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## Scout's Report

# Like a Fishbone in the Throat

### [Fishbone](#)

by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Cambridge, NY: Snail's Pace Press, 2001.

Paperback, 40 pages, \$7.95.

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### [Elaine Terranova](#)

You think of Aimee Nezhukumatathil as a new voice, both Pan-Asian and American, born in the U.S. to a Philippine mother and an East-Indian father. A rich background. She projects authenticity, whether she is assuming the voice of a Philippine rice worker or a mythic spider. That access to traditional cultures and the spirit world is a gift the narrator of [Fishbone](#) clings to, even as in the title poem, she wills herself to slough it off. But something of the old sticks like a fishbone in the throat. She makes a trade-off of the old magic for the protective coloring of the new society, and this allows her to cover a lot of ground, the same voice, with such a great breath, letting us in on so much that would remain a secret.

[Fishbone](#) is a compact and well-structured book, carefully constructed. Sometimes a single word, albeit an important one, acts as a kind of repetend, "sweetness," for instance, carries us along from poem to poem in what might be an otherwise unrelated sequence. Or the repetend may be a gesture, such as eating, which draws the imagination from a Florida back road to a family dinner in southern India. Or a second poem will answer a question perhaps intuited in the preceding one. In "Firsts," for instance, a first-born son seems to be the result of an early indiscretion that requires simulated virginity in "Wedding Sheets."

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Where in "Wedding Sheets" virginity takes on an almost religious significance, "Firsts" becomes a kind of pieta. The poem begins with what could be thought of as an aerial view, a village during monsoon season, a sleepless woman. And her story, a son brought home to her arms, where "the blood from his mouth bubbled/like iced grapes popping into wine". Striking locution. In so much of Nezhukumathail's work you know the world by its taste, the way it gets into your body.

This is a poet of images, one who gorgeously colors language, not shy of verbing nouns or creating arresting dictions: "I stand flamingo to examine my foot./My pistachio toes"--lines from "Working the Rice," dateline, Banaue, Philippines. A poem somewhat formal in structure, built on quatrains and inventive slant rhymes: *base/ terraces, salamander/ trabajadoras*. The narrator's voice is exotic yet entirely believable. A worker identifies with the plant she tends, her feet rooted like the slips of rice. Of course she'd grow to hate the relentless, "devilish vegetable." All the while, she is longing for the *terra firma* of wooden floors, of insides. A passage that beautifully frames the speaker's exasperation: "I want to crush cricket shells/with my heel, hear/their cellophane sound/in death." The poem ends with its longest line, an expansive gesture of escape, of climbing out of the earthbound self, "past/our very hilltop, high enough to brush young rain cloud, wing."

Nezhukumathail writes out of discovery with an exuberant, breathy voice, as if she can't get the words out fast enough--playful and witty. Here's a conceit from "Mirror Lake": "The eyes of the ducks rolling back/into their handle heads." And the whole poem "Stealing Song" riffs on a Manila billboard which welcomes tourists to the only Catholic country in Asia even as it warns them to beware of pickpockets. "In the Potatoes," the title and subject of one poem, is a Peruvian Indian term which, she tells us, means to become rich. Nezhukumathail engages in self-discovery and world-discovery, as she encompasses science, myth, and history.

My favorite of her quasi-historical poems is "Lewis and Clark Disagree," for its offhand charm. Here the explorers engage in a kind of schoolboy rivalry, each going a separate way philosophically, yet compelled by circumstance to agree (after all, they are Lewis-and-Clark). It's written in couplets with extravagant word matches like *Nez Perce* and *purple quartz*.

Several of the poems don't quite jell; maybe they needed a longer gestation. "Peacocks" and "Sara, Embarrassed," for instance, seem unfinished, as if the heart of the experience they relate hasn't yet been plumbed. But poems like "Arachne," "Falling Thirds," and "Good Blood" are so good you scarcely notice the rare lapses. "Good Blood" is exceptional for its gorgeous pearl-string of images and the subtle turn it takes to the birth of Christ and, ultimately, the "good blood" shed in the Crucifixion. In a routine blood test, a nurse comments on the high quality of the narrator's blood, red as in:

pepper, wine, finch throats,  
 a ladybeetle's shell, the star  
 my father always points out  
 to me on my birthday,  
 two days before His.

All along one wonders if what's holding *Fishbone* together isn't a deeper consideration, issues of colonialism rather than of mere exoticism. Not that Nezhukumathail is fighting any specific battles. But attention is being paid: Lewis and Clark's expansionism...the rice worker's oppression.... Even the striking surrealistic imagining seems to be, not the abstract French variety, but rather the sky-raking reach of magic realism. The poet's final word on the subject may be a strong belief in reconciliation between cultures. "Falling Thirds" describes the similar cadence we use for our "little wants" and dearest names, "proof/ though a tower did fall" that we once all spoke the same language.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil has been the Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing and received an MFA from Ohio State University. The winner of *The Atlantic Monthly*'s Emerging Writer Award in Poetry, she has poems in *Beacon Best Writing of 2000* and *Babaylan: Filipina-American Poetry and Art*, while her essay "Witching Hour" won the AWP Discovery Prize. She currently teaches at the State University of New York (Fredonia).

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Carbo, Nick, and Eileen Tabios, Eds., [Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipina American Writers](#). Consortium, 2000. Paperback, 336 pages, \$16.95.

Danticat, Edwige, Ed. [The Beacon Best of 2000: Great Writing by Women and Men of All Colors and Cultures](#) (Beacon Anthology, 2000). Beacon, 2000. Paperback, 304 pages, \$13.00.

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