

Book Review

Of Gods and Strangers

by Tina Chang, 2011. New York: Four Way Books, pp. 112.

ISBN-13: 978-1935536178

The Evolution of History and Pursuit of Immortality: Tina Chang's *Of Gods and Strangers*

Tina Chang's second collection of poems in her book *Of Gods & Strangers* explores the concept and malleability of time. The poems are divided into three sections, respectively titled: Reign, Infinite and Plausible, and Territory. They range from conversations with Empress Dowager, to references of nameless and dateless wars. While reading *Of Gods & Strangers* time is not a basic pendulum swaying back and forth dictating each individual moment, rather time is vast and undetermined, it stands in limbo. Time wanders both aimlessly and purposefully, dividing and unifying all moments, but Chang's poems do not only acknowledge the volatility of history; her poetry questions mortality and beautifully sculpts a solution that man can be deified through words. Tina Chang's *Of Gods & Strangers* is a mystical and vivid collection of poems that brings her readers into the continuous state of history, lineage, and time, finding its continuity in words.

From the start of this collection, readers immediately recognize the belief that history, like time, is a man made creation with no tangibility. Chang begins her poem "Book" with the nothingness of origin, her first line reading: "I could make a book of it, out of ash" (Chang 11).¹ She swiftly assures that any bound story can essentially come from nothingness. In an interview Chang said, "We, as a race, are made up of individuals who are in a constant state of searching. We are inherently a lost tribe and are journeying toward a state of belonging."² Loosely connected materials of unknown origin can end up telling a story defining a type of people and subsequently a culture. "Book" presents the image of a fruit and instead of meticulously peeling the layers back before reaching the core, we hastily break it open or as the poem says, "[but you] tore it open anyway, drilled inside with your fingers. You found the seed and ate that too" (11). Chang leaves her reader with the image and ideology that if we end up devouring the fruit, the rind, the juices, and the pit, everything is lost including the seed that could carry down to another generation or could create another origin. This image of the fruit sets up her concept of lineage for the rest of the collection.

Like "Book", her poem "So Much Light We Could See to the Other Side" examines the disappearance of what once defined an era. In this poem a cosmonaut, blind archeologist, and soothsayer discover the past "merely by feeling with the ends of their fingers which reached out to nothing" (41). Perhaps history creates itself when the present gives a voice to the past. Chang explains, "This look backward is vital for many reasons. Yes, we learn from history's mistakes, missteps, foibles. We can also rely on it for legend, myth, intrigue." She poses the thought that maybe this look backward is in

¹ Chang, Tina. *Of Gods & Strangers*. New York: Four Way Books, 2011. Print.

² Chang, Tina. Personal Interview. 30 May. 2012.

fact a creation and subsequent recreation of history. Real history is always lost and the one remembered, always altered in some way, carries itself between generations. It is only a mere idea, as seen in the poem "Infinite and Plausible" that identifies the "smallest idea" which is "born in the interior will" (55). The idea, as if it were locked in a room or trapped in a body, is hunted and at the end the curtains are stripped "from their windows separating material from light" (55).

Chang subtly clarifies the entire purpose of creating history or even a story serves as an attempt for that story to be remembered. The first poem in *Of Gods & Strangers* entitled "The Unfinished Book of Mortals" is a four-part explanation of immortality and time. This unfinished book, perhaps our own history, has no one sure shape or one definite beginning, climax, and end. The poem "Supernova" begins with images of war—no specific war, but perhaps all wars that ever were and will be. In addition to the uncertain time of this story, comes the discrepancies of interpretation, "We think they are saying one thing. They are really saying another" (3). Thus appears the overwhelming and inexpressible sensation of chaos that comes with life. Disarray requires every single person to assume a role of a narrator, in attempt to better define his or her own history and purpose. For Tina Chang these moments range from the birth of her children to the violent attacks in her city, New York, on September 11, 2001. She said, "When the planes hit...the symbol of our envisioned power had collapsed, this was the end of an era of dominance. The world was witness to this fall...I was watching this unfold and felt my own power diminishing because my voice was one of peace. I was not in full agreement with the manner in which I was being governed."

In this, it is easy to see the purpose in the ambiguity of her poem. Universal events are perpetually narrated; different speakers and beliefs create a comprehensive history strung from individual interpretations and memories. The poem continues with a haunting image of immortal gods appearing tired and famished, "the gods packed their belongings and trekked to find work, to forage for food. Starving their bodies cracked open and someone said they saw the past in that interior" (3). Inside the bodies of immortal gods, on their bone and muscle, is history and past, but is it true history? "Atlas," the next poem, claims history, or true history "stayed locked in that room" (4) and mortals are left battling over unknown truths of origin and ancestry. As Chang writes, "The soul of the country rolled into the Indian Ocean" (5). Does history, like an ocean, ebb and return to the shoreline as a new story, or does it disappear at sea and never return? She begins her collection with rich images, as if she were creating a world of her own for a reader to live in, and yet, the reader only lives in them for short moments—the length of the poem itself. This collection is not simply an overview of how history comes to be, it is an experience of history. Her thoughtfulness allows each reader to live within the poem, but for moments at a time, because with a new poem comes a new life evolved from the previous pages.

The last two parts of the poem, "Polaris and Lucida", depict the longing of remembrance. How do humans achieve immortality? Chang suggests that through books, that maybe man can live forever in the minds of the future generations: "I bent the corners of the pages to keep my place in history" (6). Perhaps even spoken words will do. Nevertheless, the book of mortal history will never be finished. Chang says, "The end of this era gives life to another. For good or for bad, we are moving, evolving as a race." Humans yearn to preserve time because it is a life after death. Implying that, history

creates human purpose. Those who are long remembered are immortal because their story continues. The book, unfinished as the poem's title suggests, "had been written long ago... [it] was written in the space between us" (7). She presents a compelling image of history as a measurement of moments of absences and silence in between the moments of chaos and change. Writing yourself into the pages is the way mortality can potentially evolve into godliness.

However, *Of Gods & Strangers* acknowledges that the enigmatic accuracy of history is natural; it is simply the evolution of time and the inevitability of error. In the poem "Tiny Souls" she questions the justification of historical revisions that were made to comply with past deeds. She writes "ruin gets up" and "there are moments when I no longer live in the future tense" (37). The past creeps up on the future out of guilt or shame when we no longer wonder, 'what will I do?' but instead ask, 'what am I doing?' or worse 'what have I done?' As the poem says, "revise the landscape" (37) so that it cannot be remembered as it is right now. If we fool ourselves now, we may fool future generations too. "Tiny Souls" is a bitter cadence of a poem written not in the voice of, but in honor of displaced persons whose countries no longer appear on a map.

"Labor" one of the final, and perhaps one of the most riveting poems of the book, juxtaposing its title with opening lines of barrenness, "My handwriting is rough, a prisoner's scripted letter, the cropped fields and your winter palms folding into my pockets for lack of gloves" (73). The prisoner wanders through his ancestry questioning "Do I begin in this past, the famine field?" (73). Posing this idea of whether or not lineage can be found in a field of nothingness, comes the desolate and existential separation between and individual being and life as a totality. The speaker of the poem refers to other prisoners, but the crimes committed go unmentioned. Perhaps this speaker is a prisoner of time, among others who are also caught up in routine and habit. Of writing "Labor" Chang says, "I felt like I was both a participant and spectator in my world... There was a comforting familiarity to that waking life but also one that felt both numbing and blind."

Of Gods and Strangers is filled with poems that mystically explore lineage without instilling fear. In fact, there are plenty of times where she writes whimsically, yet with a clear purpose. In certain poems such as "Empress Dowager Boogies" and "Self-Portrait as Empress Dowager," Chang assumes the perspective as the Empress. In regards to the Empress's history and lineage, she says, "To don her clothes, to walk in her shoes, to become a part of her battles and her pageantry felt exciting but also familiar. There is an imagined lineage that was imperative to my writing and growth at that time." The playfulness of these poems comes in the portrayal, not the mere recitation, of a historical persona. It is human to connect with those of the past because it provides us with a sense of continuity, inspiration, and purpose. It is both child-like and mature to emulate characters from history because it gives anyone at any age a sense of connection to the past.

Of Gods & Strangers succeeds as a collection of poems because while concepts of time can typically be portentous and inauspicious, these sensations never surface. Chang explained that she acknowledged "smaller details and the undercurrent of the language that was speaking to [her]." Even in "Substantial," where the speaker asks "who is listening if not me?" (66), and the aforementioned "Labor," there are hints of desolation- yet when read as a whole they still manage to dwell on the pursuit of immortality. She

elaborates, “I was taking history’s dictation, yes, some of it desolate. Some of it was melancholy.” Although her poems hint at desolation or end on a note of melancholy, they by no means instill that sensation in the reader, nor do they do the opposite by providing a glimmer of hope and ebullience. Rather, *Of Gods & Strangers* simply acknowledges the beauty, evolution, and inevitability of historical change. Chang says, “Perhaps our time here is meant for noticing, for interpreting the intricacies of humanity, and for making realizations that feel universal.”

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