

From the Bottom Side of the Tongue: A Review of Khaty Xiong's *Poor Anima*

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Poor Anima by Khaty Xiong
Apogee Press, 2015
88 pages - [Apogee](#) / [Amazon](#)

Poor Anima is Khaty Xiong's first full-length collection of poetry, arriving in the world following her first two chapbooks: *Deer Hour* (New Michigan Press, 2014) and *Elegies* (University of Montana, 2013). And *Poor Anima* is just that: an arrival. Dark and complex, this collection is and is about the moment of arriving—into language, from the non-verbal to the verbal—and how this is always a struggle of reconciliation between the present and the past. *Poor Anima* arrives as a deep and thoughtful reflection of the tension between what gets perceived and what gets articulated when it comes to family and intergenerational trauma.

As readers, we enter through “Refine,” the only poem that exists outside of the three-section format the book is divided into:

—two bodies tangled in the night
cutting, pleading
her dark wet form against the darker form

what does love look like now?

why would anyone want to write this?

what is vulnerable?

not the snow moose
leaping onto the road, a world
of whiteness against non-whiteness

not the child clucking
at the breast of its mother, mouth ajar
a hostage of black magic, drowsed
in a blood dream

“Refine” is a window before the door, giving us the first look onto the dreamscape we are about to tread through. Our first symbol: the dash. Not a word but a remnant of the missing. Before language, there is loss. We enter the book as witnesses to two bodies missing what they have arrived from, not knowing what they have arrived from. And we as readers are forced too, to begin with this loss.

What we are given instead: three small but heavy questions. These questions come out of the “world of whiteness against non-whiteness,” of the ghosts of an old terrain exposed sharply against the new. We feel their weight not because of their possible answers but because of what asking them further insinuates: *What terror must one come from to bear these questions? What is the asker holding? What are they held by?*

The child we are left with at the end of the poem represents the particular and violent embodiment of the past collapsing with present; of bearing both having to know and yet not fully knowing what one has come from. This embodiment: the “blood dream.” And it is this thick and mutli-layered blood dream that we wade through in *Poor Anima*.

At a time when writing personal, familial, and / or historical narratives has less and less room to run the risk of playing into capitalist-driven fantasies of community or cultural uplift and assimilation, *Poor Anima* exists raw, complicated, illogical, and unassimilated. *Poor Anima* mourns as deeply as it rages; digests as much as it spits out. It resists the pressure to tell a story by refusing to make the illogical logical, by refusing to make sense of terrors that do not make sense.

Poor Anima comes from a wet place unreachable by light: the anima, the subconscious, the bottom side of the tongue. And from this place, carves out an articulation of what dwells below language in the individual, familial, and historical body. Khaty Xiong alchemizes the psychological with the magical and materializes a vocabulary of how the living feels the dead. In “Ballad,” Xiong writes:

What’s hard to know
is limboed—running somehow
with any form
capable
& no one to catch.

Xiong conjures ways of articulating what is felt in the absence of narrative. Yes, *Poor Anima* is a text that deals with themes of loss, displacement, war, family, and trauma. But to say that *Poor Anima* is *about* these themes would be an oversimplification; would be to miss the work this text does entirely. *Poor Anima* awakens the dead within the body that has inherited it and gives voice to their cacophony without compromising any tongues.

Before reading *Poor Anima*, I had assumed that the subtle hauntings of ghosts that went on dying inside of me, and maybe all of us, were doomed for silence and isolation; that certain nuances of wounds would forever be stuck below the tongue. But Khaty Xiong reminds us that we possess our own free and autonomous language for speaking our ghosts, if only we need to find it. Having this book out in the world is a gift to all of us poets who embody a violent and complicated history, that embody a violent and complicated relationship to English, to the verbal, and to the pressure to narrativize or explain.

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