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Misery Islands

By January Gill O'Neil

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Review by Dennis Daly

Some islands bask under an equatorial sun, massaged by gentle trade winds and tickled by turquoise water. Others offer stony, unforgiving shores, dangerous channels, and wreckage of grander days, with only the icy winds of desperate hope and final survival to mitigate the landscape.

It's these "other" islands and their human iterations that January O'Neil dwells on in her dolorous but passionate new book of poetry, *Misery Islands*.

Opening the collection O'Neil audaciously fleshes her persona out in Whitmanesque fashion as everyman and, even more emphatically, everywoman. She identifies with those left behind and challenged by difficult circumstances, those storm tossed isles navigating daily life. Her persona drops words onto the page from a whirlwind of transitory motion. The poet says,

*I am every mill town and boarded-up factory,
the assembly line disassembled, the layoffs,
layaways, and laid to rest.*

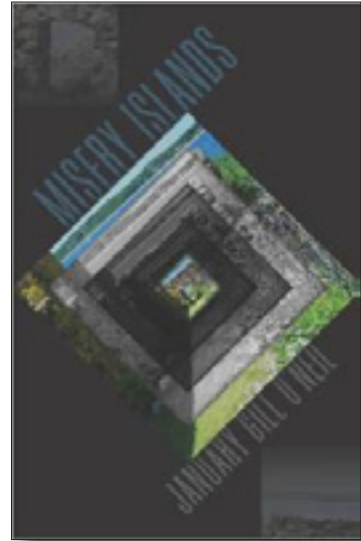
*I put the depressed into depression
I am America reconstructed; I am a force at work.*

*I dig a ditch, I fill a ditch.
My collar is white, my collar is blue.*

*I am missing 23 cents out of every dollar
a woman is supposed to earn
but doesn't.*

I am every God damn it and Lord have mercy.

O'Neil's poem *Rent To Own* follows the routine of an older guy with bad knees as he cleans used furniture, removing the unsightly detritus from the bottom strata of human life. Her bigger theme that we are all just passing through in this life bolts up, volcano-like, through the messy details. Here's a pretty telling section,



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*You'd be surprised how many people
pick their noses and leave the evidence
under the arm of an armchair, he tells me.
Roaches, bed bugs, pet hair, dander—
you name it, it's there, in the fibers,
the polyester pillows and dense cushions.
Steam vapor removes almost anything,
even tar from a chaise owned by a guy
who works at an asphalt company,
working his ass off in 10-hour shifts
to afford his slice of America.*

Tension between the roles of mother and child settles into an intimate and singular series of motions. The business-like care giver unfurls not only a washcloth but a sense of profound gratitude and love. O'Neil conveys the scene with affecting sentiment and dignity. Individuals, islanders, in other words, do make a difference. I really like the piece. The poet concludes this way,

*She reaches around for the cloth
with slow and deliberate movements
as if not to admit pain, not to convey need—*

*the caregiver needing care, the care taker
not taking as she usually does. Not today.
I want to tell her I love her*

*but I don't. I cover her with a towel
and some small talk, try not
to notice what's missing.*

*No words, yet I listen
like a stethoscope
for her to say something.*

Putting into words the carnage of a marriage breakup confounds many of the best writers, most especially over sensitized poets. I can think of a recent Pulitzer Prize winner for instance. O'Neil handles this subject with just the right touch as her warmed up words chill and disappear into a midwinter's frigid air. Her sentiments court despair with humor and astonish with tight artistic control. The poet aches out her feelings in an touching conclusion,

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*I can't compete with the failing light
from your voracious heart
burning us both into nothing.*

*Something has left us.
Every droplet of joy evaporates
to sky. When will melt come?*

*How could anyone blame you
for wanting to escape
the coldest month of the year?*

Like Homer's Penelope, O'Neil weaves heartbreak and metaphor into one composition. Her title poem, *Misery Islands*, opens with a narrative description of two wondrous and tenuously connected islands off the coast of Salem Massachusetts—Great Misery, and Little Misery. Both are now uninhabited. Each island has its own personality and its own geologic traits. The poet also splices in other historical, tidal, and climate particulars of the islands which strangely magnify the emotional discomfort of the interwoven and parallel marital distress narrative. Consider the following juxtaposition. First the historical, set on Great Misery in the "roaring twenties,"

*Imagine a pier, a club house,
a swimming pool filled with salt water,
guest cottages to the horizon line,
a tennis court and tournaments,
a nine-hole golf course with caddies
dressed in pressed white linens.*

*So elegant, so glamorous a setting,
You can almost see a couple
Looking out over a balcony,
Hands entwined, the moon
Hanging over them
By the thin thread of midnight.*

Now the equally compelling glory days before the marriage collapse,

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*I loved. You loved. We loved
with our whole selves—
lips first, then the tumble of skin
pulling each other down,
caught in the tangle and swirl,
closer to terror, closer to ourselves
the way we became something else
as soon as we were in it
the way our bodies displaced truth
through the depths of anger,
the way it changed us
and we were changed by it.
We were poor swimmers
Too far in the rip to be saved.*

Late in the collection, another favorite of mine, the poem *A Mother's Tale* appears. The poem whispers easily a harsh truth—life's ephemeral nature. The poet's persona speaks to her son and offers an interesting antidote to the human condition and its concomitant isolation. She says,

*I tell my son
that the best poems
are written in the sand
and washed away with the tide.
I say the moon controls the waves,
uses the wind to rake the shore.
It is an open invitation to fill
The world with words...*

O'Neil clearly follows her persona's sage advice. She fills the world with her extraordinary poetic words, and we get to read them.