Book review

HYPERBOREAL BY JOAN NAVIYUK KANE
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS, 2013

Joan Naviyuk Kane’s second book Hyperboreal, published last year, can be described as a shared journey between poet and reader as the two attempt to define the indefinable, to, as the saying goes, say the unsayable. In the way that the horizon is simply an illusion of the sea and sky meeting, so becomes Hyperboreal in its graceful bend to bridge entities that are both removed and distinctively connected. Kane’s book becomes that horizon for enigmatic elements such as myth and reality, thriving versus dying languages and cultures, and the conflicting sense of being home and not at home in the same place.

Kane’s poems pose an alluring ambiguity to both create that clear bridge between ideas and illustrate the vague or illusory connection between two entities. In the title and opening poem, Kane writes “Arnica nods heavy-handed on the bruised slope. / Peaks recede in all directions, in heat-haze, / Evening in my recollection.” The first stanza eloquently establishes the metaphorical and syntactical theme of the book: “Peaks recede in all directions” that are obscured by a “heat-haze,” which de-familiarizes both the speaker and the reader from the physical location. When the speaker adds “Evening in my recollection,” another layer of uncertainty is added, and this ambiguity of physical place—evening is both time of day and a becoming balanced—serves as the launching point for a book that delves into cultural issues specific to the poet and at the same time—and this makes Hyperboreal a true find for the reader—seamlessly connected to the broader readership outside the Inupiaq culture.

In the second of the book’s four sections, “The Dissolve of Voices” reveals, “A love absolute of places unknown to me: / aġnaġuksram izrizrvia, ipkanaqtuat, aniraaq, / miziktaagvik, uavat, kassanait, qiniġ.wik.” The untranslated Inupiatun, which appears throughout the collection, works beautifully to evoke a sense of distance from what should be familiar. The unexpected turn to a nearly extinct language in a volume of poetry in English perfectly reflects Kane’s running theme of the unfamiliar within the familiar, and vice versa. The two languages, strikingly different on the page, become a horizon within the book; Kane artfully melds these two languages into poems that then become a connection between the two seemingly starkly separated entities.

Likewise, in the poem “Field Notes,” Kane writes “Motionless Aegolius funereus– / An omen: typical, resplendent” and this acts as a defining horizon, which comes into focus when one notices these two seemingly slight lines working on two levels of the same idea. On one hand, you have the scientific name for the Boreal Owl directly above “omen,” forging a bridge between reality and myth in the space between the two lines. Secondly, “typical, resplendent,” near antonyms resting within the owl, snugly sit next to one another separated by only a soft pause; the owl is able to embody with ease both seemingly contradictory adjectives.

This skill of Kane is also seen in poems “Composition with Transformed Birds,” “The Orphan Girl,” and “Nunaqtigiit,” where the reader explores with the speaker the boundaries—which is also a connection—between one entity and the next. Oftentimes, the boundary between sea and sky is not as clearly defined as it is in poems like “Field Notes,” but instead
of feeling defeated over being unable to define exactly what the poet is describing, the reader is left looking at a shifted kaleidoscope of images and emotion.

Though the forty poems in this thin volume may seem daunting at first, with unexpected and un-translated language, once the reader is drawn in and grasps the urgency of the poems to (re)connect and to bridge, each poem becomes its own distinct island in an archipelago; each poem represents a blurred existence while part of a larger landscape. At the same time Kane is writing from the brink of a culture on the brink of society’s awareness, her poetry extends into universal human issues.