



## *What Island*

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P.K. Harmon. (2011). Copenhagen and Florham Park, NJ: Serving House Books. 81pp, 3 parts, \$15.00 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-0-9838289-3-8.

This timely collection is bursting at the spine so to speak with ideas, feelings, nuances and commentaries on a number of issues of island life - sustainable environments, sea level rise, economic hardships, degradation of nature and the seemingly everyday pastimes that may border at times on the mundane. The poet, P.K. Harmon, speaks with a personal and political voice. He is in awe of nature's beauty and protective of it, embracing it and at times questioning it. He addresses us with deep concerns about the earth, at times castigating us for the misuse of it. In the context of the Marshall Islands; with its domination history, especially with the massacre on Bikini by the U.S. and all its associated pains on islanders, P.K. Harmon reminds us that we live on an island – Marshall Islands or Earth – and the island is finite.

There are 47 poems altogether presented in three parts. The book moves from one being marooned on an island in the South Seas with its romanticized images of beautiful blue skies, sun, sand and clear diving waters, to the subtle commentary and socio-political critique on the need for safeguarding the environment, impacts of modernity and colonization.

P.K. Harmon explores many facets of island life via themes of ethnicity, cultural survival, political inequality and political dependence. The Marshall Islands are heavily dependent on aid and compact money from the United States and he alludes to this in more than one way via imagery and metaphors. Moreover, he examines these subjects in a manner that leads to psychological and moral insights pertinent not only to the clash of Anglo-American and Marshallese culture (Pacific cultures), but also to the universal human condition. For instance, "What Foot" (p. 45) ends with the awkward realization that man leaves his mark, his "footprints," and inevitably alters or defaces the beauty that is earth. He is celebratory in his accolade of the beauty of nature: *and I get way out there on the water in the sky / feeling pretty beautiful actually but then look down / to my foot and the print it inevitably has to make.* (Stanza 3, last line). He is an environmental word-activist immersed in the island world and nature. He is constantly pondering over some element or dimension of nature; he is in a relationship with nature and at times lost in it. This strong ecological imperative is a recurring theme throughout the book's three parts and is perhaps the strongest message in his work. This aspect of P.K. Harmon's poetry resonates well with Harvard University entomologist, Edward O. Wilson,

often-called "the father of biodiversity." Wilson's works highlighted the dire need to stop extinction of mammals due to habitat loss and destructive behaviors of humans. Similarly readers are reminded of other nature poets like renowned British poet, William Wordsworth, who exalts nature's beauty in "Daffodils" and other prominent American poets like Robert Frost in terms of earth and nature focus.

In Part One, "What Wave", "What Birth," "What Blue," "What May," "What Moon," "What Love," "What Shape," "What I Say," "What Island," "What Lips," "What Sleep," "What Water & Light," "What For" and "What Letter" are typically short. The poems are set in a context of a curious mix of "an island" vis-a'-vis the distinctive Marshall Islands in Micronesia, and on the other, our earth – the world as it were – our finite and bigger human island. In most Pacific cultures, the islands, the waves, the oceans, the trees and land are all part of the world - like the spirits of the spirit world and the departed spirits of the ancestors. The poem "What Island" itself (page 21), utilizes rich imagery and personification with utterances such as: *when the darkest girl, the mother / of our child, says "The ocean is / eating the island we stand on."* (Stanza 2, line 4 and Stanza 3, lines 1&2). "What Island" is a mainstay of the book and Harmon's discursive style helps us move from one landscape to another, one idea to the next, through his utterances, his dreams, his hopes and desires.

Treating the island as a dumping ground and carelessly exploiting it causes environmental damage and also the loss of a future for our children. Harmon correctly identifies island values as fast disappearing and replaced quite prominently with consumption patterns of the East and West as in "What Lagoon 2" (p. 70). To this end, the I-Kiribati poet, Tereao Teingiia Ratite (2010), pleads with us and laments the loss of traditional medicine trees and indigenous wisdoms in "The Pounding of Uri Leaves." Ratite asks: *What shall we do without uri leaves?* In a possible response affirming the lament and subtle critique, Tongan poet Konai Helu Thaman (2000) offers to us "Island Fire."

Also found in Professor Harmon's poetry are elements of a post-colonial critique with notions of "naming" and "othering." In "What Bob," (pp. 27-31) one may ask: is Bob a stereotypical construct of the Island man by the author/persona? The reader is reminded perhaps the poet may have also been alluding to the figurative Indian - noble or ignoble. This reminds one of the American imagination and stereotyping of the native Indian as "Bob" in the early invasion of the Americas (which is history) but one can argue its sensibilities and emotions are well and alive today. In her poem "Name Calling" (2010), Cresantia F. Koya decries "the naming" of the "other" by the colonizer or the dominant other. In "What Bob," the protagonist begins with the Islander - the native perhaps at his most rudimentary best. The protagonist is cooking over fire: *By the corner of the house / is the fire where I cook* (Stanza 1, lines 1 & 2). *...Is Bob some kind of ghost?* (Stanza 2, line 9). Again this imagery reminds one of a strong tendency on islands to associate most things with some spirit force. Towards the end of the "What Bob" series, one sees the protagonist feeling a little at ease and a lot more respectful of "Bob"- he says for instance in "What Bob -5," (p. 29), *Put another chair, set a place / for Bob. Though he has a / common name he brings me good / cheer: We / it turns out have much in / common....* The protagonist faces his own biases and stereotypes; he turns these on their heads and embraces difference. This is an excellent resolve, a climax of sorts, there is some degree of penitence meted when the persona realizes and accepts their common humanity! Eureka! Locally, Bob is a dominant image as well given that pandanus fruit – locally known as Bob - is

the mainstay of Marshallese diet. There is also a Bob festival that celebrates the dominance of pandanus and its fruit in Marshallese diets and lives.

There are many other voices and facets of island life that are highlighted in Part Two of the book. Part Two has 17 poems and the poems take us through life's many trajectories, like one weaving oneself out of the kaleidoscope that is life – all through Harmon's very enabling discursive strength. In "What Moment" (p. 35), the poem is a conversation between the protagonist and the lover, wife or ... the wife wants some conversation ... it's the moment – because it's the time the protagonist is put on the spot - or he feels like he is put on the spot – the protagonist talks of her rumblings – [her angry words]: *you own rumbling about not quite what* (Stanza 1, last line). He throws her words away in the water ... He has had too much of his lady love - it appears she has berated him enough. In her anger, she misses out on a lot happening in the world, she cannot savor the beauty and life for the moment, as she is so overwhelmed with anger she speaks with just incoherent words. Konai Helu Thaman (1999:19) in "Why Do You Say" suggests to the persona that love does not come to an end. It makes a return, return perhaps if the people in the relationship recollect their senses and return to what was important in the first place. She says: *Good things do not come / to an end / they only wait / for our return.* (Stanza 6, lines 1- 3).

In "What Prayer" (p. 41), the persona is doubting God, he appears disinterested in the prayer or church service – he is overwhelmed – he is ragged – and feels overtaken with local indulgences. In Oceania, prayers and churches are two events and indulgences one rags up for. The persona perhaps cannot handle the cognitive dissonance that comes with page after page of bible bashing and continued long hours of what may seem like endless eternity to the unbeliever or should I say uninitiated. Perhaps Samoan poet and church minister in Newton, New Zealand, Reverend Mua Strickson-Pua (2006), will provide some relief for the persona here. In his collection: *Matua*, Strickson-Pua berates the man of the cloth saying Pacific Islanders should not be exploited by the church in God's name, especially as it relates to monies collected by the believers in the name of God. And again in "What the Gecko Said" (p. 50), one is reminded perhaps of those who play God in the Pacific Islands - and – there have been many – the gecko sees all from the ceiling and spends all its life strutting to and fro from one corner of the ceiling to the other - many a traveler like the colonizer has done the same on some tropical island like the Marshall Islands and like the gecko: *There is nothing of yours that I haven't touched / and taken as my own – I scamper I freeze / I tick tick tick from a place you cannot see / life is short I shit where I please I'm hungry* (Stanza 5, lines 1-4).

In Part Three, P.K Harmon engages in political commentary. There are eight short poems with "What Bikini" (p.65) behaving like a prologue of sorts to "What Lagoon" (pp. 69 - 75), stretched out in a discursive trip that takes the reader to questions of identity, possibilities, extreme desecration of land and tribal spaces, and associated dislocation. "What Bikini" runs into four pages and is a torrid account of the bombing and nuclear testing on Bikini atoll. The poem suggests the bombing has rendered the island unlivable as fish, water and plant life became permanently toxic with unhealthy levels of radioactive waste. The U.S. plays God and claims the bombing was good for mankind - does this suggest then that Bikinians are guinea pigs or sacrifices – killed off their home islands so that people everywhere else may live - some kind of logic that is! Likewise, in "What Lagoon," seven poems in one, Harmon introduces us to another dominant image in Micronesia and the Pacific – lagoons. There is in Harmon's work a

definitive dislike for pollution and environmental degradation. He says in “What Lagoon 2” (p. 70): *I am declaring / this lagoon dead. If there / were coral heads before / they are no longer.* (Stanza 1, lines 1-4). He acknowledges bad influences from the East and West on the island in terms of dangerous consumptions with the images of speeding buses and young men who appear alienated from island cultures hence “displaced.” The good message is he says: there are still the outer islands - which constitute “an elixir” of sorts to calm the nerves of urban Majuro natives. In “What Lagoon 4” and “What Lagoon 5” (pp. 72-73), the persona is at the causeway swimming/bathing. Causeways improve communications and they run the entire length of South Tarawa – the main urban areas of Kiribati. They have increased levels of pollution in the lagoons to toxic levels due to the closing off of the tidal passages between the once were separate islets. Now the continuous causeway is some 28 kilometers long, a mark of modernity but also of modernity’s failings.

A few quibbles to an otherwise interesting book. One dominant frame of Harmon’s poetry deals with expectations and how the world [island, third, other] does not always meet one’s expectations. The American dream and its expectations on the world, “the other” are at times misplaced. These expectations are self-inflicted and need to be interrogated for its purported relevance everywhere else in the world. This element of Harmon’s work resonates closely with Gary Beck’s poem “Expectation” where he tells us that life typically begins [at least with a middle class American child] with high expectations. Then comes real life as the child grows like everywhere else, and she/he learns to accept that things are not always going to be great. America is disintegrating into social decay as we move through each poem in Gary Beck’s *Expectations*.

In trying to understand the minds of people that he is writing about, poets like P.K. Harmon struggle with their own biases, personalities and like most social scientists would admit - their own disciplinary perspectives – discursive systems of analysis, writing conventions and the like, and moreover reasoning used norms of their own society. On ethnocentrism in writing conventions and biases in writing about Pacific Islanders, the geographer R. Bedford (1988) had this to say: “The behavioral environment that we need to study then is our own as social scientists. Our own training, value systems, ideology and preferences impose themselves on any research inquiry. It is important that we recognize this and that we are projecting our own behavioral environment onto the data [our work] (Bayliss-Smith, Bedford, Brookfield & Latham 1998:10).

These comments aside, P.K. Harmon should be congratulated for adding to a much-needed collection of writing and literary work on Micronesia and the Pacific Islands. It is a small yet very important contribution to poetry of the Pacific Islands. It will be useful as text and reference for scholars and professors in literature and in schools of education as well as in creative writing.

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