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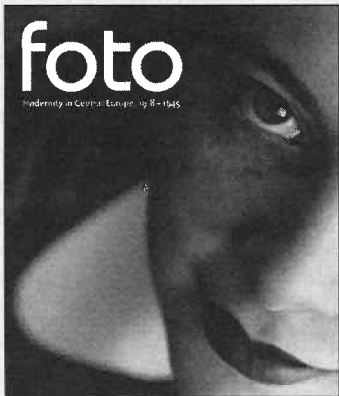
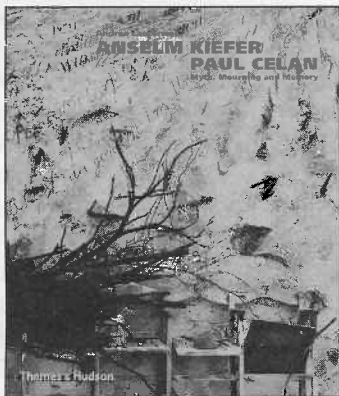


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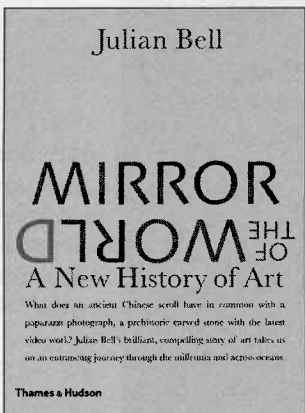
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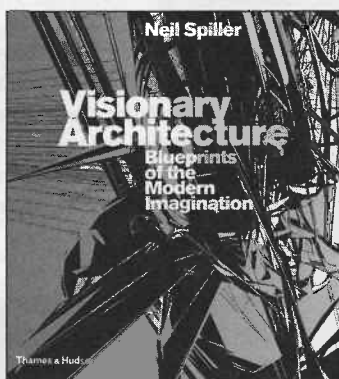
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BLOOD KIN
BY CERIDWEN DOVEY
NEW YORK: VIKING. 192 PAGES. \$24.

In her splendid debut novel, *Blood Kin*, Ceridwen Dovey offers a tale about the revolutionary overthrow of a dictatorship in an unnamed country. The exchange of power she describes isn't specific to the totalitarian governments of, say, Latin America or Africa, nor is it a critique of the sad play of current US international affairs. The novel isn't, in fact, a commentary on our times, despite its setting in the present or the recent past. Instead, Dovey's concern is more elemental: *Blood Kin* is a story about power, political and personal, and its dangerous ineffability.

The narration is circuitous: Alternating chapters—from the points of view of, first, the ousted president's chef, barber, and portraitist and, later, the chef's daughter, the barber's brother's fiancée, and the portraitist's wife—wind back and forth in time. As all but one of these narrators are gathered in the president's Summer Residence by the revolutionary leader, who calls himself "the Commander," an odd map forms, linking the disparate members of this political puzzle in increasingly inauspicious terms.

The knit of Dovey's tale, though seemingly ponderous, is tightly controlled, and her characters reveal only choice bits of themselves in each chapter. The egotistic chef gives a taste of his steadfast self-regard.

When taken captive and blindfolded, his fate uncertain, he has the wherewithal to critique his gauche captors: "Once we were out of the city, I could smell that the guards in the car were eating large chunks of matured cheese that should have been consumed in small and savored doses." At stake for the chef, barber, and portraitist is their apparent unquestioning loyalty to the president, but with the inclusion of the women's voices, each narrator is compelled to address his or her complicity in various power structures, particularly in manipulating personal relationships to painfully self-serving ends.

Such domination is at once of the body (among the brutalized faces of the president's victims—images disseminated by the revolutionaries as black-and-white posters—one resembles "a failed pudding") and of the mind, a force shaped by human intention. The fiancée, one of the revolutionaries, ruefully observes that "human beings dispose of each other, set themselves up in the place of the deposed, and then go about their daily tasks. . . . Memory sieves out pain, dulls it with time, an essential trick to condemn us to repetition." The barber, who sets himself apart from both the president and the Commander, is less equivocal: "They are all the same, these men, and it is best to nip them in the bud." But for all his and the others' convictions, *Blood Kin* reveals only that those who wield power are just as much its instrument.

—NICOLE RUDICK

**THE DIVING POOL:
THREE NOVELLAS**
BY YOKO OGAWA,
TRANSLATED BY
STEPHEN SNYDER
NEW YORK: PICADOR. 176 PAGES. \$13.

Yoko Ogawa has long been recognized as one of Japan's best writers of the postwar generation. Yet this prolific author has never received a major English translation of her work, despite an oeuvre that includes more than twenty volumes of fiction and nonfiction. Stephen Snyder has finally undertaken this task, superbly rendering Ogawa's spare yet intimate style for stories in the *New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, and *Zoetrope*. *The Diving Pool*, also translated by Snyder, is the American debut of three of her award-winning novellas.

The title novella tells the story of Aya, a teenager struggling with a growing sense of alienation from her family. The leaders of a religious group, her parents have raised their only child alongside the impoverished foundlings their church has taken in. The photographs in their family albums are crowded with row after row of orphans. "And there I am," Aya explains, "lost among them." The only one of the children to whom she feels connected is a boy her age named Jun. Aya watches him at his weekly diving practice. Though she enjoys the purity of his body in motion, the impossibility of taking her desire further leads her to experience an unknown malevolence within herself, and she discovers an almost carnal pleasure in tormenting one of the youngest orphans under her care.

The strength of Ogawa's writing lies in

its visceral content: Emotions that might cause recoil instead draw one in by their very familiarity, and she can make cruelty seem desirable, even pleasurable. For Aya, the eroticism of a boy's body and the contortions of a toddler's face become the counterweights that keep her balanced. Ogawa, however, delights in tipping her characters over to reveal the consequences of their indulgence and to expose the reader's enjoyment of their wickedness.

The other novellas likewise showcase the author's gift for mining tiny seams of cruelty. In "Pregnancy Diary," a woman recording the difficulty of her sister's pregnancy delights in her own appetite: "I think about her, curled up in bed, surrounded by all those odors, and then I open my mouth wide to take in the darkness with my bite of stew." Ogawa here uses a potent device, often employed in children's stories: the juxtaposition of comfort with terror, of the warm hearth with the flash of teeth. In "Dormitory," this coupling of the domestic and the dangerous is particularly riveting, as a woman arranges for her nephew to live in the dorm she occupied while in college. Small mysteries that she only brushed against many years ago begin to widen for her, and the place that she once considered a second home now seems utterly strange. "I had the feeling that I had somehow been lured into this unlikely predicament," the woman tells us, "but I tried to remind myself that . . . the world would return to normal." However, as the narrator climbs into the secret of the dormitory, the collection ends with this mysterious reminder: that deep realms await us, just beyond the reach of our fingertips.

—LAURA STOKES