



Native Son

Poems of travel and home

CINDY MUNTWYLER, 2005

PITCHING MY TENT ON SLANTED GROUND: Selected Poems by David Johnson. Walking Bird Press, 2005. Paperback, \$15. Order online at www.walkingbirdpress.com or by mail to 8016 N. Ida Ave. #12, Portland, OR 97203.

Longtime *EW* contributing writer and former staff writer, poet and journalist David Johnson is that rare bird: a native Eugenean. He lives in Portland now but resided in Blagoveshchensk, Russia, for several years. Even as a citizen of the world, Johnson is an Oregonian through and through, as many of the poems in this new collection attest.

An ardent lover of the natural wonders of the Northwest, Johnson's work draws on an extensive knowledge of Oregon history and its native people. A storyteller at heart, he laces narratives of his own and his family's life with loving detail, honoring great-grandparents, grandparents, his father Paul and his late mother, Lois. In the insightful photograph on the back cover of *Pitching My Tent*, it's clear Johnson has weathered the sudden storms that have come his way with the flair of an artist, much as the weathered boards he leans against proudly exhibit their fine-grained, gnarled beauty.

In the first of the collection's six sections, Moving On, the poems speak of family, childhood remembered and first thoughts. On a Saturday afternoon playing "Cowboys and Indians" after watching TV cowboy Lash Larue and others "gallop into black and white sunsets," the poet recalls the lesson learned. With "a tin star pinned/ to my lonesome heart or a Wind River breeze/ fluttering my turkey-feathered headdress,/ I knew with red-rock certainty/ that right was right, honor non-negotiable,/ and purple sage my duty to defend/ until suppertime."

The most tender short poem comes in section two, Casting Without a Hook:

"Reconciliation"

*He kisses tears from her eyes
as delicately, as eagerly
as an antelope's tongue
grazes a salt lick
on the west slope
of Hart Mountain.*

Section five, Beyond the Taiga, include poems written while Johnson lived in Russia. He shows his respect for two master Russian poets, Anna Akhmatova ("Anna's Apartment") and Yevgeny Yevtushenko ("The Lookout Remembers Yevtushenko"). "Down at the end of Lenin Street" describes the view "a kilometer above the confluence/ of the Zeya and Amur Rivers" in this verse:

*On this brittle morning, in a derelict ship-
yard
at the end of the cluttered spit,
dry-docked, rust-freckled freighters
lean against each other like gloomy
drunks
out of work, out of vodka.*

And in the final section, Bands of Light, a poem called "Footpaths" recalls Cherokee moccasins on the Trail of Tears in an exhibit at the Smithsonian and a high-top shoe in a Gordon Parks photograph. The poem ends with these heart-breaking lines:

*And in the Holocaust Museum
matte black boots and shoes are heaped
in a mound near a wooden boxcar
that takes us all, barefooted,
to Treblinka*

A collection worthy of many readings, *Pitching My Tent on Slanted Ground* will be the object of celebration at 4 pm Sunday, Aug. 7 at Tsunami Books. Johnson, also co-author with Erik Muller and Peter Jensen of a collaborative book of poetry, *Confluence*, will read, sign books and chat with friends and admirers. Be there. **EW**

BOOK NOTES (July 28 - Aug. 11): Be sure to catch **Barry Lopez'** salmon essay in the summer issue of *Granta*. ... Literary Arts named **Elizabeth Burnett** its new executive director, effective July 1. ... **Edith Mirante** (*Down the Rat Hole*) reads at 7:30 pm on 7/28 in Powell's on Burnside. ... **Christopher Sorrentino** (*Trance*) reads at 7:30 pm on 7/28, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland. ... Eugene writer **Judy Berg** (*The Otter Spirit*) reads at 6 pm on 7/29 at the Book Mine, 702 Main Street, Cottage Grove. ... **Mark Helprin** (*Freddy and Fredericka*) reads at 4 pm 7/31 in Powell's on Burnside. ... Novelist **Josh Emmons** (*The Loss of Leon Meed*) reads at 7:30 pm on 8/4 in Powell's on Hawthorne. ... **Willamette Writers Conference**, August 5-7, in Portland. Google will take you to the conference website. ... Poet **David Johnson** (*Pitching My Tent on Slanted Ground*) reads at 4 pm on 8/7 in Tsunami Books. ... **Brian Francis** (*The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington*) reads at 7:30 pm on 8/8 in Powell's on Burnside. ... **Alafair Burke** (*Close Case*) reads from her third mystery set in Portland at 7:30 pm in Powell's on Burside. Authentic main character, Deputy D.A. Samantha Kincaid, makes Burke's new novel a must-read. Burke's father is crime writer **James Lee Burke**, and she is a former Portland deputy district attorney who loves the city.

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