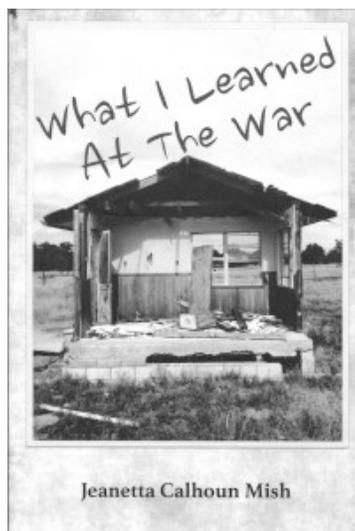


Book Review: What I Learned at the War



What I Learned at the War,

by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish

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Reviewed by Thomas Hubbard

As a child who spent countless days in company of a river — swimming, catching crawdads, fishing, trapping muskrats, hunting rabbits — I learned how to cut small, tinder-dry

grapevine twigs and smoke them like cigarettes, exhaling the mild smoke to drive away clouds of river gnats. And so when I opened Jeanetta Calhoun Mish's *What I Learned at the War* for the first time and read the lede stanza of her "Pastoral for My Brother," I was immediately hooked. She wrote,

Today, I remember
 prowling the woods with you
 smashing wild grapes
 into our haunted mouths,
 smoking the vines.

Reading on, I discovered a writer whose work evokes the America that birthed "new" southerners, urban mixed-blood NDNs, midwest greasers, and the legions of lost travelers who, like Kerouac in the fifties, cross the continent endlessly, searching for their lives. This collection of poems displays a distinctive attitude, established most succinctly in the poem, "Sometimes there was an armistice." Mish recalls attending her first formal dinner, and toward the last lines she tells us,

...I went to the ball, and as I remember it,
 managed to always use the right fork
 and to not say *fuck* out loud, not even once.

She tramps through America's garden of violence, inequity and hurt, making poems of

evidence she sees and remarks she remembers, then kicks them along her path like a child who kicks an unwashed tin can along railroad tracks, ignoring the oncoming freight train.

Mish's prologue, "For the American Dead," even though not written in an elegiac form, elegizes America and even American elegies, establishing a distant background of disconsolate introspection as she tells stories of the unfortunate among friends and family. But she peoples these stories with palpable characters who — despite bearing deep scars and bruises inside and out — smile, laugh, and shout at indomitable life.

The first poem in this collection's body proper is "The Mice." Mish carefully establishes the setting and personnel with subtle brushstrokes that would make Michelangelo proud.

It was late July, late afternoon,
one of those thick southern days
when shimmering heat draws a veil
over everything. A day that farmers,
eyes shaded by calloused palms or
John Deere caps, raise faces to the
stony sun and dream of rain. We tilled
the garden in March. Now, scarlet runners
weave red and green Pendletons around
their bamboo tripods, apparitions of old
Cheyenne women singing by the drum.

In her hospital room we were desperate
not to speak of death. Defying silence,
distracting her from pain, I confessed....

Here, the speaker inserts into the conversation an anecdote from when she was "running the cultivator" and accidentally disturbed a nest of field mice, which fills the eleven-line stanza. And then she finishes the poem with three lines:

We spoke of squash and mice and mothers
and of rain and scarlet runners. I tell you,
we were desperate not to speak of death.

Mish proceeds with three poems under the title, *Occupational Hazards*. The first, “#1 Child Labor,” recounts her childhood chores, which lead up to her ironing jeans for the family, and it ends with four rollicking sentences,

...Graduated to jeans at fifty cents a load at age eleven and developed a fetish for perfect ironed-and-starched creases. Later fell for a series of cowboys based on the perfection of their starched-and-creased pearl-button shirts and Levis. Gave up starch-and-crease when I gave up cowboys. Never ironed again.

Next comes seven somewhat whimsical pieces under the heading, *Literacy Autobiography 1961-1992*. The first, “#1 Body Language,” begins with birth, “My first language, mothersmell, rhythm of womb...,” and ends with,

...The hand reaching for a belt or a long-neck bottle, the fist swinging, the leg drawn back the perfect distance to kick with accuracy. This language I have tried to forget, so as not to confuse an arm reaching out in comfort with one poised to choke; so as not to confuse a body hovering over me in ecstasy with one preparing to suffocate.

The final piece in this grouping of seven is “#7 What I Learned at the War.” It ends with darkly humorous advice,

Try not to think about whether there is somewhere no war is going on. It’s like sending happy postcards to your former pimp in prison—it just makes the situation more unbearable.

Mish’s two poems, “What Sarah Venable Little Told the Sheriff” and “What Sarah Venable Little Wrote in Her Diary,” recount the vengeful and violent aftermath of America’s war between the states, first from a “family history” viewpoint, and then from a dying grandmother’s viewpoint of personal repenting and sorrow. On her deathbed, Sarah Venable Little mourns fathers of two generations, slain, “...because we turned away from / our grandmothers’ simple faith / / forgot the commandment / to never take up arms against another.”

Like many American families, especially in the South, this family still carries forward (and holds dear) their old, festering wounds of the Civil War. And like so many southern families, this family’s hearts pump blood of the conquered tribes which roamed here not so long ago. Conflicts....

In the poem *Pia Toya*, Mish writes two stanzas that may bring rain to the eyes for Coast Saliish tribes and, indeed, for all tribes.

Inside your heart
is a mountain written over
with a story not its own.

Let us remember its
ancient name, tell its true
story in the old way

made new.

And we all know the names given our west coast volcanoes on mainstream maps are not those mountains' real names.

Jeanetta Calhoun Mish ends this collection with a long poem, "The Quah Effect," named after Talequah, Oklahoma — capitol of the Cherokees' "new" home at the end of the Trail of Tears. Among her closing lines are these:

It comes down to this:
head out for The Territories
east of the 97th parallel
south of the cultural Mason-Dixon

where there are two kinds of
survivors: the crackers and the
others—the music makers, the poets,
the artists, the medicine people.
I come from both kinds.

This book provides, among its considerable gifts, a view of what it is that makes otherwise sane adults write about the life "new" southerners, urban mixed-blood NDNs, midwest greasers, and the legions of lost travelers forever search for, and sometimes regret finding.

Thomas Hubbard, a retired writing instructor and spoken word performer, authored *Nail and other hardworking poems*, Year of the Dragon Press, 1994; *Junkyard Dogz* (also

available on audio CD); and *Injunz*, a chapbook. He designed and published *Children Remember Their Fathers* (an anthology) and books by seven other authors. His book reviews have appeared in *Square Lake*, *Raven Chronicles*, *New Pages* and *The Cartier Street Review*. Recent publication credits include poems in *Yellow Medicine Review*, spring 2010; *I Was Indian*, ed. Susan Deer Cloud, Foothills Publishing, 2010 and *Florida Review*, and short stories in *Red Ink* and *Yellow Medicine Review*. He serves editorially with *Raven Chronicles* and *The Cartier Street Review* and he blogs about writing techniques for WordCraft Circle of Native American Writers and Poets.