



scales of time and other vistas, that of the hummingbird (that “rush of cochineal,” as Emily Dickinson once perceived it) and the stillness of the hawk as its eye hunts the red rock, and the effortless perpetual circling above that still point of the human eye, on its spot of green against an expanse of red rock.

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HIROKI TAKAHASHI

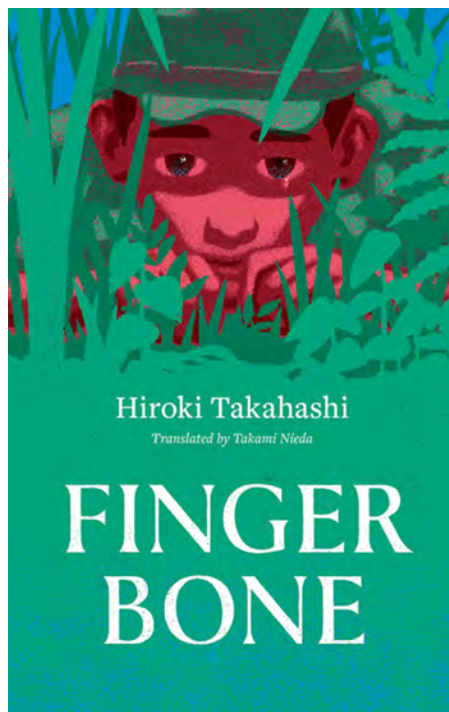
Finger Bone

Trans. Takami Nieda. Richmond, Virginia. Honford Star. 2023. 128 pages.

THAT THE SECOND WORLD WAR—not just the atomic bombs, as kaiju movies emphasize, but the whole imperial enterprise Japan undertook in the first half of the twentieth century—still lingers in popular Japanese imagination some eight decades later, and provokes just as much ambivalence, is made clear in Hiroki Takahashi’s *Finger Bone*, a short novel from 2013 newly translated by Takami Nieda. It is a brutal, harrowing novel that should be considered a classic of war literature.

Takahashi’s novel, praised by familiar Japanese authors in English translation like Yoko Ogawa (*The Memory Police*) and Hiromi Kawakami (*Strange Weather in Tokyo*), follows an unnamed narrator, a Japanese soldier during World War II, through the jungles of Papua New Guinea as he engages Allied forces at the Battle of Isurava, is wounded, and recuperates in a field hospital before fleeing the victorious Allies, who have retaken the region.

The heart of the novel is the narrator’s time at the field hospital, where he befriends other injured men, reflects on the randomness of survival, and muses about the unstoppable of the Japanese Empire (he hears rumors that the US is already ablaze and sure to capitulate soon). Japan’s empire—its role as the bastion of civilization—is never far from the narrator’s mind nor those of his comrades, though Takahashi is usually cautious to remain ambivalent about these historical beliefs. It



is especially prevalent in scenes featuring indigenous Papuans, or “kanakas,” whom the narrator befriends and fears in equal measure, whom he considers “savages” but also exotic keepers of ancient rituals (Takahashi’s afterword suggests he might not feel differently).

Finger Bone is a curious little book that revels in the senses of war, emphasizing its lived reality through the eyes, ears, and stomachs of soldiers thrown together by circumstance and duty but who wish for little more in return than to go home to their small, meaningful lives. In texturing the novel with the feelings of war, Takahashi gives readers a literary onslaught of gruesome deaths interspersed with moments where soldiers seek something like normality, pretending their field hospital is a soba shop or playing shogi on a makeshift board. Just as Takahashi begins turning a name (Furuya, Shimizu, Sanada) into a character, someone for readers and the narrator to care for, he is gone—killed by friendly fire or dead by malaria. All that remains is a finger bone cut from their corpse, a memento of a life lost in imperial service that might never make it home.

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LAUREN CAMP

Worn Smooth between Devourings

Beacon, New York. NYQ Books. 2023. 73 pages.

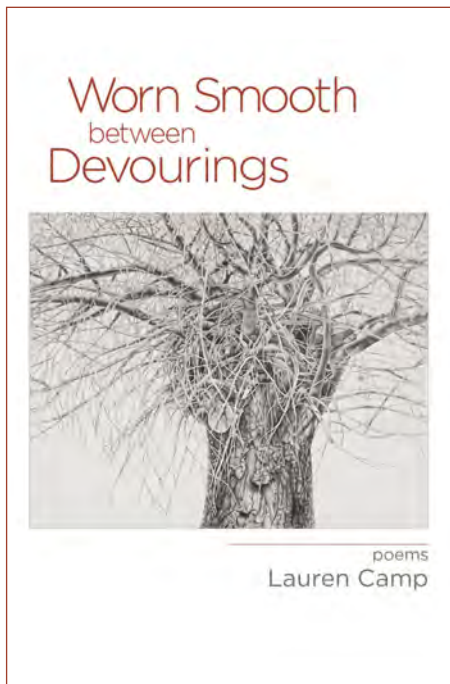
I DO NOT KNOW OF A WORD that encompasses the feelings of grief, anxiety, and utter calmness in one collected idea, but Lauren Camp has created a need for it in her latest book of poetry, *Worn Smooth between Devourings*. This book delves into the despair of the mundane: grocery lists, refrigerator magnets, a dog’s tongue, and the number of birds in a tree. The stillness of these reflections becomes abysmal, or absurd, or both; as she says in the poem “For Sale,” “I think we all want / to conjure new ways to loop / from daily rituals.”

It’s the complacent comfort that brings the hint of unease throughout this collection; the pain of knowing one’s day-to-day life is not left wanting for food, shelter, or safety, and yet across the world there is endless suffering, as the speaker of the same poem prophetically asks, “Did you know there is new violence / in Gaza, people throwing burning tires and rocks?” The speaker reminds her reader just how delicately balanced this world is, for better or worse. She expresses the kind of despair one experiences for feeling helpless in the face of others’ suffering. This is where white noise becomes a survival mechanism: the counting of birds in a tree, or taking advice from magnets: “My magnets tell me to expect nothing, / to never stop wanting. They repeat every day.”

These poems offer strange comfort through the recounting of daily rituals, as we collectively worry about wars overseas and the next big news story. And there is comfort in reading the words the way Camp has written them in this book: austere, yet flush with emotion; deeply tragic, yet fulfilling. In her poem “White Chalet Bird House,” Camp writes, “I used to be grateful / for proof, but now want something less narrow to settle in,” and after



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recounting violent news stories, “I cannot sleep / through any more slaying.”

There is a steady breeze that flows through these pages, and they give ease to the dis-ease of life and distraction from a persistent existential drift. It is truly mind-bending how poetry can not only shine light in our darknesses but also completely tear us down in grief, and I wonder how it is that I feel so strangely at peace reading *Worn Smooth between Devourings*.

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GARY VICTOR

Le violon d'Adrien

Montréal. Mémoire d'encrier. 2023.
192 pages.

ADRIEN CHANSON will stop at nothing to obtain a violin, the instrument that has enchanted him since the moment he saw Monsieur Benjamin, the acclaimed violinist, in concert. To satisfy

Adrien's desire to learn to play the violin, his mother signs him up for a class Monsieur Benjamin is offering through a local church, and so begins his obsession with the stringed instrument.

Despite the jealousy of his classmates, Adrien excels in his lessons, quickly rising to the top of his class and making a name for himself in the neighborhood. And this is where the difficulties begin, because Adrien is growing up in Port-au-Prince in an era when it is best to remain anonymous, to go unnoticed. The tendrils of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s dictatorship (1957–71) are so far-reaching that nobody is safe, not even a child. When Adrien learns that he will need to purchase a violin to continue his lessons, Victor’s earnest and naïve protagonist must face danger in search of his dreams.

Gary Victor is accustomed to writing novels set during tumultuous moments in Haitian history. Like his serialized novels set during the fractured presidencies of Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1990–91; 1994–96; 2001–2004)—*La Piste des sortilèges* (2002) and *Le revenant: La vengeance du revenant* (2007)—Victor couches his narrative in a moment of political upheaval, the early 1970s, when Papa Doc’s regime ends and that of his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier (1971–86), begins. It is a period of violent reprisals, where the state manipulates citizens into lashing out at one another. Abductions, arrests, and disappearances form the coercive fabric of everyday life, making whimsical pursuits like the violin or games of chance crucial outlets for mental escape. These outlets often come at a personal or spiritual risk, just as those who play the lottery may incur debt, those who seek to import an expensive violin may have to rub elbows with an unsavory sort.

What sets *Le violon d'Adrien* aside from many of Victor’s previous works is that he sets genre and pulp fiction aside to tell a tender story about childhood dreams and longing. Adrien long admires his mother’s commitment to the Haitian national lottery, the *bòlèt*, as a source of entertainment, always betting in moder-

ation. Every week she consults a *tyala*, a book of numerology, to select and play the numbers that correspond to her dreams. When Adrien starts working at Nino’s



bar to save up money for his own violin, he tries his hand at the numbers as well, searching through his mother’s book for the digits that best translate to the object of his desires: a violin. When his attempts at the lottery fail, Adrien looks to other, more risky ventures to secure his instrument, and by doing so he encounters a host of macabre characters straight out of a living nightmare.

As in all games of chance, some are won, and some are lost. Many people try to discourage and reroute Adrien in pursuit of his dream, telling him that “when you’re poor like we are, you don’t take violin or piano lessons.” What never escapes from view, however, is the love that Adrien’s parents have for him, and how much they all long for a world in which a child’s most lofty dreams may come true.

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