort Monroe, where the “febrile
zeal” of the government had unwittingly set up a school for them in
a malarial swamp (“Psychophotos of Hampton”).

I have already indicated to some extent Harper’s range; he can
move with ease from the jazz rhythms of “Brother John” to the terse
evocation of John Brown to mordantly ironic meditations on racial
injustice. Elsewhere he’s the finely controlled elegist of deceased kin,
as he is in “We Assume: On the Death of Our Son, Reuben Masai
Harper,” which concludes with these movingly understated lines to a son dead after twenty-eight hours in an incubator:

We assume
you did not know we loved you.

Then there’s the combination of chilling detail and grim humor, reminiscent of MASH, when Harper evokes a Vietnam field hospital in “Fixing Certificates: Dog Tags: Letters Home”:

Blood, endotracheal tube, prep
abdomen, mid-chest to scrotum —

“While you’re fixin’ me doc,
can you fix them ingrown hairs on my face?”

and the Roethkean feeling for nature in this fine portrayal of childhood from the first part of “Lovely’s Daughters: Visitors”:

We packed our cuts
and insect bites with rich damp earth.

.........................

Naked, on the hot night road,
we squashed fireflies on our chests
as they burned. . .

While his poetry is usually engaging and often compelling, Harper sometimes risks losing the reader through a willful obscurity which arises from occasionally excessive disjunctiveness, indirection, and allusiveness. The allusions are most intense in the first section of Debride-ment, “History as John Brown,” where one is seriously handicapped if he hasn’t recently read at least one book on the subject. Take, for example, these lines from “Plans”:

Earthwork inspections
from Roman provinces
to Spanish chieftains:
Schamyl, Circassian,
Moina, Toussaint, Hugh Forbes.

Despite the occasional excesses of his “modernist” idiom, Michael Harper’s attempt to come to grips with what it means to be black and a man in America should be rewarding to any reader. Ultimately, Harper’s kin are our own. 

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