

Sy Hoahwah. *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride*. University of New Mexico Press, 2021. 64 pp. ISBN: 9780826362216.

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In a poem aptly named "Biography," Sy Hoahwah writes, "As a child, father told me I hatched out of a pearl partially dissolved in wine. // Mother always reminded me, I reminded her of father, / and I made the milk curdle in the stomach of other newborns" (2). Here, we find the troubling combination of the inherited and the unfamiliar. Like Hoahwah's previous collection *Velroy and the Madische Mafia* (2009), the speaker in *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride* maintains multiplicitous identities—Indigenous, Southern, monstrous. In this place-oriented collection, Hoahwah forces the reader to reconcile the blurring of assumed borders between natural and unnatural, life and death, and more as he defines the hybrid body/bodies of the speaker against and within liminal landscapes: "I sat here long enough / to become an altar / where the abandoned monsters come to pray" (24). Pulling from epic and Gothic traditions, Hoahwah's new collection of poetry allows us brief visions of an impossibly shifting narrator—one we must trust fully as we follow the speaker to the outskirts of town, down a logging trail, and into Hell itself.

Threaded through this collection is the juxtaposition and blending of un/natural spaces and objects. Disturbing boundaries we often perceive as concrete, Hoahwah creates the uncanny:

In these lands, there is no difference  
between a star and thrown car keys.  
Chicken nuggets hatch from the eggs of eagles.  
I grow dirty while bathing in bottled water. (12)

The land here—beside a fort in the "Hinterlands" as the poem's title tells us—forces reader discomfort. These hybridities contrast land-alternating human products and supposedly natural objects, and the landscape becomes monstrous in its indefinable form. But, as Hoahwah notes in the collection's first lines, the mountains where he so often sets these poems, the Ozarks, "are where defeated assassins, the unholy, / and monsters come to retire" (1). These poems, just like the mountains, contain the undesirable and the rejected. "The more one cries the more one prospers... / O ancestral demon," the speaker calls out, "may my lamentation become verbal sorcery" (12). Hoahwah's speaker claims a purpose when speaking to the ancestral demon, undermining another boundary while offering a "tone between poetry and backward prayer" (2). The language itself in this poem resists strict definition, much like Hoahwah's uncanny objects.

Hoahwah's preoccupation with liminality starts with physical space in these poems. Often centering landscapes with a long history of American-sanctioned violence against and the genocide of Indigenous peoples, as with the Ozarks, Hoahwah's poems are transgressive in their boundary-crossing:

Line of barbed wire  
marks the boundary  
between this world  
and the next. (3)

"This world," acting as both realism and metaphor, contains the multiplicities that firmly ground this collection in speculative genres. In the epic tradition of Alice Notley's *Descent of Alette* (1996), Hoahwah's *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride* evokes Dante's *Inferno*; similar to Alette's and Dante's descent into their versions of Hell, Hoahwah's poetry collection centers landscape, transcendent objects, and an afterlife journey. Hoahwah writes, "I'm a dazed underworld hero fleshed and rubbed down / with my own tongue and brains" (11). Liminal landscape plays a pivotal role in this recreation of epic narration, both in the hellscape and Hoahwah's description of semi-familiar earthspace where a demon can be "steeped in cornbread philosophy [...] as he kneels down to the priest and holy water" (1). Much like Dante's exploration of Hell, Hoahwah's speaker looks back to known dead: "I don't even have ashes of dead saints / to rub into my eyes" (11). Virgil guides Dante, and a skeleton who "got scared and held my hand" (42) acts as a semi-guide for Hoahwah's speaker.

There's something more, though, than linked narrative content to this form in Hoahwah's collection. Epic poetry has a long history of hybridizing historical information. The Mayan *Popol Vuh* combines and treats as equal Quiché mythologies about the earth's formation and their recorded history under Spanish colonization. In *The Lusíads*, Luís Vaz de Camões attempts to cement Portugal's status as an imperial powerhouse by calling on both Catholic and Roman deities, an unusual move in which he compares his country's power to that of ancient Rome, hoping to solidify nationalism for Portuguese readers. Hoahwah's *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride* is similarly working to establish a complicated identity and cultural memory: "There is no sanctuary in the subdivisions we edge closer to / with our bowstrings cut" (9). Hoahwah's collective *we* reappears across poems to establish the contemporary memory of Indigenous voices while critiquing American suppression of Indigenous culture.

Hoahwah's speaker—the repeating *I* and collective *we*—is part of this tumultuous liminality, this shifting landscape, appearing often as one of the many objects placed in the natural versus synthetic existence. Hoahwah writes, "We've all been chased to this

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genocidal beauty once or twice, / surrendering at a fast-food table with free Wi-Fi" (9). In these two lines, Hoahwah twists together the inevitable capitalist value of the space alongside historical stamps on the physical land—specifically Fort Hill, an Oklahoma military post known for its currently operating Artillery School, but more importantly as the site of violence against Indigenous peoples before, during, and after the Plains Wars. Among it all, of course, is the speaker, witness to the genocide and the restaurant chain. This spatial awareness is reminiscent of Rachel Zolf's new poetic/theoretic book, *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* (2021), which theorizes the poetics of witnessing excess from the position of the oppressed, the non-subject, *No One*. Citing Paul Celan's famous line, "No one / bears witness for the / witness" (62), Zolf's work cites the im/possibilities of witnessing. Hoahwah's poetry attempts to do just this: *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride* calls attention to the witnessed blending of collected memory, history, and current realities.

This witnessing strikes me as indicative of Hoahwah's intensive and extraordinary genre play. Merging Gothic tropes of madness, hybridity, and haunted landscapes, Hoahwah speaks to the purpose of writing monstrosity: to reveal the cultural value of the monstrous body. In her blurb for *Ancestral Demon of a Grieving Bride*, Heid E. Erdrich writes, "Sy Hoahwah has perhaps invented Comanche goth." I see the truth of this claim in Hoahwah's integration of human and nonhuman elements, heightening the uncanny experience for the reader. The speaker recalls a "decapitated head" with natural, nonhuman matter attached: "Lightning / tied to its hair, / / jagged teeth glow" (Hoahwah 7). Hoahwah's blending of the body with natural imagery, especially lightning, is reminiscent of Natalie Diaz's "The First Water is the Body" from *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020). Diaz writes, "The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States— / also, it is a part of my body" (46). This nonmimetic bodily description encompasses Hoahwah's and Diaz's work, cementing the speakers as parts of the landscape and firmly defining the body as an object in the scenery, as both a critique of abject oppression and a method of reclamation. So often, landscapes in Gothic literature include unwanted "monsters" (Hoahwah 1), who are always under threat of ejection. Working within this genre's lineage, Hoahwah's speaker, a character defined by multiple identities, is both invisible and hypervisible against the landscape, reflecting and critiquing the way America has historically attempted to conceal Indigenous peoples, physically and culturally—and Hoahwah clearly reports on the im/possibility of this blurring and his own witnessing.

Hoahwah's poetry collection promises a continuance of this liminality—this combined hypervisibility and invisibility against both natural and synthetic landscapes. He describes

the collection's speaker as a "Christian, Oklahoma-shaped and melancholic, / caught at the entrance of a ditch / as the best breath of me tornadoes into the next county" (28). Not only is the proposed afterlife a place of undeniable liminality but so are the gaps between human-created land divisions. This collection imposes an unbelonging that forces movement, a movement that forces unbelonging. The body in Hoahwah's work eventually becomes liminal itself, an object inciting unexpected fear at its sudden visibility: "Monsters," Hoahwah writes, "hatch fully grown from their eggs" (28).

*Hannah V Warren, University of Georgia*

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