

Reviews

Of a Family's Odyssey

And There was David-Kanza.

By Albert Russo.
October 2011; 180 pp; Pa;
\$14, Imago Press, 3710 East
Edison St., Tuscon AZ 85716.

David Alexander

And There Was David-Kanza continues a cycle of fiction that has preoccupied author Albert Russo for decades, and which his perhaps best-known work, *Mixed Blood*, tracks with in a clear line of progression. The novel begins in central Africa in the mid-1920s, where those of mixed racial ancestry occupied a social limbo between "whites" and "coloreds." David-Kanza -- offspring of Daniel Sardo, friend of main character Sandro Romano-Livi, a Jewish immigrant from the island city of Rhodes, Greece, and Shumani, a Kishwali-speaking black African tribeswoman from the nearby province of Kivu -- is a character symbolic of the central themes of the narrative.

"David-Kanza" is above all about a family's odyssey across geographical space, physical time and levels of consciousness, encompassing passages, rites and metamorphoses, that are structural, mental, economic, political, technological, and somehow, even of the stuff of synchronicity. This mixture of attributes affords the novel a secure place amid the canon of fiction that arose from an earlier era colonialism, empire building and commercial exploitation in Africa, and elsewhere in the Third World.

And so Albert Russo's "David-Kanza" is finally a novel less even about Africa than it is about civilization itself, for the magnetic poles of the novel are, on one hand, anarchy, versus culture on the other.

On-going Call of the Wild

The Wildness Beyond.

Edited by Walt McLaughlin.
2011; 76 pp; Pa; \$10. Wood
Thrush Books, 85 Aldis
Street, St. Albans, VT 05478.

David Brainerd

This is Walt McLaughlin's second anthology of "uncommon nature writing." It brings together poems and short prose pieces by 21 different writers. These consist mostly of observations of natural phenomena and brief travelogues about sojourns in wilderness areas. All the contributors are, apparently, American or Canadian, with a heavy concentration of Vermonters and upstate New Yorkers. So, it is no surprise to find that most of the places and the flora and fauna described are to be found in North America.

An exception is Walt Franklin's "Canyon & Portal," in which he discusses hiking in Crete. He tells us that Pliny said about this area, "*Nowhere else does there exist a more magnificent wilderness canyon,*" and he visits the place that Apollo called "the 'navel of the earth.'" This essay's placement in the middle of this collection should remind the reader that all these recent works are part of a commentary on our relationship to the natural world that has been carried on by countless voices since civilization began. Throughout this anthology, images appear, reinforcing the idea that this relationship is the foundation of our existence.

Charles Finn parks "on a gravel road between nowhere and nowhere," feeling as though he might be "watching the end of the world." t. kilgore splake refers to another author who "described a hidden austrian waterfall as the last place on earth," and notes "that there are special p[l]aces for one who feels a certain need for some solitary aloneness in nature." When you find yourself in such a place, William Weiss says, "You cannot help thinking/ that it would be a good day to

die/ because nothing has ever/ been so beautiful or so alive/ and you have never been so pure."

People are, of course, part of the natural world, and, yet, as McLaughlin says, "there exists a tension ... between civilization and the wild, between the human and everything else." That tension defines us as human, for good or ill. So, McLaughlin notes, as he listens to a loon, "Suddenly I see myself for what I really am. No doubt tears flowed just as easily from Adam's eyes when he found himself cast out of Eden." "The Wildness Beyond" of this book's title would seem also to be the wildness that exists within each of us, that part of us that calls out to maintain our connection to nature. If you feel that call, you will enjoy this book.

Clear-eyed Visions

The Local World.

By Mira Rosenthal.
Wick Poetry First Book
Series, #17. 2011; 72 pp; Pa;
\$15. The Kent State
University Press, 1118
Library, PO Box 5190, Kent,
Ohio 4424-0001.

Ellen Ferber

The "Local" in *Local World* is a shifting concept; Rosenthal moves frequently and easily, although not always seamlessly between the body and the land. In one of the most dramatic examples, a photograph of California's Berryessa Valley about to be flooded to create a reservoir alternates with images of the grafting of a flap of skin onto her sister's wounded body. The flooding will commence in three weeks' time the caption says// The fertile valley now foregone to reservoir, cisternal/ /They dug into her flesh dug into the rotting mess of trauma." Rosenthal is unflinching in the face of pain, seeking to participate in her sister's by staying to hear her scream as bandages are changed. Much of this is pretty raw stuff.

The larger world and the interior of the body are everywhere in these poems, both wounded, assaulted, deteriorating, overwhelmed. Sometimes the two meld into a single powerful image: "And the paddle

See Page 11

Neal Wilgus

From Page 4

stark and moving picture of growing up in Illinois, of living in Missouri. Hamm begins "At thirteen... / I was an alien among / the Rockwellian agricreatures / of my home galaxy." In the next poem, "At Sixteen," he writes of Midwestern fathers whose "beardless sons / nurse black eyes / nurse hangovers / roil out of beds / and. into coveralls / unknowingly roiling / into their fathers' skins."

These are family poems: we find "mother said / our failure was written / into our histories / at birth / and we laughed / at her ignorance." Later he writes "I see my father in two versions: / one as a young man, / when he wore so much drywall dust / with a vast innocent dignity, / and one as an old, old man, / when the color will be nothing." At another point "my father once left / the reddish phantom print / of his open hand / below my mother's right eye."

In "Snow Me Forlorn" Hamm writes of Missouri "One minute / you're dying / to climb atop / a wooly green / Ozark mountain" / and the next "you're reminded / how often goodness / is a closely / guarded secret." In the final poem, "What I Have Learned of Grieving," Hamm concludes that "sweet mother symphonies" will "heal like rosary beads / of sweat sliding down the / other side of the window." All in all, Hamm's *Apologies* are accepted with thanks. Recommended.

Ellen Ferber

From Page 9

was a stent// in the heart of water, draining all reflection."

A section called "Necessary Travel" featuring a long poem in parts, "Foreign in a Foreign Country" lends itself to these connections: a child seen in an airport and a bird trapped in her chimney, a scorpion on a road in India and the poet's own "little life." Rosenthal makes frequent use of photographs, some from Dorothea Lange, some personal. In the last section she makes use of a personal one: "Snapshots of the Farm Before We Sold" combines the forces that drive her work: "Rotting fence posts wicking water up/ the vein of the dead wood grain, growing/ beer bellies of moisture, toupees/ Of fresh moss—I guess

this is/ goodbye old men—we're/ selling, we're moving to town."

The Notes section acknowledges the influences, debts and inspirations of, among others Ellen Bryant Voigt, Thomas Pynchon, Chinua Achebe. This poetry is literate, visually acute and the sometime horrors of the pain and destruction of the human body and the body of the world are tempered by beauty and the clear-eyed visions the poems convey.

Review

In Sight

The American Eye.

By Eric Hoffman.

2011; 71 pp; perfect bound;
\$15. Dos Madres Press, Inc.,
Loveland, Ohio 45140.

Pam Rosenblatt

Eric Hoffman's **The American Eye** is not an easy book to read – if you read it properly. It is filled with references to ancient gods and heroes, Emerson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and different European countries that Emerson toured.

To read this book "correctly" (if there is a correct way to read a book), you need a literary background on these subjects. You can read **The American Eye** without referencing these topics and come to an appreciation of wonderful imagery and descriptions, but the main gist of these verses written will probably be unattainable.

Hoffman has divided the book into two sections. The first 55 pages of the book are about Emerson's travels throughout Europe, his wife's death, his relinquishing the priesthood, and visits with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle. These poems are created via the writings of Emerson's personal journal. The remaining 16 pages are a long poem about pragmatic philosophy called "The Vast Practical Engine".

Ironically, Hoffman uses Emerson's line "I am without skill" in the first section of the book. Through Emerson's journal writings, Hoffman has the brilliant Emerson suggest the following:

**I am without skill
As much at sea as on land.
My ignorance astonishes me.
How little I comprehend this**

**world,
Which seems to me a millstone.
Like this ship, I hope & drift,
Yet this ship will, God willing,
Reach shore whereas I am a
Shipwreck continually sinking,
Only to rise to the surface
& sink once again.**

**I know so little of history
Or of metaphysics
& must profess myself
The poorest of philosophers.
I am pale for all my idle hours
Spent staring at a book
From which it is impossible to
learn –
Imagine if this captain had only
A text to tell him of the sea,
We'd never reach our
destination.**

**The only benefit of my
ignorance
Is the affection it affords me
Of the wise, who revel in
displaying
Superior knowledge.**

In this poem, Hoffman points out that Emerson doesn't know everything and appreciates "the wise, who revel in displaying/Superior knowledge."

And in section 8 of the second poem, "The Vast Practical Engine", Hoffman writes of his pursuit for knowledge:

**o my soul
Nothing but a child's cry
such purity in not knowing
but seeking knowledge**

**and once in its possession
it is only by degrees
knowing its mutability
and limits -...**

Hoffman's American eye isn't transparent. It sees everything, though that may not be such a good attribute, as he writes at the end of "8":

**even here in our hearths
and gardens
an infernal cat playing with
a panting mouse
or holds a hot bird
fluttering in her jaws**

Through vivid description, Hoffman suggests what we see may not be always be a pretty image. Knowledge is a precious thing, and something that can also be dangerous.