

Between the News and the Dews

A Review of Harryette Mullen's *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*

*The morning news landed in the driveway, folded,
rolled, and rubber-banded, wrapped in plastic
for protection from the morning dew.*

Harryette Mullen frames this first poem in her latest book with a rhyme between culture and nature, “morning news” and “morning dew,” with the former “protected” from the latter by a refined product, plastic, that itself has an organic origin. That product is invoked in the book’s very title, slang for the “discarded plastic bag we see in every city / blown down the street with vagrant wind,” like the poet. Urban(e) tumbleweed herself, a walker in and around the city of Los Angeles, Mullen uses the deceptive casualness of her “notes” to produce a compelling book-length eco-poetic meditation on the meaning of such categories as the “human,” the “natural,” the “native.”

Urban Tumbleweed (Graywolf, 2013) comprises three tanka per page, making for 366 three-line poems, one for each day of a leap year. Though somewhat less grid-like (two poems per page are left-justified; one is centered), the visual appearance recalls the four-quatrains-per-page layout of Mullen’s *Muse & Drudge* (Singing Horse, 1995). And just as those quatrains played on the structure and relative interchangeability of the blues stanza, so *Urban Tumbleweed* varies the traditional Japanese thirty-one-syllable, single-line form by adapting the syllable count into tercets. The scale of the 7" x 5" page—reminiscent of the eponymous portable diary/notebook—is well adapted simultaneously to isolate and connect its three tercets. For all the appearance of natural ease in the writing, form here is Oulipian as much as organic.

Mullen’s prefatory short essay, “On Starting a Tanka Diary,” and the closing acknowledgements help to situate the work. Mullen writes of “using tanka to explore the question ‘What is natural about being human?’” or “the human being’s place in the natural world, an idea I wanted to explore in my own nontraditional way,” and the inseparable relationship between nature and culture—evident everywhere the speaker turns—is the central one in the book. The “notes” and “diary” of the title propose a poetry of “ephemera” and “fleeting impres-

sions” consistent with the tanka tradition. “Attention to surroundings,” “reflection” (not just observation), “everyday encounters with nature,” “a record of meditations and migrations”: these are all features of the tanka diary. Importantly, “attention to surroundings” does not solely mean “natural” surroundings in the conventional sense. These are nature poems of a massive American city, after all, which means plenty of local and non-local flora and fauna, but which also means surroundings marked by homelessness, violence, random police actions, free-ways, traffic noise: urban pastoral. Nor is the attention always occupied with the ecosystem and with momentary observations of nature: we get news items, truncated jokes, household tips, film and literary references, notations on the daily bus ride, dictionary definitions.

For a poet, the great humbling challenge is to know that one begins with an inadequate vocabulary: “I lack a proper lexicon to write about the natural world, when what we call natural or native is more than ever open to question.” The language of nature does not come naturally, and developing that lexicon requires some self-education: “I spend the morning reading names / of flowers and trees in the botanical garden.” In turn, the poetry is opened up to found or recycled text, so that a tanka devoted to the “blackfoot daisy” sounds like a plaque from that same botanical garden. “Attention,” then, also includes self-reflexive attention to the writing process: “stopping to admire your garden, I might be / composing a tanka in my head” is just one of many such moments. As she has throughout her career, Mullen makes language one central site of the nature-culture relationship, reminding us that the conjunction itself is what constitutes the human. Metaphor unites the realms. One primary way that we “know” nature is through figurative language, not nature’s other but its twin: the setting sun a “blazing Frisbee,” the bee as “[s]elf-guided missile,” Venus “a beauty mark penciled on the face of the sun.”

Urban Tumbleweed is often deliberately flat or ephemeral in its diction, which is part of its quiet surprise. Moving away from the electric verbal surfaces of her preceding books, Mullen embraces cliché, seeming imprecision, and moments of sentimentality and datedness with cheerful ease, in her use of words and phrases like “charming,” “stir the heart,” “incredibly green,” “a breathtaking view.” At the same time, something more is always going on beneath the apparently simple surface. A whole ecopolitics is built into that wry adverb “incredibly”: to achieve these “incredibly green” lawns, their owners have treated them chemically and violated watering bans.

Only limited control can be exercised over the “urban / garden,” however, as a “[f]ugitive fragrance... / escapes” the “[c]hain-link fence, locked gate.” Nature and culture are simultaneously deeply entwined and in tension with each other, as Mullen foregrounds the impulse toward constraint and cultivation: store-bought flowers are “considered / more aesthetic than the ones growing in the yard,” while the bird of paradise “potted...in / florist shop windows” grows of its own accord “and a head taller,” “[h]ere in my yard.” We find “riotous dandelions” and “slovenly” and “spectacular” jacaranda growing “without check, with original energy,” as Whitman has it. The distinction between “energy” and “check” extends to human creativity, the spontaneous “child’s / exuberant drawings in colored chalk” on the sidewalk more appealing than the “impressive green lawn” produced by “a crew / of turf installers” for market-driven “curb appeal.” While the ironies exposed by Mullen’s eye for social detail may be understated, rendered not acerbically but with equanimity and even a gentle whimsy more often than not, they remain sharp and clear, the notation unflinching: “At night our tidy-clean, green park is locked / to keep out rough sleepers who bed down on sidewalks / next to shopping carts full of rubbish.”

Nature and culture are inseparable not just from each other but from a history of race in which diasporic Africans have been associated with (exploitable) nature and seen as incapable of culture. If racial politics is less central here than in Mullen’s *Sleeping with the Dictionary* or *Muse & Drudge*, still it is hardly absent. The “ashy knees” and “kindling / limbs” of the “[f]lame tree” call up both the cosmetic treatment of black skin and the history of lynching—this on the same page as “settlers risk brewing a deadly / cup of mud,” where “mud” is not just coffee but also a racial slur for “mulatto.” At the same time, it is the project’s totality that represents Mullen’s strongest statement on nature, nature writing, and race. Claiming the cultural space as a black woman to write about nature, Mullen aligns herself with the tradition (in Camille Dungy’s phrase) of “four centuries of African American nature poetry.” Like Dungy in her pioneering anthology *Black Nature*, Mullen “[resists] typical assumptions that ‘green’ is white and ‘urban’ is black.” “Typical assumptions” consistently get shredded in and by Mullen’s work, and that remains the case in these vivid notations on what Ed Roberson calls “urban nature.”

If the nature-culture continuum is the weightiest one that Mullen works (and plays) with in *Urban Tumbleweed*, the book features plenty of others. We get arresting shifts in scale from cosmic to microscopic, from the Andromeda Galaxy to a mosquito on a raindrop, and a panop-

tical temporal perspective that shifts from the present to the prehistoric and back. “Native” and “non-native” map onto a complex thematics of belonging, mobility, and estrangement, partly through the trope of the book’s omnipresent “immigrants.” Gardens don’t distinguish among their plants—“Native or not, you’re welcome”—while a “[n]on-native ice plant on postage stamps / represents the golden state,” as does its non-native governor at the time, Arnold Schwarzenegger. As friends come in from out of town, tourist sites are visited, and the poet travels nationally and internationally, the tumbleweed becomes a figure for a cultural condition, and homelessness not just a sadly literal state but also a figure for the poetic process: “A homeless woman spends her days collecting / odd scraps of paper, then sits in front / of the all-night drugstore, poring over them.”

Like *Muse & Drudge, Urban Tumbleweed* ends in utopian fashion by imagining an audience, the possibility that “our folded paper boats and origami airplanes”—these poems—“may last longer / and travel farther than we know.” And it imagines that future while acknowledging once more its own limitations: “Never learned your name,” the poet says to a bird in the last tanka, reminding us that the perceiving and commenting eye/I is always noticeably present. If “[a] pink snake racing across the desert / hardly needs explanation,” still, to be human is, among other things, to explain. Culture is an interpretation of nature, the phenomena of which now come thoroughly mediated, loaded with symbolic baggage through their appearance as icons of popular culture in hundreds of films: “They’re meant to underscore boredom or an awkward / silence: recorded cricket chorus / or desert wind rolling a tumbleweed.” By the time it gets to town, the tumbleweed has become text, “eco” and “poetics” intimately and provokingly conjoined.