

ON ANODYNE BY KHADIJAH QUEEN

TIN HOUSE | 2020

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Khadijah Queen's *Anodyne* is a collection that strives to answer a question posed within its own pages. In "Route," for example, the resolution of the poem isn't closure at all, but an opening, a new inquiry that reshapes our reading of everything that came before it—"Who can live // Next to what's falling apart." This juxtaposition of survival and destruction is embodied in the speaker's everyday existence as a mother, as the daughter of a mother with dementia, as the sister of a brother "turned...into dust" by a bullet, and as a victim of a painful illness herself. But Queen also makes statements about survival in her structural and stylistic choices. Scattered with experimentation, this book uses form to organize and make sense of the chaos in which both speaker and audience exist.

I found myself most drawn to Queen's impressive range of experimental poems: the erasures, the diagrams, and the pieces of fieldwork that play with punctuation. These poems' scatteredness could be interpreted as "expansion—openness, inexact song." "Double Windlass," for example, appears as a square resembling a window, with parts of the poem placed into its nine smaller quadrants. This organization allows for multiple readings of the poem, as removing the content from a more traditional lineated form also removes the imposed reading order. By granting and encouraging the audience to read across, down, and even diagonally, the poem multiplies and expands itself. From left to right, the first row reads, "under volcanic / moonshadow // double twilight / took // the honeycomb / infatuates" whereas from top to bottom, the first column reads "under volcanic / moonshadow // city moss / in lateral sail // invocations—." In this, the very act of reading the poem is a practice in making sense out of chaos. Queen invites our participation, forces us to "double lift"—an expectation spelled out in the poem's title, as to "windlass" is to "haul or lift."

The poem "Synesthesia," likewise, notably invites reader part-

icipation with its experimentation. A two-part piece that spans four pages, the work opens:

I. Theory

First, I was twenty-five with no sleep ()
& my body said feel this And I didn't
want to () then It turned into a constant & ()
burned to be felt I couldn't harden
away from it couldn't ease ()
or sleep or not-feel my way away because ()
it was myself &
what my child could see () & what I was watching
()
Semiotics—

On the surface, this feels like a petition for the reader to fill in the blanks. And yet the poem doesn't require these parenthetical interruptions and can be read and understood without them. Queen leaves us an abundance of modes by which to understand this poem, the first in its title. "Synesthesia" relates to the senses, to the intersection of senses so that one sense is tightly associated or tangled up with another. While the page directly engages the reader's sense of sight, the pairs of parentheses then become symbols for another sense, another feeling. The poem itself confirms this reading. After the first set of parentheses, Queen writes, "& my body said feel this And I didn't / want to," where "this" refers directly back to the empty parentheses before it, suggesting that the intersecting sense may be the perception of pain. Furthermore, the amount of space between the parentheses changes throughout the poem, indicating that we see them as units of measurement. We come to understand the parentheses as symbols of varying amounts of pain, the feeling the speaker "didn't want to" feel.

The second half of this poem, however, redefines the parentheses. In the second part, titled "II. Signification + Gesture Drawing," Queen re-signifies the symbol. She writes:

Dr. Yang has to put her hand inside a man to feel
where the hole is, feel how to save his life

& now I () sketch a tender gesture;

Here, the parentheses shift to a symbol of healing and tenderness. Not only is this a lesson in the power of context to shift meaning, but this is also a gesture towards resilience. Queen's ability to redefine and re-signify what previously represented pain is also the ability to reclaim the Black body, to persevere through semiotics.

Resilience lies at the heart of this collection, nestled in bursts of joy and hope that glitter in the dark of grief and physical pain. In the book's opening poem, "In the Event of an Apocalypse, Be Ready to Die," Queen immediately draws the reader's mind to beauty, opening, "But do also remember galleries, gardens, / herbaria." In "Of All the Things I Love," a poem that forefronts the speaker's battle with her son's depression and her own limitations as his mother, Queen sandwiches comfort and joy—"computer games and good eating...fried and meaty and overdosing / on pancakes and Golden Oreos and steamed / chocolate with whole milk" between the speaker's grave admissions, such as "I don't drink much, / but I want to." Queen is insistent on grasping fleeting moments that push against pain and highlight the things that we can control in a world full of chaos. At the end of "In the Quiet," the speaker revels in watching the show *American Horror Story* because it is a "Violence [she] can turn off."

Another way resilience manifests is in Queen's constant rejection of closure. Many of her poems' endings aren't end-stopped; they read more like continuations or even new beginnings. For example, "Ode to 180 Pairs of White Gloves" closes with the line "O pink lips first pulling on a Kool" which feels doubly incomplete. On the one hand, the phrase seemingly cuts off the second half of the compound word "Kool-Aid," giving the impression that the poem has ended prematurely. On the other hand, the phrase is charged with its praise, so that it could just as easily be the first line of a new part or poem. In "If Gold, Your Figure as Mirror On the Ground Is," Queen closes with, "Nothing earth about you except what clean is visible Also your

hands” (53). The capitalization of “also” signals the beginning of a new sentence in the mind, and the phrase “Also your hands” itself feels like it starts an entirely new line of thought. The reoccurrence of these interrupted endings might be, itself, a power move; in a world where lives can end, where the speaker’s brother can die and her mother can cease to remember, these poems refuse that sort of terminality.

This collection is about wrestling control when we control so little. The doubleness of the word “anodyne,” which means both “inoffensive” and “a painkilling drug or medicine,” implies that healing is found within those innocuous and everyday moments that Queen clings to within turmoil. The collection’s final poem emphasizes these dichotomies—order and chaos, harmless moments and ones of danger or grief. In “I Slept When I Couldn’t Move” Queen writes:

I slept so sure in a used place & so anonymous like womanhood
& so hypervisible I slept in a kind of fire & became it
I slept in a place of brilliant bones & the future of Blackness
I slept in a system outside of every law but one
I slept when I couldn’t move
I slept in a simple way
I slept in a place just for us
I slept where I could see it

The act of sleeping, an inherently peaceful and harmless act, butts up against outside forces, the “system outside of every law but one,” the speaker’s body that “couldn’t move.” But in sleeping, the speaker’s body and mind become places of refuge, sites where the speaker can maintain a modicum of control and hold space for a better future. In spite of despair, Queen points us towards “a place just for us.” This collection is always reaching forward towards the next page, the next moment of relief, the next break in the clouds.