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Split



Synopsis

"Split crosses borders, exposing truths and dreams, violations of body and mind, aligning them until the deep push-pull of silence and song become a bridge. And here we cross over into a landscape where beauty interrogates, and we encounter a voice that refuses to let us off the hook."—Yusef Komunyakaa

Perhaps the writer's most difficult task is to render the catastrophic linked non-stories that comprise transgenerational trauma. Cathy Linh Che's collection *Split* accomplishes this nearly impossible challenge with uncommon grace and power. Each poem unwinds the cataclysm of personal wounding by making itself irresistibly beautiful.

—LA Review

In this stunning debut, we follow one woman's profoundly personal account of sexual violence against the backdrop of cultural conflict deftly illustrated through her parents' experiences of the Vietnam War, immigration, and its aftermath. By looking closely at landscape and psyche, *Split* explores what happens when deep trauma occurs and seeks to understand what it means to finally become whole.

Pomegranate I open my chest and birds flock out. In my mother's garden, the roses flare toward the sun, but I am an arrow pointing back. I am Persephone, a virgin abducted. In the Underworld, I starve a season while the world wilts into the ghost of a summer backyard. My hunger open and raw. I lay next to a man who did not love me—my body a performance, his body a single eye; a director watching an actress commanding her to scintillate. I was the clumsy acrobat. When he came, I split open like a pomegranate and ate six of my own ruddy seeds. I was the whipping boy. Thorny, barbed wire wound around a muscular heart.

Cathy Linh Che is a Vietnamese American poet from Los Angeles, CA. She has received awards from The Asian American Literary Review, The Center for Book Arts, The Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown, Hedgebrook, Kundiman, The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Residency, and Poets & Writers. She is a founding editor of *Paperbag*.

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Customer Reviews

Part of the trauma of oppression is the trauma of being silenced, and *Split* is a voice that refuses to be silenced. It is a voice that recognizes that by speaking one's own truth, one asserts one's power over oppression and refuses to be a victim. Speaking out is an act of revenge. Throughout *Split*, the narrative of rape and displacement is coupled with a narrative of silencing. There is the cousin who silences the girl he rapes with "just a shush in the dark", the brother who did not speak out even though "he would not leave, watching even as the toaster pinged", the mother who says, "He's just playing with you, and stroked my forehead." This conspiracy of silence, tender and complicit, becomes part of the violence inflicted on the speaker. The silence intentionally and unintentionally imposed on the speaker is derived from the silence imposed on the older generation, who are victims themselves of rape and violence in Vietnam. In those poems, the mother who witnesses the rape of a village girl does not say, "It could have been me," but rather "She survived and could not marry." The father who was a soldier for twelve years hardly speaks at all, "his psyche shot through, shrapnel still lodged in his scalp." A grandmother on her deathbed "couldn't speak. Her teeth kept grinding like a machine's stuck gears." And in Vietnam itself, "No one talked of the war, but history was in the billboards, in the films the tourists watched." But the act of keeping silent does not make the past go away. For the family in *Split*, memories of their traumatic past haunts them like a reoccurring nightmare. For the mother "The ghosts kept knocking on her body's thick walls. She refuses to let them out.

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