

## **BOOK REVIEW**

By Leigh Harrison

### **BOTH SIDES OF THE NIGER**

By Andrew Kaufman

Spuyten Duyvil Press

2013, 80 pp., \$15, softcover

There are noteworthy travelogues that read like poetry (W. Somerset Maugham's "The Gentleman in the Parlour" and Basho's "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" come to mind) and books of poetry that read like travelogues (such as Ferlinghetti's "A Far Rockaway of the Heart" or Pablo Neruda's "The Sea and the Bells") but Andrew Kaufman's *Both Sides of the Niger* (Spuyten Duyvil, NY, 2013) is a recent addition to the canon of such dualistic work, and noteworthy for its excellence.

First of many reasons that Kaufman's newest poetry collection seems so superb is the quality of the printing; the lush color cover features two photographs – one (by Chris Manders) of women fishing in small pirogues, with net traps, in the dark waters of the Niger River; the other one, by the author, of women (including a young woman, seen topless) posing at an African marketplace. Both are evocative of the beauty and the poverty we encounter as we read the poems.

The well-wrought arc of the poems leads us into the Dark Continent, as if a travel article. We see the river, as did the author, snaking through the countryside from an airplane. Then, in a villanelle that gives the collection its title, we watch women washing clothes in those waters, which are infested with numerous diseases. Kaufman catalogues the sicknesses: typhoid, bilharzia, cholera, dengue fever, malaria...in a poem that is starkly chilling in its commingling of beauty and subtle horror.

The Africa that Kaufman has come to know, and shares in these twenty-five poems, is one of post-colonial government and medieval medicine men, of people who gather cow dung to make cooking fires and have little awareness of modern medicine or hygiene. Their naturalistic state gives Kaufman a chance to revel in the simplicity of their lifestyle, and the uncomplicated ways they deal with birth and death. Yet he clearly shows us the fact that these are people living in a manner so primitive that their witch doctors still read auguries to determine if they need "a spirit...to fight the spirit of a curse...(or use) bone or blood" to cure the illness.

Kaufman's generosity of heart doesn't allow him to either praise or condemn the same people for their lifestyle. He merely presents, in poem after poem, images of a world where food is caught and killed by hand, grown by hand, where harvests are made by families and villages, where modern medicine is largely absent, and diseases run rampant.

And yet, amid all the poverty and illnesses, Kaufman repeatedly sees small moments of magic wherever they flourish. In “Want,” he writes: *When the scars / that were hints / of a road turned / to nothing, / I found the dark insect / that is the plane’s shadow.* And later: *A wind-wrecked ridge / turned to spires / of a ruined city.* Kaufman not only sees the magic all around him, he creates much of it with his formal poems. Moreover, his work is so skillfully wrought that we almost don’t realize that we are scanning sonnets, villanelles, and dialogues – all perfectly crafted so that the forms are subsumed within the rich imagery.

And this imagery fills our senses: we hear people singing and drumming; hear the buzz of insects. We see the sirocco wind blow across the desert, watch the Niger roll and flow, observe shadows that flare in lantern light. We can smell the kerosene used to immolate a hapless victim; elsewhere, the smells of cooking beneath a baobab tree.

Not all the poems are in form; most of the work is actually free-form, although several seem to be permeated with what might be called accidental haiku. Another scene from the poem “Want”:

*What I took  
for dwellings turned to  
shadows of rock*

and from “Fumes”:

*a frigate captain’s  
pyramid-shaped tomb  
embossed with an anchor*

One of the most lyrical of Kaufman’s poems is *Sounding the Names*, a piece in which he catalogs the words he’s learned from people of the desert, who have no schools, and no vocabulary lists. They have a life so simple (and uncomplicated by computers and Western habits) that they seem relics of the Stone Age. The people he stays with teach him their words for *teeth, water, lips*, three kinds of bowls, and for *bracelet*, but – as Kaufman concludes – there are no words:

*for happy or sad, yesterday  
or tomorrow, none for the sea  
between talk and fuck,  
nor the desert between gone and here.*

Kaufman’s work has been described as “earthy and spiritual” by Hal Sirowitz, and as “emotionally resonant and discordant” by Stephanie Dickinson, and it is all these. The problem of his reportage is that – while it strives for truth amid the beauty and squalor – it also leaves much out. There is an elliptical eye at work here that sees both privation and loveliness, and yet seems to ignore (or skew) their roots and causes. In “Cotonou at Night,” for example, Kaufman relates how the villagers attacked someone because they

believed an act of voodoo (via a handshake) had caused someone to lose his penis – but he leaves unspoken the ignorance and lack of education that underlies such beliefs. We observe the difficulty of life for women of the Niger, yet, in “Fumes,” he describes the “half-drunk” Moslem who shoos away a girl he’d been sitting with at a bar, calling her, “just my friend,” then, “my little sister,” and then “a whore” – again, leaving the man’s misogynistic attitude unmentioned – but obvious. (I found this far more problematic than another reviewer found the nude in the cover photo – a photograph which I found sensitive and innocent.)

Kaufman’s good-hearted perspective serves him (and the reader) well when he fills our vision with images of dancing women of Benin, or of the “hello song” of a turtle dove or crocodile – yet he also serves up a soup of images of a people who have been down-trodden by wars and conquest by islam, and yet omits any mention of these in “The French Military Cemetery of Ouidah, Benin.” Here, he describes the crumbling ruins of what was once the Ouidah slave market – a market that was part of the world-wide islamic slave trade, yet Kaufman delicately omits any mention of this, writing only of the French soldiers’ graveyard:

*so different / from Ouidah’s largest graveyard, / the sea,  
on which most slaves / sold here / died in transport,  
or in the holds / of ships / awaiting transport,  
the white of the waves, / their markers / and epitaphs,  
the white of the waves / likewise as clean / as the sun.*

In summary, this collection is mesmerizing and image-rich. It is a view of a people, a continent, and nations living without most of the comforts of modern life, a people living under the yoke of dictatorships either communist or islamic – and from which Kaufman generously omits mention of blame – yet *should*. But his *Both Sides of the Niger* is also infused with the poet’s intense and beautiful descriptions of poverty – for which he offers no answers, yet somehow forces us to ask all the right questions.

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