

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Richard Oyama: "What Memory Is" & "Where I Came From"

Richard Oyama · Tuesday, December 31st, 2013

Richard Oyama has had work appear in *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, *The NuyorAsian Anthology*, *Breaking Silence*, *Dissident Song*, *A Gift for Tongues*, *Malpais Review*, *Adobe Walls* and other literary magazines and small presses. *The Country They Know* (Neuma Books 2005) is his first collection of poetry.

These poems are premiering on Cultural Weekly.

What Memory Is

We dispute the memory
Of our memories. He says
Mine is colored by emotion.
I think he has alcoholic
Blackouts, holes in
The pockets of his memory but
Don't say this. What
Good? He remembers Sandie Shaw
And Claude Thornhill so
What point? But we
Rehash the old John vs. Paul
Debate anyhow. In the bar
I notice he's got a
Blind look of nullity from
The booze, waiting for
The click in his head to go off.
He starts nodding on the subway
Before realizing he needs to take
A piss, jumping out and
Stepping between the cars
But there's no time, leaping
Back in before the doors
Close. Oh shit, he says,
Lurching awake. We're on
The wrong train. Where
Are we? I ask. In the

Ghetto, he says. We
 Disembark, walking up to
 The Bed-Sty street where I keep
 Watch while he pisses
 Next to a white van as
 The owner slides in. I
 Explain my friend's just
 Using his van as cover. He
 Zips up. We see
 Two cops and duck back
 Into the station. He tells me
 A CCTV camera caught him for
 Illegal pissing and was
 Fined \$100. I
 Hail a cab. I think to ask
 Him what's that limestone building
 In the park but he's
 asleep. The lights
 Flow past. In
 Park Slope I pay the cabbie.
 As the sky lightens
 Birds trill a morning song.
 I say what a glorious time
 Of day it is.

Where I Came From

1. Row House

The dusty pick-up is parked to the left,
 A vestige of the agrarian in Manhattan all but
 Gone with the knife-grinder and his stone wheel,
 The shoe repairman whose leather smells of the barn,
 The Good Humor truck and its calling bell.
 My brother documented the going.
 The curved car hoods are flecked in soot.
 The sun slants westward then stops dead:
 The building's penumbra. The traffic light is halfway up the pole
 Then the park's blurred foliage.
 To the left is a leafless tree
 Hemmed by asphalt in a dirt square. There's the faintest
 Hint of spring. We're the corner row house.
 The first floor is white brick, redbrick
 The rest. Our story, the fourth.
 The fire escape zigzags above. The jump would shatter a leg.
 The columns and lintel are neo-classical, an order that
 Fails, the facade a blank, indifferent face to
 The unruliness inside.

2. Assent

My brother snaps them in assent.
 Both look down, pensive. Ozu's parallelism.
 My father fills the foreground,
 Thinning hair decorously parted, you can't see his ear
 Stick out, monkeyish, in profile but
 The eyebrow as cartoonish as Groucho
 Or Kahlo, his high forehead unmarked.
 His jaw is charcoal where the nerve jumps.
 He wears an overcoat and a plaid muffler
 Against the cold. Behind him
 My mother looks at the thing. What
 Is it? Her hair fulsome and black as a wave,
 Her eyebrows penciled, her eyes slitted and unreadable,
 Her mouth a boat low in a lake. What surprises is
 The absence of tension. They're in our store,
 Its calligraphic banners,
 Fluorescent chill, the fishbowl image of
 Harlem projects. What are they thinking?
 They keep their own counsel.

3. Rebound

My brother captures me in my
 Turning. It's the year after Nam, before Tet.
 I'm disguised in his olive army jacket over
 A blue Tech sweatshirt. Snow
 Gutters in the curb and garlands a denuded tree
 Supported by two poles to the left of what
 Looks like a hearse. But a lot of
 Those Fifties cars were big-bodied
 With headroom. My hair is a conservative Beatle cut
 Even in 1966. The horn rims give me
 A poetic sincerity that as a teenager have I
 Earned? It's as though my brother spied something of
 The pained seriousness, alertness, ambition
 Latent within. I face halfway toward our building, waiting for
 The basketball to jump into my open arms.

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