syan jay. *Bury Me in Thunder*. Sundress Publications, 2020. 102 pages. ISBN: 9781939675958.

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syan jay's (Dził Łigai Si'an N'dee) first poetry collection, *Bury Me in Thunder*, walks a thin line between exploring grief and healing through vulnerable, tender poems while also, at times, shrouding language in secrecy to maintain a sense of safety and privacy. The different stages of a thunderstorm – cumulus, mature, and dissipating – structure the collection into three parts and suggest a narrative arc towards release or resolution. Written after the author moved back home to take care of their mother following a stroke, the collection tackles the intergenerational trauma created by a legacy of colonial violence and the cultural rupture caused by the fact that the speaker's mother was adopted by a family outside the reservation. This legacy has real implications: "My mother can't teach me / our words, her father stripped of voice and face, / leaving her alive but evaporated" (90). These lines gesture towards the cultural loss that affects two generations and pushes the speaker to search for restorative practices.

Several poems describe experiences of gendered violence and explore the speaker's articulations of gender. syan jay, who is agender, declared in an interview with Kimberly Ann Priest, "[m]y priority will always be to my transgender and non-conforming kinships" (n.pag.), and their poetry explores these issues carefully in an attempt to wrestle them from a history of harm, as seen in the opening lines of the first poem, "A Person Born Without Lungs":

> My body is made of absences,
> of meaningless gender, of a colonizer's
> language, of unbearable things wrought
> from servitude and genocide. My body
> is an ocean of graveyards. (15)

The body bears signs of settler colonial violence, is shaped by the coloniser's language, and is marked by its experience of trauma: "My sex is unbearable, both witness / and participant to violent desire" (15). Binary gender identities are a colonial imposition that also reinforce racial categories (Driskill, et al.). Mediated by the "colonizer's language," the speaker's meaningless gender" designates a site of oppression. While *Bury Me in Thunder* brushes a devastating portrait of how body and language are affected by colonisation, poetry also functions as a tool to describe and reclaim experience in order to envision alternatives. The "wish / for safety,

equal parts / human and held" (16) gestures towards the possibility of wholeness and the process of healing, neither of which are ever fully completed. The poem "Feasting on Dysphoria and Sparrows" underscores misgendering and the experience of objectification, as the speaker describes, "[a] man is telling me I am a woman," as well as the violence of having one's "personal made public" (51). The language used to render sexual violence is raw and direct: "I am part of the exhibits / touted on stage for men to fondle," as the speaker turns into a gendered, racialised, "othered" specimen: "The 'Thing' displayed naked before / crowds" (56). Terror and fascination, anger and desire, denial and honor uncomfortably bleed into one another.

Naming is an important ritual that ties a person to the land as well as community. As names are often gendered, they bear particular weight for transgender and nonbinary people. In "Time, Names, and Found Things," the speaker asks, "[w]e don't name our girls with things that can die […] But what happens when I am not girl / and not boy? Do I inhabit the name / of ghosted things, undead things?" (86). In other words, when your community does not know how to name you, do you become something more, or less, or other than a living human? Naming becomes a function of the land, the place where "You Asked for the River to Name You / and she named you fragility / and she named you aching / and she named you bruised kneecaps" (31). These given names demand that the speaker integrates pain and grief as constitutive elements of their identity. The river can also take that name and memories away, as in "A Home Prone to Amnesia": "I waited for the river, / who swam and shifted with threat below, to sweep / away the hometowns and memories with them, and reach up, / pull my name right out of me" (69). In this collection, naming has at least as much to do with being claimed by the land as by family, which has powerful implications for trans* people who often need to rename themselves. It is also described as a fluid process, which the river can impart but also claim back.

Bury Me in Thunder casts memory as a geography but the land goes far beyond metaphor: it is constitutive of the body and makes flesh porous to its environment. Manifestations of trauma are imprinted onto land and bodies, as in "Before the Land Breaks": "I breathe in, there is coppered earth on my tongue. / The land thickens under my shoes, as my body de-forests / itself among the lava and rock" (50). Here, the speaker tastes soil and minerals even as their body "de-forests itself" in an uneasy but constant exchange between land and body. Natural landscapes are also a stage for violence, as in "Rawhide for the Archer's Knot," where the speaker and their aunt become deer in a field, a hunter's prey, and "uncles skin our legs to give us camouflage," as though raw wounds would enable them to blend into the environment, the wounds opening them up to their surrounding like "salmon carcasses"

(81). The natural world is simultaneously shelter and threat. In "What the Hills Look Like at Night," land erupts out of the speaker's injury: "As we sat to watch / fire take the mountains, the blood / on my bandaged hand blossomed into three peaks" (48). The body becomes the landscape. In jay's poetry, there are no closed categories, no weatherproof lines. At all times, material reality is liable to rupture and blend into another dimension that is still grounded in the textures of flesh and earth.

These poems embed the speaker within a web of land, histories, and people. Metaphors of eating, devouring, birthing, being swallowed, or breaking into/out of another body run through the collection, further challenging the notion of a discrete individuality. Teeth are a recurrent motif in many poems, as in "Root Soup," where they are cooked to feed a family (73). Like bones, teeth can yield information about someone's childhood landscape. In the same interview with Kimberly Ann Priest, jay remarks:

> Our teeth provide evidence of where we are from. The land and what we have access to during childhood will influence how our bones grow. Scientists use isotope chemistry to look at tooth enamel and bone in order to measure geochemical signatures that carry evidence of where a person lived as a child. We can tell how someone lived, what they ate, and their access or barriers to nutritional food and clean water. The body carries so much and yet, we do not think of what we can find beyond what we say. What can the body say? (n.pag.)

Bury Me in Thunder, then, examines what the body says in its communication with place and community, the family systems disrupted by colonial violence. Storytelling constitutes another type of food that can be offered to appease the ghosts of the past, by both "seasoning the earth for seeds to feed our families" and forgetting "hunger from the stories we eat from our shared palms" (83). Despite the pain of remembering and the frailty of catering for possible futures, the speaker is "making / a map for my family to find home" (22).

That family peoples many of the pages, and the collection itself is dedicated to the author's mother. There is an abusive stepmother (20), a grandfather (85), a brother (37), sisters (55), uncles (40) and trickster aunties (65), and a lover (53). This sense of kinship extends to ancestors when the speaker states that "death has made powerful / ghosts for you to talk to" (49). In fact, the opening poem asserts, "I am built from ghosts" (15). In another, the speaker says, "the ghost of my grandfather will feed me / acorn dumplings, tulapai" (87), showing that ancestors can provide nurturance as well as strength. Longing to connect with her past, the mother "needle[s]

thread into stories, / aching to unbury her family" (90). Here writing, as a form of storytelling, connects with the ancestors once more, framing the poem as healing ritual, capable of (re-)enacting ceremony. The epigraph also refers to writing as creating worlds through magic, a skill attributed to the speaker's mother. Song (59), sage smoke, and dance (63) hold space for a new kind of desire and connection to place and the ancestors. Even though "the people / here don't know how to sing / the songs that close wounds" (88), there is space for pain to open up towards multiple signifiers: "a wound // can hold meaning / can hold tenderness // that pain is not monogamous // &holds many lovers" (62). The last poem, "Silver O," describes loss and grief while also offering a kind of resolution in which the speaker is "returning to a different home" (93). This is the dissipating stage of the thunderstorm, signaling both resolution and separation. *Bury Me in Thunder* does not promote easy notions of recovery but rather suggests ways of embracing ambivalence and contradiction.

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Works Cited

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