

Maia Elsner reviews Nathalie Diaz, Sandeep Parmar and Susannah Evans

When My Brother Was an Aztec

Nathalie Diaz
Faber, £9.99

Faust

Sandeep Parmar
Shearsman Books, £10.95

Space Baby

Susannah Evans
Nine Arches Press, £9.99

Nathalie Diaz' *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (first published in 2012, reprinted by Faber in 2022) exposes the complexities of addiction through Aztec mythology. In the title poem, Diaz's speaker reconfigures her brother as a king, fed with "crushed diamonds and fire", owning "all the jewels / a king could eat or smoke or shoot". The turn to the mythic becomes a means to think through how those who are hurting can in turn hurt others:

He thought he was
Huitzilopochtli, a god, half-man half-
hummingbird. My parents
at his feet, wrecked honeysuckles, he
lowered his swordlike mouth,

gorged on them.

And yet, despite being "shattered and quartered [...in] basement festivals", flung "into *cenotes*, dropped from cliffs", "my parents' hearts kept / growing back". At its core, Diaz' collection is an exploration of the imperfect ways in which people attempt to care for each other.

But the game is rigged against those who try to do better by those they love. What hope exists of salvation when the buffalo are gone:

weeping blooms

of white

smoke.

*(The Clouds are Buffalo
Limping Towards Jesus)*

This scattering of words performs the dispersal of smoke: what remains is the residue of burning. Throughout the book, the syncretic is used to explore the impact of colonialism and the relegation of once sacred ritual to mere symbol. In *How to Go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs*, the brother no longer appears as Moctezuma in a "headdress of green quetzal feathers", but as a Judas effigy, and his sister has no choice but to pay for the meal with thirty pieces of silver. "Angels don't come to the reservation", Diaz reflects in *Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination*, before dismantling any notion of the angelic as benign:

remember what happened last time
some white god came floating across the ocean?

Through the rhyme pattern of *Downhill Triolets*, and pantoum form of *My brother at 3a.m.*, Diaz gestures towards a certain inevitability, connected to cycles of addiction, and the continuous recolonizing that occurs in settler societies. She concludes: "History has chapped, un-kissable lips- / he gave me a coral necklace that shines bright as a chokehold" (*Clouds Watching*). How, then, to loosen this chokehold? In *If Eve Side-Stealer and Mary Busted-Chest Ruled the World*, the right-margin lineation speaks to a kind of reclaiming:

What if Eve was an Indian
& Adam was never kneaded
from the earth, Eve was Earth
& ribs were her idea all along?

But the string of "what if" questions are never answered: possibility dangles, unrealised. Poised between what was and what could be, might intimacy enable a softer way of relating? The speaker of *Watch Her Eat the Apple* seems to think so:

This blue world has never needed a woman
to eat an apple so badly
...
a broken bell I beg to wrap my red skin around
until there is no apple,
there is only this woman
who is a city of apples,
there is only me licking the juice
from the streets of her palm.

But *The Beauty of Busted Fruit* reminds us "some wounds can't heal": when set "on a nightstand of a stranger's bed ... your hurts" will be, devastatingly, what "will make people want to kiss you".

"Grief is not an abstraction but an inheritance waiting for", writes Sandeep Parmar in *Faust*. This central sequence appropriates Goethe's version of the scholar's deal with Mephistopheles to figure the trappings of migration in the context of a postcolonial inheritance of fire: "Across a burning field / To stand in the smoke

... between a grandfather and his meat cleaver" (v).
The devil has many guises:

He, the forger of passports.
He, who is paid only in cash.
...
He, a registrar, a bursar, bank manager
a purser, a pilot, border control officer
(xix)

But the wager's outcome is uncertain: if one "follow[s] the beasts / who walk the threshing circle, doomed, blind / beside the man who put out their eyes" (xxvii), what else but a "counterfeit Eden" (viii) can be found? The prose poem, *A Winnowing Shovel*, provides a gloss: "Perhaps this is the migrant's grief-sodden task, sent on an errand to sate forces greater than themselves". Weaving together literary analysis of the Faust story – from versions by Berman, Marlowe and Mann to Louis MacNeice's translation, which Parmar intimates is inflected by his role as reporter on the end of the Raj for the BBC – with historical retellings of Britain's role in apportioning Indian land pre-Independence and details about "refuge in tents" during Partition – Parmar unfolds a personal history of flight.

To Faust's question "*What happens now?*", Mephistopheles replies, "*Direct your strivings downwards*". In *Faust*, Parmar uses the idea of striving, "stereotype of the good immigrant or model minority", to parse the difference between collective ritual, symbolised by the chorus in ancient myth, and the individualized, heroic impulse. She looks at how Homer in *The Odyssey* "add[s] labour onto the hero's journey", so that "the work of return is never done", and at psychiatrist Joseba Achotegui's coining of the term 'Ulysses Syndrome', to describe stress-induced disorders suffered by migrants in their adopted homelands. As migrants "start striving. A better house, a better job, more money" and so "disband, are disbanded", "the shadowy background of the choral band recedes like ghosts in the underworld" (*A Winnowing Shovel*). This is the real tragedy.

How then to mourn? In *An Uncommon Language*, part analysis of poems about miscarriage by Dorothea Lasky, Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds and Lucille Clifton, part

lyric reflection and essayistic poem about losing a child, Parmar asks “what are the ethics of producing poetry from grief, if that grief is pointless ... speaks back to death with an illegitimately and imprecisely acquired language?”. Joining the cry of other “mourning mothers, hoarse as Demeters”, she offers her own:

What grew in you is not you but a shroud

...

A ghost who wakes you up five times a night
stands undecided between rooms...

Like the migrant, the ghost hovers “between”. We are left without answers and only an ambivalent questioning: “what is language anyway? An agreement. To make reparations. With whom? For what?” And yet it’s precisely this ambivalence, across the miles of land and sea to Westwood, California, in *Elsewhere*, that “held us all together / like the quiet before an exodus”:

That *cry of pain* gathering in the margins
where one alights on what is worth taking –
carried through the fire, my ancestors, a reliable
syntax –
and what must be left behind.

Suzanne Evans’ second collection, ***Space Baby***, explores an apocalyptic world on the brink of collapse. While ideas of burning in Diaz and Parmar are a means for each to explore the intricacies of different colonial legacies and the way those histories condition contemporary experience, Evans’ focus is on what people will do now that “curiosity [has] crack[ed] the lid / on everything bad that ever existed”, now that “the world is un-put-backable” (*Permafrost*).

Evans, like Parmar, is interested in motherhood, but while Parmar exposes the impossibility of giving words to maternal loss, itself impeding the possibility of mourning, Evans asks what it means to bring life into a context where “the moors have been on fire / for weeks now” and the sheep, all ill, have been evacuated (*That smile is yours*):

rise and shine the baby slept through
and is already a genius

...

rise and shine the waves are rolling
tides of jellied lampshades and old condoms

rise and shine your phone trembles
(*Rise and Shine*)

One of the strengths of this collection is an irreverent tone that allows Evans to flit deftly between critiques of late-stage capitalism and quips about a world in which “an AI watched the film / with Hal and Dave but failed/to identify the bad guy” (*The Long Bets*), where people turn to crystals to “dispel...negative thoughts’ (*Be The Change*), wondering whether it matters that they “certainly have not / made enough pension contributions” (*Timeline of the Far Future*).

In a rather uncomfortable exposition of our difficulties with facing our own complicity – “townspeople try / not to think about their past actions / they’re not bad people, just hungry, / lonely, or lazy, or lacking in foresight” (*The Passenger Pigeon*) – “Space” suggests that we “launch it all skyward to forget”: the first ever baby is born in space, “midwived / into the unknown” (*Space Baby*). This becomes a last cry against mortality. And though the speaker of *In Nova Scotia* makes light of the ominous claim to “feel my lives piling up, all the things I’ve been / a sparrowhawk, a pastoral nomad... / two successive golden retrievers”, when the man on the harbour whispers “*Nobody dies*”, the speaker knows “we both have / and will again”. Through a dizzying mix of absurdist moves (*The Glacier Attends its Own Funeral*), speculative pieces (*The Robot Will Cuddle You to Sleep*) and dystopian imaginaries, Evans draws attention to the incongruities that dog our current existence to show us, ultimately, just how much we have to lose.

Maia Elsner is the author of ***overrun by wild boars*** (flipped eye, 2021), which won a Somerset Maugham Award. Her reviews have appeared in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*.