

# Eric Yip reviews Mona Kareem, Charif Shanahan and Mary Jean Chan

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## **I Will Not Fold These Maps**

Mona Kareem, translated by Sara Elkamel  
Poetry Translation Centre, £9.00

## **Trace Evidence**

Charif Shanahan  
Tin House, \$16.95

## **Bright Fear**

Mary Jean Chan  
Faber, £9.99

How does one locate oneself in a world that refuses to accommodate one's existence? This question is at the centre of Mona Kareem's collected poems ***I Will Not Fold These Maps***, translated from Arabic into English by Sara Elkamel. As part of the Kuwaiti Bidoon, an Arab minority group excluded from citizenship, Kareem seeks to estrange the world's elements from its spatial and temporal cartographies, destabilising our relationship to home, bodies, and language. This is accomplished mainly through Kareem's confident and daring use of parataxis:

After having her seventh child  
my mother gave birth to a third foot.

In the city  
the river saunters all night  
mourning the fishermen's departure.

After the government collapses,

who will hand out oxygen masks  
to the martyrs?

(*A Walk*)

These discursive leaps in association situate poems in an aspatial, atemporal limbo. Discursive does not mean imprecise: these images often pay off in breathtaking and unexpected ways, such as in the ending of *Cities Dying Every Day*, where "For the millionth time, Asia / dons a coat of wars— / as our lives transform / into aging trains." Many examples of this quality can be found in *Cosmic Haemorrhage*, an ambitious sequence composed of short, numbered fragments. Here we find multifaceted images like "The stamp of estrangement: / A shirt and a face cloaked in gloom / Browsing shoes in the night". Kareem's lines consistently jolt the reader, pulling them towards the precipice of displacement and violence, though the concentrated use of certain words in the book's first half (tears, night) risks diminishing their effect. Humour is fantastically utilised in several poems, like in *My Body, My Vehicle* where an out-of-control, "complected and broken" automobile stands in for the disorienting rush of expatriation. I am reminded of Etel Adnan's work (a poem in Kareem's book is dedicated to Adnan), in that both poets are keenly aware of language's relationship to distance and space, a relationship which is altered and accentuated by the experience of exile.

One of the most affective poems in this book is a prose retelling of Lot's wife, in which the character stands in for an exiled poet anguished by the loss of the past. "At the border checkpoint," Kareem writes, "a migrant is not

allowed to occupy herself with anything but the present moment.” In this fable, a male artist recasts Lot’s wife as “a prisoner of eternity” in the form of a bronze statue on display, a fate even crueller than the Biblical pillar of salt. This God-endorsed punishment becomes a symbol for the patriarchal grip of the state and the world at large. “Why wouldn’t the Lord understand that all she wanted was to write a poem about ruins? Is it because men have a sole claim to ruin?” The anxiety of losing one’s voice and language, “the language whose extinction would render her dreams obsolete”, is the engine behind each poem’s propulsive restlessness. The fable of Lot’s wife encapsulates this fear, yet its tone gestures towards a refusal of silence, a belief that language can and will “[hang]—like an eternal cry— / in the chasm of time.”

Charif Shanahan’s second collection *Trace Evidence* delves into the intersecting implications of mixed-race ancestry, disconnection, and male queerness. Shanahan is highly attuned to the ways hierarchical systems can shape and deform even the most intimate of relationships. In the poem which opens the first section of the book, the speaker contends with the insufficiency of racial categorisation, specifically the categories of Blackness and mixedness:

It is not that the system fails  
To position you

It positions you actively  
And specifically nowhere

So that you appear on the outside  
But remain within

Or you appear within  
But remain on the outside

Which is to say in other words  
*A part and apart—*

(“*Mulatto*” :: “*Quadroon*”)

The syntax here moves in a piecemeal, refracted manner; the strain “the system” exerts on the speaker hampers the act of expression itself. Throughout the book, these pressures infiltrate more private moments, including

those between mother and son as well as lovers. In *Inner Children*, the speaker visits the town of Asilah “...to find something out / about my mother so as / to find out something / about myself”, during which the speaker has camera sex with his boyfriend “of nine volatile months”. Shanahan’s talent in sketching complex emotional timbres is apparent here. The speaker is at once compartmentalising his mother’s shame of their ancestry (“*My business*, she says / as though my story is not inside / her story, as though // when she hides, she does not hide / my face with hers”) while being aware of the body in a racialised, sexualised context (“a panther-shaped hole / in my black tank / undershirt // my olive skin / filling in the figure / into a kind of tattoo”).

In some poems, the interpersonal, geographical and societal barriers that Shanahan’s speakers face manifest quite literally as traffic intersections. We see this in the tersely titled opener *Colonialism*, where the speaker dashes through an intersection as a young child and is chastised by his mother. In the titular poem, the speaker and his mother are waiting to cross an intersection when they discuss the categorisation of their ancestry. The book’s second section, *On the Overnight from Agadir*, is a sequence detailing the aftermath of a bus accident that cut short a planned year-long stay in Morocco. Flashbacks and monologues hover as single-line stanzas as the near-death experience forces the speaker to contemplate his desire to “discover his roots”:

Where does the inquiry begin    Does it begin in my  
particular body in my  
particular mind

Does it begin centuries before me [Does it begin] in  
my mother Does it begin in  
all these places    At once

One of the achievements of *Trace Evidence* is that Shanahan pushes beyond a narration of personal history, offering instead a humanist plea for understanding. Through conversations with therapists, friends, and (ex-)lovers, the book ultimately converges towards the self and its communitarian nature, with Shanahan writing “[...] they would have believed that / *You* were not I— // Not ever— / Which, to us, now, would seem silly, wouldn’t it?” This does not gloss over the hierarchical divisions the

book itself is contesting. Rather, Shanahan's speakers come to orient themselves towards the actionable present and what one can do, or must do, to bear "the heaviness of what I am required to discuss in order to live".

Like Shanahan, Mary Jean Chan's second collection ***Bright Fear*** shines light on the aftershocks of colonialism alongside the dynamics of queer and familial relationships. These poems stress and shimmer under the "the quotidian tug-of-war between terror and love", their poet-speakers moving between cities and environments, their identity, language, and body constantly misconstrued or threatened.

The book's first section, *Grief Lessons*, is underscored by not one, but two viral outbreaks: the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2003 SARS epidemic. These public crises reveal the presence of more targeted and embedded ones. The poems here document microaggressions, colonialism in education, and the struggle for queer joy with a sharp lucidity. All these forces – physical and verbal – pressure the body and mind of Chan's speakers, with one poem noting "the sensation / of being watched – is daily and casual". In another, the speaker ruminates on their ambivalence towards institutional EDI efforts while flying over "a genteel English landscape":

neo-colony is a state of being

it is the illusion of freedom  
until it is withdrawn ever so  
softly like a hospital curtain

the more you successfully  
assimilate the more you see  
the terms and conditions feel

the texture of abstract nouns  
Equality Diversity Inclusion

(*EDI for Migrants (III)*)

The issue of language and survival is especially pertinent for someone who writes poetry in English, a tongue that was acquired outside of family and home. The book's second section, *Ars Poetica*, is a sequence that looks at poetry itself as a catalyst for self-realisation. To Chan, a

poem is many things, from "a heaven in which lonely meanings sit / companionably beside lonely children", to "a struggle to translate / the weight of flesh against / bone into syllables". Most significantly, the poem is a means of survival in response to the world's rage and grief, a pledge "to offer this in return, the way trees do". Citing Billy-Ray Belcourt, "[poetry] resists categorical capture. It is a shape-shifting, defiant force in the world". It is this shape-shifting, defiant nature that Chan latches onto in order to transform the page into an "inscrutable house" for "doing the hard / work of mending or mourning / what remains dear to each of us".

The strategy employed by most of the book is one of directness paired with emotional acuity, with some prose poems straddling the boundary between memoir and lyric. One speaker says "I am asked why my poems are so clear. I'll confess: / it's what happens when you want to be understood". Clarity, in both its optical and communicative sense, is one of this book's defining characteristics. At its best, this lends credence to the weight of each questioning and declaration. This especially comes through during the book's last section, *Field Notes on a Family*, where Chan steers their probing yet empathetic gaze towards familial interactions. Two poems addressed to two could-have-been brothers who "receded from my life like hard weather" are markedly powerful. One brother was almost adopted by the speaker's mother, while the other was lost to a miscarriage. These fraternal spectres become entangled with the speaker's fluid gender presentation and yearning for companionship. As the book concludes, the need to be seen culminates in a graceful catharsis emblematic of Chan's style:

as we spoke, my parents  
looked at me and simply said, yes.  
Yes? I asked. Yes, they replied.  
We love you. The sentence  
was complete, no longer  
half-finished. The months  
ahead of me are wide open.

(*Out*)

**Eric Yip** was born and raised in Hong Kong. He won the 2021 National Poetry Competition and was shortlisted for the 2023 Forward Prize for Best Single Poem – Written.