Haunted Pages

*Ghost of*, Diana Khoi Nguyen (83pp, Omnidawn)

This is the kind of book that confuses me. It has some intriguing poems, poem sequences, as well as a prose poem and list poem in, but it also has some banal visual texts, where a figure has been removed from a photo with Photoshop and the removed shape is filled with text and transplanted to the next page, where it is sometimes layered up. Some of the photos are printed twice in overlay to produce a strange distorted or out-of-focus effect.

This is a book I bought for myself, and at first glance this visual work looked enticing, but I quickly realised that it is a very simplistic idea that has been repeated throughout the book, and that it doesn't get any better each time it's used. It simply *isn't* 'visual innovations' as one of the quotes on the back cover suggests. I also became aware that these photos have been inserted as a kind of evidence that THIS IS TRUE and that THIS REALLY HAPPENED. If I'd read the back cover first, which I didn't, I'd have seen that 'Ngyuen is trying to anatomize' her brother's 'tragic absence with pained and urgent remembrance'.

Now, I wouldn't be harsh enough to deny anyone a means of remembrance, but it does seem to me any poet has, at some point, to take their poems of mourning and ask if they are good enough to go into the public domain. That is, are they good poems, not whether they are emotional, moving or tell the reader about who is being mourned. The photos don't move me in the slightest here, nor are they good poetry or art; they should have been left out. They are still too self-involved and offer little distance or any new approach to mourning and grief.

The opening poem, on its own as a kind of preface to the book, states that 'There is no ecologically safe way to mourn'. I like this as a phrase. How can mourning be 'ecological'? I ask myself as the short poem goes on to describe plants that 'have nectaries / that keep secreting pollen even after the petals have gone'. This is interesting writing, and the poems in the main are, appropriating imagery from wildlife and nature to inform the work. Nguyen is concerned with memory as much as grief, including the story of 'The Exodus. Saigon to Los Angeles, 1975-2015' which reads as a kind of family history.

Grief here is often seen as an emptying out, as in 'An Empty House Is a Debt', where 'There is a house in me. It is empty. I empty it.' And that emptying informs other parts of the narrator's life, too:

 What is a maze if there is nothing to find in the maze.
 I find myself angry at nothing.

'Grief Logic' is also a by-product of death and mourning:

 If you swim against the fish, your legs will grow longer.
 If you swim with the fish, every bowl of water will tremble in your hands.
 If the fish swim across your path, hang your head in imitation of a child hiding her face.

The poem swims in and out of rational thought and despair, offering both koan-like statements and surrealism as well as commonsense and self-awareness. It is one of the highlights of the book, as is the titular prose poem sequence which offers six self-reflective episodes from a family life, with the focus on a brother who is now dead. It is straightforward, musical, taut and affecting, and shows up the visual elements of this book for what they are: tired, simplistic experiments which detract from the language at work.

I'm very much looking forward to future work by this author, who I hope will be able to step away from the confessional and really push the forms and language they are using here to greater effect, without the baggage of personal involvement or any need to seem 'experimental' using the visual. Or, if visual work is where they want to go, then they must find out about concrete and visual poetry before committing to print. Either way, let's hope this book has acted as a kind of exorcism or therapy and that Nguyen will be able to play to her poetic strengths, which when they are on show here, are formidable.

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