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BOOK REVIEWS

Miracle Fruit

By Aimee Nezhukumatathil
Tupelo Press, 2003

“Miracle fruit changes the tongue. One bite / and for hours all you eat is sweet,” read the opening lines of Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s debut collection of poems that so exquisitely capture the “crush of sugar on your tongue,” the taste of honey and cherries this book leaves in the mouth. The implicit sweetness of Nezhukumatathil’s poems is cut with a sense of loss from the very start; the man who sells this miracle fruit has “one / tooth, one sandal.” The “jasmine throated angels” and “pineapple slices in kulfi cream” she writes about in “The Rolling Saint” might be too saccharine if they weren’t juxtaposed against the reality of the poem’s main subject: an Indian holy man who rolls for 4,000 kilometers on his side for peace. Nezhukumatathil deals with very specific notions of loss in this book—not the finality or violence of death, but organic losses due to the passage of time, or random heat-of-the-moment losses that are often the result of the wild abandon generated by love or the conviction of faith.

Miracle Fruit is divided into three sections—“Slice,” “Juice,” and “Flesh”—and each has its own distinct flavor. “Slice” deals mostly with coming-of-age themes and family scenes; the vivid, narrative advice and warnings of the speaker’s mother figure prominently in many of these poems. “Juice” is a section of imagination and the natural

world; here Nezhukumatathil often uses plants or creatures in vibrant ending images—ants “waving / their antennae as if conducting a symphony,” “the birds overhead / holding their breath, the pierced trees bubbling at their bark.” “Flesh” is the raciest section, tackling the complications of lust and relationships, “not the mess... Only this sweet business of trying,” with a delicious grace.

One of the most impressive aspects of *Miracle Fruit* is the myriad of styles Nezhukumatathil works in, and the sheer variety of bodies her poems inhabit: the short-lined tautness of words tumbling vertically in “Little Houses”; the loose syncopation of “Meditation on Flannel” with its pauses of white space; the imagistic prose blocks, like “Crow Joy,” interspersed throughout the book; the more formalistic couplets of “Red Ghazal” that stretch long across the page. Nezhukumatathil’s language is as exacting as her forms are varied. She captures dialect flawlessly in poems like “The Original William,” and renders details with a hawk’s eye, as in “Making Gyotaku,” where she describes the Japanese custom of making a print with a fish you’ve caught.

In poems like “Suddenly as Anything,” Nezhukumatathil fuses the natural world seamlessly with the emotional world by rooting her poems in a distinctly human landscape; here a classroom experience leads to carpenter ants, an orange, and an explanation about the chara plant. “Telling the Bees” introduces the insects in the context of a

supermarket's produce department. Overwhelmingly, *Miracle Fruit* is a book that uses the organic world—a menagerie of animals (birds, pigs, frogs, alligators, crows, stingrays, elephants, snakes, peacocks) and an abundance of food (unripened pears, banana ice cream, cheese curds, *poori*, potatoes, paprika) to get at the deeper questions of what constitute joy, passion, coming-of-age, love, faith, and heritage.

As a poet of Filipino and Indian descent, Nezhukumathil deftly interweaves the cultural geographies and physical landscapes of both countries into her work, shifting effortlessly between the pickpockets of Manila and mealtime with her cousins in the south of India. “Fishbone,” the poem that begins the “Slice” section, highlights the culture clash between the poet's distinct heritage and her contemporary American childhood by comparing her breakfasts of fried smelt with more “normal” ones, like the Cheerios and buttered toast served at her friend's house. This collision gives *Miracle Fruit* a tension—a unique texture and character that runs throughout the entire collection. In “The Purchase,” Nezhukumathil utterly nails the alarmist tendencies of immigrant parents when she tells the story of her mother's narrative reaction to her new puppy—a harrowing tale of a dog, a snake, a baby, and ultimately, a death. “She will remember only the dangers, the blood,” she writes.

The imagined worlds in these poems are lush and wild, with pictures, personae, and cartoon characters coming to life. We find Lewis and Clark arguing and playing pranks on each other, a Bonsai master's daughter complaining about her father, the Incredible Hulk claiming he's a “mellow kinda guy.” If a

book could have a Freudian stage, this one's would be distinctly oral—*Miracle Fruit* devours what it loves, and digests it as words. The short poem “Speak” best expresses this process:

If the Hopi say “ripi”
to mean notch, then
for them, serration
is “ripiripiripi.” I want
to speak like that, fill
your ears and hands
with wet stones, turquoise
and smooth, as if
they had tumbled
in the mouth of a macaw.

If this book has one cohesive message, however, it can be found at the end of the first section, in the poem entitled “Falling Thirds.” Here we discover that “We measure our names the same... we sing the same songs,” guiding the reader towards the idea of community, of a common humanity. Nezhukumathil writes in “Fabric,” “As long as / we stayed there we kept / everything bright from breaking.” And as long as you remain in the folds of *Miracle Fruit*, your world will stay intact, colorful, and sweet.

—Erika Meitner

How to Be Alone: Essays

By Jonathan Franzen

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002

When I first heard the title of Jonathan Franzen's new book of essays, I was surprised by just how, well, egalitarian it seemed. The title, *How to Be Alone*, has more than a hint

of self-helpful “therapeutic corporatism” and a striking lack of ambivalence. Surely, I thought, this is not the same Jonathan Franzen who writes serious novels in the “high-art literary tradition.” But more than just noting this, I was troubled by it.

Part of me—maybe a shameful part—likes the Franzen who didn’t want the Oprah insignia on his dust jacket. This part of me was even more disappointed when, in the foreword, Franzen announces that many of the essays have been edited for clarity; especially, he says, “Perchance to Dream,” the notorious 1996 “*Harper’s* Essay,” a strenuous, searching, and whiny examination of contemporary fiction and its discontents. Though I’ll admit that, when I first read it, I found some spots rough, on the whole it seemed clear enough: cultural atrophy makes “serious” art—especially fiction—nearly impossible. This leads the serious artist to become either a culturally irrelevant elitist or a depressed recluse. Sometimes, in the case of Franzen circa 1995, both. In *How to Be Alone*, the essay is retitled “Why Bother?” (this self-deprecating shift, incidentally, turns out to be one of the most substantial changes to the text) and it is the centerpiece of about half of the book’s essays, which, like “Why Bother?,” offer complex examinations of the writerly and readerly self. Often despairing in tone, these essays suggest that the current state of cultural affairs is not just unfortunate, but is a personal affront directed at one Jonathan Franzen. This fairly unwavering theme does not always keep the essays from being deeply engaging, but Franzen’s concerns in *How to Be Alone* are not simply solipsistic. Many of the essays in the collection were written “mainly to make some money,” and here, Franzen reports interest-

ingly on topics as diverse as the U.S. Postal Service, prison design, and Clinton’s impeachment. He also reviews books from Sven Birkerts’s *The Gutenberg Elegies* to Sex: *A Man’s Guide*.

What makes *How to Be Alone* a compelling collection is that even in his journalism, Franzen’s tone is still occasionally edged with personal despair. In “Books in Bed,” a problematizing review of how-to sex books, Franzen parenthetically bubbles, “Nothing more reliably bolsters my faith in humanity than the dyspepsia of letters to the *Times*” and later notes his perennial alienation upon “learning that Hootie & the Blowfish sold thirteen million copies of their first record.” It is these unmitigated ebullitions of personality that tie *How to Be Alone* into a fairly unified whole. If you like Franzen, this augments these otherwise interesting essays. If you don’t, you are faced with a guy who can’t stop carping about his own self-imposed obsolescence.

If you fall into the later group, you might really quail when, later in “Books in Bed,” Franzen cries, “I want to be alone, but not too alone. I want to be the same but different.” After Franzen has displayed an excerpt of his correspondence with Don DeLillo, mentioned (a few times) the friend who gave him a TV, and recounted a trip to Stanford for lunch with a MacArthur Fellow (and the list goes on), this might seem more than a little adolescent. But Franzen (according to the MacArthur Fellow) is a “social isolate,” a writer and a reader in the tradition of high modernism who, in a culture inundated with Hootie and Britney, Oprah and planned obsolescence, is essentially alone. And not just alone but, as the tone of these essays often indicates, proud to be. Without a

doubt, this is the sad solitude of one who defends “aesthetic elitism” as a way “to secure a small space of privacy within the prevailing din.” So despite the early implications, elitism—though Franzen claims it “doesn’t sit well with [his] American nature”—plays an intrinsic role in this collection. Though these essays often bend towards the personal, they speak elegantly to conflicts central to our culture. In the constant contrast between his personal voice and the public forum of these essays, Franzen dramatizes such conflicts while simultaneously engendering the collection with a surprising depth of feeling.

How to Be Alone won’t teach you how to be alone. It won’t even try. But, through its feelingness and the rigor of the thoughts percolating in these essays, it does—despite its contradictions and occasional overbearance—stand proudly alone as a work pertinent, both for lonely elitists and, well, anyone else who still reads.

—Nicholas Hengen

Sun Out: Selected Poems 1952-1954

and

A Possible World: Poems

By Kenneth Koch

Knopf, 2002

Here we have the bookends in the oeuvre of Kenneth Koch, a remarkable poet who wrote for the better part of a century. As in many poetic careers, the work of Koch’s middle period—especially in the irreverent classic *The Art of Love*—has proven the fullest and most satisfying. Still, there is much to recommend these outer satellites as well.

When Koch set out to write the poems of

Sun Out, he was a young man discovering the world—fresh from Cincinnati and fresh out of Harvard, just coming to know himself as the New Yorker he would in due course become. There is a miscellaneous cast to many of these poems, as in the first poem of the collection, “Sun Out,” which begins, “Bananas, piers, limericks / I am postures.” Taken in context, this appears to be a random start to a random poem in a random collection. Taken as an excerpt, it serves as an *ars poetica* of sorts. Though Koch’s kooky energy is often unfocused, the poetic spirit itself—more than any opaque or transparent subject—serves to redeem the volume, and indeed his entire career. Koch may be posing, but at least he is willing to admit it.

With enough style to outrun their substance, most of these first efforts are little more than sketches. For example, “En L’An Trentième de Mon Age,” an abstract meditation on one’s late twenties in the early fifties, stands as a dry run for the more concrete and confident meditations on ages and again in “The Magic of Numbers” (from *The Art of Love*) and “Ballade” (from *Straits*). Koch incorporated “Sun Out” into “Fresh Air” for his official debut volume. With the bananas, the piers and the limericks vanished, Koch exclaims plainly, “Sun out! perhaps there is a reason for the lack of poetry / In these ill-contented souls, perhaps they need air!”

Such a “lack of poetry” in the Eisenhower era wasn’t exactly a Victorian fustiness, though it was a modernist fastidiousness that led to mustiness, and then, as with the Victorians, to dustiness. The young Koch wanted no part of those stale traditions, yet the long shadow of modernism lingers here in the form of an obscurity he would soon come to abandon. Past this, the shadows of

John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, tougher for Koch to shake, are stronger in *Sun Out* than in any of his later volumes.

Nevertheless, there are traces here of the style that Koch himself would come to develop—as *Sun Out* demonstrates, the coy tone, the desultory geography and the rampant exclamation points were there from the very beginning. Above all there is an interest in the play of language, as when the Spice Islands are renamed the I-spy lands (in “No Biography”), and in fey titles such as “Everyone is Endymion.”

When Koch is on his game, one wants to play along, but there are moments when one simply wants to take one's ball and go home. Too often, he flirts with incoherence—the price to be paid by the apprentice Koch in order to achieve the more intelligible jubilation of his mature work. But in reading lines like

January, milkmen, hopelessness, and, stare!
Try idea, it is modern, cigars! If blankets
Mutter in cargo, defrayed chests'
Anagram, O coconuts, jujube and lingo!

it is more difficult to appreciate what art there may be in them than to see why this art should come from a poem called “No Job at Sarah Lawrence.”

If *Sun Out* bears the marks of an energetic but undisciplined twenty-something, *A Possible World* is the wise and worldly valediction of a septuagenarian. Koch's characteristic exuberance and poise blend together with the wistful nostalgia of his more recent volumes. The result doesn't quite live up to the grandeur of the monumental *New Addresses*, though the disappointed may take consolation in the pair of new “addresses” to be

found in *A Possible World*, “To Buddhism” and “To a Bug.”

Since *A Possible World* was issued posthumously, one brings to it an expectation that Koch will be concerned, if not preoccupied, with the specter of death. Indeed, “A Momentary Longing to Hear Sad Advice from One Long Dead,” Koch's remembrance of Delmore Schwartz, possesses its fair share of melancholia. “Barking Dogs in the Snow,” which seems at first glance to be another exercise in surrealism, is more properly considered as a contemporary meditation on old age. Yet the book as a whole is unusually digressive for a final collection—who else but Koch would reserve spaces in the last pages of his last volume for poems called “The Moor Not Taken” and “Thor Not Taken”?

Ultimately, what sets *A Possible World* apart is its keen sense of the world in all its diversity. Koch extends beyond the familiar worlds of America and Europe to fashion poems reflecting on his extensive travels in poorer countries, including China, Haiti and Malaysia. These poems, though reminiscent of his earlier African meditations in *On the Edge*, extend themselves beyond mere chronicles of exotica and verge upon engaging—if not quite fully engaged—political critique.

Among the finest of Koch's travel poems is the outstanding “Variations at Home and Abroad,” a poem made possible by what Koch describes, in “A Memoir,” as “my free-booting life as an expatriate.” How delightful to consider the arbitrary logic of the identity equations Koch concocts! “To be Italian takes at least half the day,” Koch explains. “To be Chinese,” he continues, “seven-eighths of it.”

By such calculations, it took Koch a quarter-century to become a poet, as long again to perfect his craft, two decades to bask in

the glory of success, and seven splendid years to solidify his contribution to the art.

There is no simple formula, however, for the magic that Koch had for making poetry come alive. He began to distill the process in a series of valuable books on the art of teaching poetry composition, but even those excellent works do not approach the excellence of his best work as a poet. *A Possible World* is a considerable addition to that work—the work of an erratic but genuine talent in poetry. Koch seems to have suspected as much of himself. Perhaps he speaks to his own efforts, here and elsewhere, in the late poem “A Review,” where we find the poet “Afraid? Probably. Succeeding / At something? Likely—”

—*Jim Cocola*

The Good Kiss
By George Bilgere
University of Akron Press, 2002

George Bilgere’s *The Good Kiss* seems an appropriate choice for Billy Collins to select for the 2001 Akron Series in Poetry. Like Collins, Bilgere is accessible and humorous—the Poet Laureate writes of reading Bilgere’s poems: “I heard a sound I hadn’t heard in a long time, and I realized it was myself, laughing.” But Bilgere’s humor is more reminiscent of John Berryman, using pain and self-analysis to marry each laugh with a wince. The result is a book of poetry that is truly entertaining, yet still attuned to the heartache out of which so many poems come.

The book’s title is the first instance of Bilgere’s remarkable talent for blending

tones. *The Good Kiss* takes divorce as its primary subject matter and examines the weaknesses in ourselves and our relationships that no single kiss, even a “good kiss,” could ever heal. Bilgere’s speaker is at his best in subtle comparisons between his own failed marriage and other relationships: his sister and brother-in-law, his parents, former friends, and even strangers he observes in a coffee shop. To one’s gratitude, *The Good Kiss* does not brood; it shakes its head in finding the absurdity in its seriousness. In “What I Want,” the dedication to which reads “for my marriage,” Bilgere writes:

I don’t ask for much: a good merlot.
An afternoon thunderstorm cooling off

The city as I sit listening to Ella
Sing “Spring is Here,” so the air goes
lyrical
And perhaps a stray bolt of lightning

Strikes my ex-wife as she steps from
her car,
Setting her on fire, to the unqualified
delight
Of the friends she has come to visit...

Poems such as this achieve that wonderful degree of honesty that is able to portray life’s hardships as both saddening and hilarious. Another, “Nevada,” explores the sad movement from love’s silliness to its soberness as a relationship disintegrates. The poem is visibly aware of the discrepant meanings words take on in different situations:

...whore
I called her in bed, at the beginning,
In the kind of weird play

Sex can be made of, as if rehearsing
For the time to come

When I called her that
Out of bed and in earnest...

Such poems make up the emotional center of *The Good Kiss*, but the book also revisits familiar subjects from Bilgere's first two books, *The Going* (University of Missouri Press, 1994) and *Big Bang* (Copper Beech Press, 1999), primarily that of the speaker's family. In *The Good Kiss*, however, the poems about family take on a harmonic quality as they inform and are informed by the portrayal of the speaker's own failed marriage.

In "Laundry," he writes:

... soon that wind
Will get the better of her
And her marriage. Soon the future
I live in will break
Through those borders and make
A photograph of her—but

For now the shirts and blouses
Are joyous with her in the yard
As she stands with a wooden clothespin
In her mouth, struggling to keep
The bed sheets from blowing away.

Bilgere's poems are narratively simple; like those of Collins or of Mark Halliday, they require just one reading to be understood. But reading the poems more than once reveals the stunning ways in which Bilgere uses small devices, such as the line break, to create an independent integrity for every line while still pushing the poem toward its end.

Many authors speak of writing as a heal-

ing process. Although the poems in *The Good Kiss* seem as if they might have been written in such terms, they are far too accomplished, far too finished to feel like a "process." These poems resonate after one has put down the book, compelling us to return to it with the fresh interest of a first reading. In the dangerous country of "failed love" poems, *The Good Kiss* thrives with its withering honesty, its self-deprecating lyricism, and of course, its humor.

—Dave Lucas

Caramelo

By Sandra Cisneros
Knopf, 2002

As real as fiction can be, as absurd as reality can get, Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* tells the story of Celaya Reyes, nicknamed Lala, as told in retrospect by Lala herself. But before she can get to her own story, she must wade through the rusting lives of her grandmother and mother, stopping briefly along the way to dip into stories of further-back ancestors and the history of the Mexico and the America that are both so integral to the path of her own life—all of which happens over a backdrop of linguistic and formal experimentation.

Cisneros has stolen the art of description and made her mark all over it. Gems are unearthed in each turn of phrase as Cisneros constantly challenges her reader to see things with a twist. On the annual migration from Chicago to Mexico, Lala describes the border:

Not like on the Triple A atlas from orange
to pink, but at a stoplight in a rippled

heat and a dizzy gasoline stink, the United States ends all at once, a tangled shove of red lights from cars and trucks waiting their turn to get past the bridge. Miles and miles...As soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. Toc, says the light switch in this country, at home it says click.

The family's entrance into Mexico marks the arrival of more Spanish into the narrative. For most novels, linguistic hybridization runs the risk of becoming confusing, especially for monolingualists. Not so in *Caramelo*, in which Cisneros cleverly and subtly manages to translate Spanish phrases, of which there are many, into English.

Dialogue, too, is often cleverly introduced—sometimes paraphrased or in free indirect discourse, and often with no direct correlation to the narrative. Cisneros explains only when she must. Her trust in her readers is enormous, flattering. Time stays flexible; digression is encouraged. This is not to say her chronology is labyrinthine, only that it is far from straight, preferring instead to veer off track and linger around prose decorated lavishly with vivid images, unconcerned with whether the reader can keep up. Fortunately most readers will enjoy themselves too much to be worry about what happened when, exactly, or how they got here in the first place. The novel's temporal looseness adds to the its breezy nostalgia and allows Cisneros to transport her reader back and forth in time and location without making such shifts evident.

Formally, *Caramelo* does interesting things with metastory, the most significant being its penchant for interruptions in the storytelling. As Lala unfolds her grandmother's

and then her mother's stories, they interrupt her, at times pleading with her to leave out certain painful or regrettable moments, other times merely straightening a crooked fact. While working out her grandmother's story (her grandmother's remarks in bold, as they are in the novel):

Now let me get on with the story. The world was filled with wind the day Narciso Reyes met Exaltacion Henestrosa.

Ha! That shows what you know. The winds in Oaxaca arrive only in the winter.

Well, let's pretend it's winter.

But you just finished saying it was the rainy season. Really!

All right. Just for poetic purposes, we'll allow the wind to arrive in this scene. It suits the story better.

Such exchanges, when used too frequently in the novel, can become obnoxious, chopping up the story and inviting unwelcome frivolity. But by drawing attention to the unreliability of both the narrator and her subjects' memories, these moments effectively play around with, and make the reader hyperaware of, the form of story and the artistic license any author uses when telling or writing one.

This story runs deep, with characters that should be real, settings that are, and a plot line as convoluted and messy as any family history. Its focus blurs and sharpens, maintaining a shallow depth of field as the lens zooms in and out from character to character. *Caramelo* is an epic romance, its narrator in love with life, on par with the work of Colombian-born Gabriel García Márquez, in particular *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Like

that of García Márquez, Cisneros' imagination, not to mention her language, should push other writers past envy into appreciative inspiration.

Reading *Caramelo* is the experience of watching wide-eyed, awestruck, as Cisneros braids and unbraids an intricate rebozo of fiction, rich in color, well worn, each snag and fray only adding to its character. A story of stories, full of diversions and destinies, snapshots and infelicities of memory, *Caramelo* is the sweetest and richest of desserts, to be savored slowly. For when it is all consumed, the reader looks at the empty plate wistfully, regretfully, wishing she had left some for tomorrow.

—Megan Milks