

lives, their acquaintance largely based on what a compelling and caustic father has said of each to the other. The narrator's memory of this charged and awkward meeting with his brother is called up by a ferry-ride, sitting in a car with his lover as they cross Newport Bay at night.

It is strange to sit still in one conveyance and be moved, someplace by another. Quickly we are away from the land and into darkness... Not drifting but launched, and not cast off but wound up and set going by a hand too shy to wave and too distant to be seen.

Frequently Master's characters are tourists. In "Hall of Mirrors," a mature man's recollection of a visit to Versailles as a student forms a kind of time-capsule of his experience of the complexities of human intercourse. Often couples are travelling together, if not in the same direction—in Mexico, in a Galway fishing village, or simply in the tangled and unfamiliar back reaches of their own acreage. And those who travel alone assume the risks of reaching back into their thorny pasts to reclaim losses or recapture loves. One man calls an old flame during a layover at O'Hare. Another, while on a business trip, goes to see the house where he lived as a child. A third seeks late acquaintance with his dead father in a backyard garden in Pittsburgh:

...Lazar wondered if he should weed the bed of parsley and basil and rosemary that grew around the roots of the ailanthus. The job would have to be done carefully, for their fragile stems could be pulled up by the more sturdy roots of the wild growth that overwhelmed them. But the light was falling, and he would not be able to finish before it got dark.

Masters is lavish with physical detail, generous with his knowledge of the workings of the world. In "A Mechanic's Life," for instance, one senses that the author could dismantle and reassemble an engine with relative ease. But expertise, be it emotional, intellectual, or practical, is never brandished here. Masters is merely conveying (as George Garrett points out in a splendid introduction to the book) "an awareness of how the things of our lives at once reflect and conceal the truth of ourselves."

Reminiscent of the short fiction of Alice Munro and Peter Taylor, the stories of *Success* yield the depth and complexity of novels. Hilary Masters writes, always, of place and memory, of time and change. His homeground is the rocky yet fertile soil of human connection and the soul's persistent striving toward it, a striving that on this earth's terms must pass, for now, for salvation.

The Fountains of Neptune by Rikki Ducomet. Dalkey Archive Press, 1992. \$19.95 ISBN 0-916583-96-1

Reviewed by Dana Burnell

The Fountains of Neptune, the third in a projected "tetralogy of elements," is a book saturated with seawater and myth, a novel rippling with the underwater life of the unconsciousness, of the bawdy, the drunk and the uninitiated.

"We forget," says Venus Kaisersteige, internationally celebrated psychiatrist and the protector of Nicholas, a boy forced by trauma to enter a long, coma-like sleep, "that other states exist... that thought is a process which has evolved over the ages from anterior states. Just as our finger bones still resemble those of the lizard, so at depths deeper than dreaming our thoughts may echo the lobster's."

Nicholas and Dr. Kaisersteige reconstruct the past together, delving into the wellsprings of memory to discover what happened to Nicholas' beautiful and promiscuous mother, Odille, and to her husband and lover. This tragic love triangle, its violent end witnessed by two-year old Nicholas, is suppressed in the boy's memory.

At the age of nine, however, events conspire against Nicholas to force a loss of innocence and an awakening into the knowledge of the irrepressible fluidity of memory and the elemental inaccuracies of storytelling. His sleep begins in the spring of 1914, and he "slept through both World Wars and the tainted calm between."

Nicholas begins to retreat from the outside world of his "Other Mother" Rose, who had regaled him with stories from her days in service when she was "dramatically propelled from scullery to kitchenery." Toujours La, slurring from his breakfast absinthe, tells of an underwater world where all women are carnivorous ogresses and Odille the most terrible and rapacious of them all.

Rikki Ducomet's writing is reminiscent of Colette's; both contain a line-to-line sensuality and hint at the possibility of there being a proper way to live; a solution, albeit temporary and capricious, with which to protect the consciousness when floodgates are tragically opened by political (and always personal) events.

The adult Nicholas, left alone by Dr. Kaisersteige, builds for himself a delayed boyhood peopled with safely fictitious creatures who inhabit the Kingdom of D'Eilir. This unwrinkled 60-year old man creates an innocent world, and echoing his past, invokes a boy companion and friend whom both he (by playing the role of Toujours La) and the townspeople nearly destroy.

Each line of this book is flushed with richness of meaning and bobs with the inevitability of unexpected events. The town in which young Nicholas is raised is archetypal yet glowingly alive and detailed with sexual energy, misplaced love, and spicy fish soups "made dreamy and anxious by the addition of roe, garlic and egg yolks..." This novel was first published in Canada in 1989, and it is difficult to understand why Rikki Ducomet is not afforded more recognition in her native United States, for she is a writer with an enchanting presence.

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina Garcia. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992. \$20.00 ISBN 0-679-40883-5

Reviewed by Dana Burnell

"Women who outlive their daughters are orphans," says Celia del Pino, a woman who sits by the sea wearing drop-pearl earrings and a black beauty mark; a woman who stands by what betrays her. "Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire." Epigrammatic as this may seem, the reader of *Dreaming in Cuban* knows that Celia's "first fire" as well as any subsequent flames are doomed. Under the brightly colored Cuban sky, there is magic. The tragedy of the del Pino family is that magic can no longer make a difference, and the del Pino women continue reaching for something to sate their unnatural appetites.

Celia's fervor for El Lider, Castro, articulates itself on the day of her husband's death and succeeds in further alienating both her daughters. These daughters, Felicia and Lourdes (never did a mother less aptly name her children), are women with prodigious and capricious appetites; Felicia for men and murder, Lourdes for food and power. Celia adheres to Castro's policies tenaciously and with increasing hopelessness, just as she clings to her sanity and her love for her family.

Celia's son Javier re-enters her life in a brief and, for the men in this novel, characteristic appearance. After having escaped Cuba to become a professor in Czechoslovakia, Javier returns shattered by a failed marriage to allow his mother to clean and feed him, and later watch him drink rum as he plans an escape from this self-imposed exile.

The third generation of the del Pino family is represented by Pilar, a painter and the earring-nosed daughter of Lourdes, who lies in her Brooklyn bed at night listening to the stories of her Abuela Celia. Celia calls to Pilar from Cuba, imagining "her words as slivers of light piercing the murky sky"; both indulge in the fantasy of rescuing Pilar from the twin vise grips of America and Lourdes.

Dreaming in Cuban resembles Pilar's paintings as they are described, brightly colored and violent from desperation; fashionable in its mixture of perennial and current

the florid sexuality of Latin passions. The publishers describe the novel as being "suffused with a generous and comic sense of life," a somewhat strange comment on a book in which there is no response to love except repeated betrayal, where many of the characters live in a tattered dream world mixing crushed hopes and psychotic illusions, and where magic is acknowledged but dismissed as outdated and basically ineffectual, like Castro's Cuba itself.

Cristina Garcin is a wonderful writer who has created vivid portrayals in these obsessive women. The narrative enables the characters to fully realize their potential as they are wrapped in layer after layer of re-interpretation and contradiction. The best parts of *Dreaming in Cuban* leave you with the near-stupified mental state following a family reunion: One is ultimately rewarded for walking the thin bridge of evasions that lead from one person's accepted fact to another's.

Region of Unlikeness by Jorie Graham The Ecco Press, \$17.95 ISBN 0-88001-271-4.
Reviewed by Carolyn Wright

In her overview of this book and of Jorie Graham's previous volumes in the November 21, 1991 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Helen Vendler suggests that the expansion of the poetic line in the work of Graham and others has caused many contemporary poems "to resemble cloud chambers full of colliding protons rather than well wrought urns." This poetry—which comes in what Vendler calls a "zig-zag of half-articulated suspicions, innovations, silences, hints, glimpses, stumblings, and contradictions"—forms not still frames, but kinetic, cinematographic pictures of the mind at work making meaning: from the intertwined threads of personal and political history, from the memory and immediate bodily sensation (and the memory of earlier sensation) overlaid with associations from myth, history, and echoes of the language of other poets. It is poetry in which the poet invites, or instructs, us—if we can—to "connect the dots, connect the dots / connect the dots . . ." [her command repeated five more times] from the fragmented faces on the cutting room floor of her own mind. Indeed, I wondered, as I read through this work, trying to encompass some frameable *take* on the volume, whether these should be regarded (to paraphrase Wallace Stevens) as "poems of the act of the mind" trying to make poems, or as actual poems in themselves. I am not yet sure what I have decided.

I admire the breadth and scope of Jorie Graham's associative powers, the range of allusions from the Western intellectual and aesthetic traditions, and the sheer capacity of the speaker's voice to go on and on, page after page, spinning out minute observations—some of which (a deer moving through a clearing, a flock of birds alighting in a tree) are poetic commonplace, hard to make new—into grandiose metaphysical arcs of contemplation. This is one of the few books in this post-Eliotic generation that presents a three-page "Foreword" consisting entirely of epigraphical material quoted from some of the philosophical "big guns" of the Western tradition—St. Augustine, Heidegger, the *Book of Revelations*. Thus, I was mildly surprised at the brevity of the "Notes" section—only two pages—crediting the deliberate echoes of language from various poets, recollections of various paintings, to which the poet is indebted. We know this poet reads weighty texts (so many of her contemporaries are eluded for not doing so), and she wears her learning with a corresponding gravity. Not many poets these days are called *intellectual* or *metaphysical*, and know the terms to be a compliment.

The grandeur, or generosity, moreover, of some of the titles (the poet calls one poem "A Short History of the West," another "Manifest Destiny," another "Detail from the Creation of Man") is edifying, but I also wonder if the poems' occasions, or moments, are not overly compromised by the burden of what such grand titles promise. Does the sense of grandeur in these poems arise, finally, from within them—or does it seem also imposed from without, *a priori*, by what the packaging—the titles, the epigraphs, the deliberately stated intentions of

with this style would be to take a more conventional, traditionalist approach to the "made" poem (by New Critical standards) in the metaphysical tradition of Donne, Eliot, and Stevens; or even a well-made, literally and historically allusive poem by Bishop, Clampton, or Kumin, throw such a poem suddenly into a mental cyclotron. There, bombard it with high-energy particles of feeling and allusions derived from the widest possible range of Western aesthetic lore; then, as the poem leaps dizzily from one literary quantum level to the next, watch it blow up into a post-Big-Bang universe of swirling dust, gas, and stellar melt-down material. But what can the reader, marooned on his tiny prosodic planet in one minor solar system, catch sight of? To throw light on the poetic experiment changes it, so that we can never see it as it is—and my response to this book remains in a steady, Heisenbergian state: a sort of critical waffle, as it were.

I am also bothered by certain mannerisms that repeat (like the photographic instant), successive wrappings of words (in consecutive parentheses) which are further fractured by virgules, in order to evoke the atomization of—what? the post-Einsteinian physical universe, the deconstructed literary realm? Or may it be that Americans' attention spans have been so fragmented and shortened by our film/TV/video-obsessed culture, so that even poets, such as Graham, have consciously cinematized their efforts? Perhaps (the reasoning may go) if poems attempt to function like films, or like the editing process the filmmaker employs; if the poem itself strives to reproduce or re-enact that editing process, will more people go to watch (that is, read) it? The continual insertion, moreover, of the shutter action ("Click") into the line begins to lose effect by the dozen repetition, especially because the poet uses it in poem after poem, no matter what the poem's subject matter or corresponding tone may be.

Furthermore, when the speaker too frequently—for my taste—halts her momentum to tell us the poem is "(trying to make sure it's a story after all) . . .", and that "(click) (click)," she is therefore following narrative principles, I wonder if the constant pointing to the narrative intention, like the ever-clicking interruptive shutter, does not bespeak self-consciousness more than the conscious act of the mind? Just to call it a story doth not a story make. Perhaps, in the constant interrupting and blurring and fracturing of narrative—what narrative line there is—the poet hopes to make the stories seem more powerful, political—the speaker coming upon a (now-dead) friend with a needle in his arm, the speaker facing the inmates of the women's prison in Rome as they shout for her to be thrown in among them, the speaker and her mother sitting together as the father spends the afternoon in bed with another woman—but others arc of domestic scenes, quieter interactions. Yet all the poems are in the same tense, urgent tone, not merely eliciting our attention, but self-consciously *telling* us to pay it. "And why should I tell this to you, / and why should *telling* matter still?" The fact that the poet herself stops in mid-poem to ask this question makes me wonder if she, too, has some reservations about the experimentation she has undertaken here. She is to be credited for assaying it, though. And she is fortunate to leave a publisher to whom she can send an experimental work, who has freed her from the ordeal of the publishing competitions, in which tired selection committees, overwhelmed with thousands of anonymous submissions, too often choose manuscripts which are conventional, bland, easily grasped at first reading. *Region of Unlikeness*, thankfully, can be cleared with none of these qualities.

Selected Poems by James Tate. Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1991. \$27.50 ISBN 0-8195-2190-6 (cloth) \$14.95 ISBN 0-8195-1192-7 (paper)
Reviewed by Carolyn Wright

John Ashbery's blurb on the back cover lauds the "valuable service" this volume performs "by drawing together the best of Tate's work from many individual collections" and allowing us "finally to take a measure of his genius." As America's senior surrealist—Tate