

## A GEOGRAPHY OF PAIN

Cathy Linh Che, *Split*, Alice James Books, 2014.

*Kevin O'Connor*

While a “poetry of witness” might apply to any testimony about traumatic events that fall along a spectrum between the private and the public, Cathy Lin Che’s debut collection *Split* accrues complexity and depth by collapsing those polarities and exploring how the legacy of a destructive international event (the Vietnam War) impacts a personal history damaged by interfamilial abuse. If some individual poems in the work of this young Vietnamese American writer might be viewed as aesthetically slight, or even as self-indulgent confessional displays when considered alone, the book as a whole demonstrates both psychological fearlessness and literary ambition in its insistent attempts to discover larger historical and narrative meaning in personal trauma and to rewrite the memory of pain in a healing and potentially redemptive artistic form.

The title of the collection *Split* announces a motif which can refer simultaneously to the resonance of the psychic wounds of the poet’s parents and grandparents suffered during the Vietnam War, to her own “split heart” as a result of her rape and abuse as a young girl within an extended immigrant family, and to the wounds suffered by any of the innocent and vulnerable—especially women—at the hands of men who transgress as a result of their own dehumanizing wounds. Young American Marines—“just boys,” who “with scissor-fingers/. . .snip the air”—mimic the cutting of her mother’s hair as a young woman in Vietnam—are characterized as both needy and threatening; likewise, her own father, once a reluctant Vietnamese soldier who haunts the volume as a survivor in protective denial, is unable to “arm” his daughter from the predations of males in his own extended family:

My father was a soldier.  
He taught me nothing about men.

They are an empty barrel.  
You’re not supposed to look into  
A gun you dismantle

to try to see its parts.  
 (“The Future Therapist Asks About Rape”)

This collection is organized in three part: the first section attempts to recover and re-enact the factual dynamic of the speaker's sexual trauma as a girl; here the poet's effort to truthfully self-objectify and describe events becomes the first phase of moral exploration into the sources of guilt and shame. If the book had merely continued in this vein, it would have fallen more into the category of aestheticized but primarily therapeutic complaint; however, Part Two expands the temporal and social field of inquiry into causation and complicates a view of the skein of familial influences and interdependencies. Likewise, the poet's formal strategies become more varied and complex even if, as in "Dress-up," her attempt to capture the way her father's psyche and body were damaged in war, her poem "never seems to fit him." Part Three bookends the volume by returning to the site of the speaker's original trauma where she resorts to Catholic and classical myth to help stitch and heal the wound: "What I seek/is redemption. An arrow/that joins a split heart."

The achievement of Che's book lies in its sense of limitation and appropriate scale. Though her raw materials are potentially lurid and sensational, her graphic confessional revelations are selectively discreet; her tone can be searingly intimate, but never hysterical; and she is careful to filter references to history, culture, or mythology through a grounded personal lens. Stylistically young, Che tries on a number of stanzaic patterns and line lengths, but if one influence is predominate, it would be that of William Carlos Williams. Her diction tends to be colloquially plain and spare; her music is energetic but quiet; and her line breaks rely less on enjambment and more on the emphasis and focalization of discrete images:

I cycled through dreams  
as though washing  
my hair.

Organized  
The ruptures to form  
a sequence.

Soldiers  
on their bunks,  
reading their books.

My father a machinist  
with blood  
on the wheels.

I burned time  
on strips  
of film.

Stacked reels  
In boxes in a corner  
of a darkened bedroom.

Che's formal control and aesthetic strategy in the volume become most apparent in the cumulative power of her motifs and image patterns. Her direct address poems to "Doc" succeed in aestheticizing the therapeutic similar to the way prayerful addresses of Donne or Hopkins at once externalize a real drama of faith and also find a suitable fictive addressee for the poetic act. Likewise, while the title image of "split" may initially refer to the speaker's sexual violations of body and heart as a child, it expands associatively to include the way American soldiers threateningly "clipped the strands" of her mother's hair; her father's psyche "shot through, shrapnel/still lodged in his scalp"; her grandmother's "childhood home razed by the rutted wheels/of an American tank"; and ultimately the notion that "in every psyche, tiny or dramatic perforations—"

Geography and space also act as binding motifs. Excavating the buried memories of abuse, the speaker tries to understand the dynamic of the crime by mapping out "an archipelago of needs," and re-imagining the original transgression: "I was a border, and he crossed it—." While exploring her own victimization, the speaker also glancingly depicts the moral complications of her own Leda-like surrender: "I was on the downward slope/of the sine waves of consent." As we read further into the volume, the house and the darkened room of the original violation become associated with the larger social terrain of violence and trauma in the family's history:

In Vietnam, the landscape  
is aftermath—

tourist shops, sunbathers,  
packs of motorbikers—

there were still  
bomb craters

and in them, the grass  
grown in.  
("Doc—)

Che's poetry works in the tension between the desire to witness and explore the living wounds of past traumatic violence and the desire to domesticate and even reify the painful past in photograph or tourist museum or poem:

...I want to strip  
the significance—

put it in a museum  
behind the walls of glass—  
a hand, a torso, knobs

of muscle.  
("Object Permanent: Memory")

In "Daughter" the poet even imagines her surviving refugee parents spatially— her mother as "a house with a palm-thatched roof" and her cryptic, impenetrable father as "a private landscape" who, while unable to protect her, "showed her what it means to survive." While the aggressive drives of men may be depicted as one source of the long concatenations of further transgressions, men like her father become sympathetic in their machine-like dehumanization:

My father looked like a human  
with holes punched in.  
The place where he worked  
smelled of gasoline  
and oiled cement.

In "On McDougal Street," the speaker ogle a construction worker, and the poem is startling both for its unflinching revelation of her own conditioned desires and in the powerful economy of its juxtaposed images:

I want to remove that shirt, kiss  
his dark arms, that wife-beater tan,

suck in the aroma of his hair, his sweat,  
that smell of work, the smell

of my father and oil  
on the machine shop floor.

My father could pulverize me  
and my mother, but never did.

He carried a gun for eight years  
and never told me about it.

Here the lovers hold hands, and there,  
my father squeezed my mother's hand so tight

her fingers bled. *See what they do to you?*

“Letters to Doc” the penultimate poem of the volume, shows both the strengths and limitation of this kind of “witness” poetry. The statements of bare facts and stripped down images are not just an ‘antipoetic’ strategy: they establish the moral grounding and purpose of the poetic act.

Yes, a rupture.  
There was blood  
And membrane.

I wiped and wiped.

On the paper,  
a brutal portrait of me.  
There it dried.

a physical fact.

But to display oneself without insisting on “thicker” descriptive context and distancing stylization may result in the poet giving up agency over the significance of her own experience:

I have placed it  
In the open  
For all to see

I am asking that you  
read me.

The poem’s strongest feature is that it quarrels with itself, recognizing the counter-force of a willful art in this essential tension: “I want to rewrite everything./In love, my back arched/like a cat’s. “

As I consider the way the speaker in the final two poems consciously identifies with Persephone and Daphne—mythic personifications of transformation and regeneration—I cannot help but feel that these allusions seem grafted on and not fully earned or assimilated: the announced desire

for redemptive rebirth and closure runs far ahead of its realization. Yet, even like Sylvia Plath reaching for the metaphors of Holocaust and mass annihilation to convey the enormity and intensity of her feelings of victimization, Linh registers her ambition impressively:

Persephone had it right.  
If you must go, might as well  
Take all of spring with you—

The unfurling leaves,  
The dandelion seeds.  
A strawberry patch

While in terms of formal mastery, *Split* may pale beside the early work of Sylvia Plath or Adrienne Rich, Cathy Linh Che writes out of genuine necessity, making inventive poems by the rhythms of her own pulse. This first volume stakes out enough raw material for a lifetime of imaginative poems, and this reader wants to believe that she will find new, more sophisticated forms to serve her growing ambitions as a poet.