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Review of *Crossing the Snow Bridge* by Fatima Lim-  
Wilson

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**Fatima Lim-Wilson. *Crossing the Snow Bridge*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995.**

Fatima Lim-Wilson lives in my home town of Seattle, city of floating bridges. And yet, like so many people in Seattle, she is from elsewhere—in her case, the Philippines—and her poetry is about the many kinds of border crossings that are necessary to inhabit a bicultural identity. But to call *Crossing the Snow Bridge* a collection about cultural identity is to get it exactly wrong: Lim-Wilson’s greatest strength is her ability to move, sympathetically and yet skeptically, between persons, nations, and historical moments. Her forceful, synaesthetic vision blurs boundaries, questioning the very nature of those boundaries.

To resort, reluctantly, to an undergraduate buzzword: Fatima Lim-Wilson has that rare quality of *negative capability*. In “Luzviminda, or Filipinas Make Such Good Maids,” for instance, she ventriloquizes a maid:

When they cannot sleep, I scratch  
The twins’ backs simultaneously,  
Lulling them with tales of women  
Who fly from the waist up above  
Church steeples. Their torsos  
Tremble under loose skirts... (49)

In this image, we experience the maid’s own loss of identity, and how she tries to recover it through stories. She is called “Lucy” by her employers, and at the end of the poem she asks, “What again is my real name?” (50). Instead of answering her own question, she visualizes an escape, at once magical and real: “My thinning shadow / Crosses the snow bridge of burning / Coals, walking on bare feet home” (50).

Lim-Wilson’s poems are full of surprises, and yet in retrospect, they seem inevitable, as in the surreal “Family Tree,” which tells the story of an unfaithful grandfather and his bride, whose hair went white the day after her wedding. The granddaughter of this ill-starred couple speaks:

...Mother  
Pins my hair, pulling until she draws  
Tears. This way, she says,  
Grandfather’s stories will pour  
Out of your ears. He is smart, you see.  
Once I get over my fear of wings,  
He promised, I would catch sight  
From the summit of the tree

Grandmother as a child, trailed  
By a stallion nudging her bare nape  
And Father, growing larger and larger  
As he leaves behind the black  
Crawl of the funeral parade.

(90-91)

Where did this mysterious stallion come from? Why is the father expanding? Whose funeral is it? This family tree is not a static genealogical table; it is a dangerous, growing, living thing. And yet, even though the poem's confusions are never resolved, we, as readers, are satisfied: after all, the roots of most family trees are seeded with unanswered questions, ambiguous figures, and half-truths.

Lim-Wilson's poems, then, are dangerous, moving, living things. She knows when to push a metaphor, and when to leave it, and she is a terrific storyteller. Her experiences of the Philippines, and of leaving the Philippines, are not bounded by a narrowly-defined self. Rather, "The Philippines" are channeled through a cast of characters that ranges from Pavarotti ("They have built a palace for me / Made of coconuts..." [8]) to Imelda Marcos's shoe-shiner ("I wipe and wipe till I see mirrors. / For the best I reserve my spit." [44]). I have a theory that most poetry-books are too long by half: even good poets—even Adrienne Rich, for instance—cannot sustain their vision for a hundred pages. But Fatima Lim-Wilson is a counter-example: after a hundred pages, her verses show no signs of exhaustion. A difficult life, full of losses and transitions, is not a lucky life. But for a poet like Lim-Wilson, it does offer the chance to produce something lasting: a collection of poems that arises from truly intense and fascinating encounters with the forces of imperialism and cultural dislocation—not to mention weddings, grandparents, and ghosts.

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