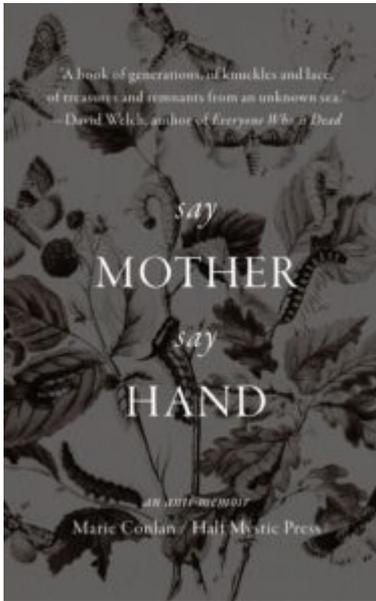


Review: Say Mother Say Hand by Marie Conlan

written by Guest Contributor | June 15, 2020



Say Mother Say Hand: An Anti-Memoir by Marie Conlan

[Half Mystic Press](#), April 2020

116 pages / [Bookshop](#)

In Marie Conlan's debut book, *Say Mother Say Hand*, healing is done in a circular motion. Not to be confused with the gentle swabbing of a wound, gingerly wiping the blood and bacteria oozing from open flesh around and around until coagulation and closure. No, this excavation of matrilineal trauma mimics the panicked spiral of a tornado, spinning clockwise in a bright, sickly orange. It is a visceral hook sunk into the collar bone, piercing generations of women trapped in grief bigger than their threadbare bodies.

...she is a tornado, and this time it

was you. I say to him I told you she is a tornado, and

this time it was you. And I love you. And I'm sorry. [56]

He says my womb and my mother's womb are indistinguishable. He says I should

imagine my womb spinning clockwise, gentle and orange...

I spin with such desperation its waters spill and I nearly drown

just ankle deep, I bless my

orange lake with nervous authority, I bleed for months. [86]

This incessant cycling doesn't disorientate, but rather gives permission to the dizziness to create new shapes. Conlan tilts genre and memory and lineage off its axis. She vibrates between opaque poetic narrative and bleeding prose block, between mother, grandmother, and narrator, to hold her roots too close to "a moon almost full stop [18]" and compel the tidal wave to come.

And through the devastating washing, the narrator is able to hallucinate the first fracture, the first trauma of a Jewish grandmother fighting for her young life in Holocaust-era Poland. A woman with many names, but was first named Renata, who now only lives in memories tinged with horror—lives in the hardness of decorated hands that wield weapons like iron fire poker and bottles of vodka at her children's temples.

*Renata, I cannot pronounce the river I gave you for your
pretend girlhood. I fish a stone from the river with my
mouth and inhale it into my throat. Choking now, I
remember. [92]*

But Conlan doesn't stay in the surreal currents of this dreamed-up Polish river for long. As quickly as we get to see Renata with "corn poppies weaved through the ends of her thin black braids [63]," we just as quickly wear the heaviness of her haunting. We taste how Renata has manifested in the gut of her daughter and her daughter's daughters. We hear the snapping of bones and minds, can smell pungent piss in the toilet after detox, can feel the cold tile under the narrator's legs as she slips into depression.

This is the true magic of Conlan's writing. She moves with ease between the ethereal metaphor and the tangible copper of flesh. Conlan's ability to shine an unforgiving, post-suicide-attempt fluorescent hospital light on the poetic modes we use to reckon intergenerational trauma begs the question: *how else is there to exhume a force that festers so deeply in the body?* When DNA is composed of a god-like power the narrator cannot see, touch, or even uncover in Google searches, but that densely lingers all the same.

*Origins attract beasts. When you weed a garden you pull
from the roots and devour it whole. [62]*

For Conlan, there is no other place to start than at the root. The root of the palm and of the dream. The root of a mother's alcoholism. The root of a grandmother's suicide, naked and afraid of the Nazis bursting through her door, which is to say, bursting through the fragile walls of her mind, "walls

stained blue by Zykon B [59]". Conlan devours the roots and creates new homes for them—through morpho butterflies and three little girls pulling bloody acorns from their throats. Through "caterpillars hanging from the vine of the catheter [17]." By diving deep into the fragile potential of bodies, the narrator bears witness to the sickness, but more importantly, she bears witness to the lives themselves.

If the body remembers everything she happened to me she happened to me before I was something to be happened to if the body remembers everything she happened— [95]

This is the true phenomenon of this gut-wrenching anti-memoir—Conlan wrings out the body with severe twists of the hands she has inherited, but by doing so, exudes a tenderness—a kind exposure. She holds her lineage close to her breasts in full transparency of midday, and pushes forward, with love.

In a dream I have daughters. Renata is a child when we leave for the hills and turn into another ridge. We travel at noon, empty and cold and without a place to move from. I carry her across my chest, I carry her firmly with both arms....

My mother is a baby when we find the sea. I am already there. I embrace her across my chest, firmly with both arms. I emerge a sea urchin and I emerge a helpless thing drowning in air. Yellowing pockets of moon in my lungs. Almost too bright. I travel at noon, with a blue scarf and a tin cup for holding things [58].

Say Mother Say Hand reminds us with both open palm and hardened fist that carrying—mother, body, genocide, dreams blue and bursting from the throat—is not a linear act, but an unfolding one. One that knots the threads of bodies and names. One that begs you to swallow time, open cracked lips, and speak.



Shawnie Hamer was born in the heat & dust

of Bakersfield, CA. Her first book, [*the stove is off at home*](#) ([Spuyten Duyvil](#), 2018) is an experimental art & poetry book curated through a community ritual that focused on the identification & exorcism of trauma. Hamer is the founder of [collective.aporia](#), an international arts collective featuring online, donation-based creative workshops & **apo-press*, as well as a co-conspirator of the off.collective. She proudly received her MFA from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University where she was able to befriend the most inspiring group of artists she's ever met. Her poetry can most recently be found in publications such as *South Broadway Ghost Society* & *Tiny Spoon Lit Mag*. She is currently living & creating in France.