
REVIEW

"Nothing the Forest Raises is a Monster": A Review of Shivane Ramlochan's *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*

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Review of Shivane Ramlochan, *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*. Peepal Tree Press, 2017. 70 pages.

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Shivane Ramlochan's debut collection, *Everyone Knows I am a Haunting* (Peepal Tree Press, 2017) stormed the literary scene. Reviewed in venues such as "The Guardian", shortlisted for the prestigious Forward Poetry Prize for Best First Collection (2018), and described by blurber Loretta Collins Klobah as "a subversive tour de force," the collection stands as a bold new voice in Caribbean literature or as Olive Senior, the current Poet Laureate of Jamaica comments on the jacket, "a challenging, unforgettable, and courageous new voice." While this is Ramlochan's debut as a poet, she is no newcomer to the Caribbean poetry scene. An active literary citizen, she serves as a reviewer for Caribbean Beat magazine, and her commentaries and reviews are published regularly online and in newspapers across the region. (Full disclosure: Ramlochan reviewed both my poetry collections, *Difficult Fruit* and *Honeyfish*.) *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*, is yet another dazzling dimension of her diverse contribution to Caribbean letters.

The collection is broken into three sections. Part one introduces the reader to a cast of human and non-human creatures—a trio of duennes, a matrilineage of abortionists, a sacrificial virgin, to name a few. This section is speculative and surreal, a space of inversion and disorientation—part dream, part mythoscape. Part two, the beating heart of the collection, is comprised of a long poem in seven parts titled "The Red Thread Cycle." The sequence, unlike the section that precedes it inhabits achingly real landscapes—Tunapuna Police station, Caroni River, the cinema and market—and agonizingly recognizable characters like policemen, mothers and rapists. The poems in this section do not demur: the clear concern is sexual violence and its aftermaths of breaking and survival. The third section creates a hybrid reality—a carnivalesque space both surreal and real in which the two earlier sections collide.

The book's evocative title both signals this hybridity, this tension between the otherworldly and the familiar, and invites an interrogation of it—what exactly is this "Haunting"? One might point to the parade of creatures and gods as the referenced agents of possession; however, I would argue that the haint animating this text is, in fact, violence itself. More poltergeist than friendly spirit, violence materializes and manifests throughout the collection; it is legion, many-tongued and multi-faceted. A hydra. The poems wrestle with spaces, characters, situations, and interiorities scathed by violence of one kind or another, some more overtly addressed, and others only alluded to including: rape, reproductive violence, and sexual assault; the colonial violence of native genocide, the slave trade, indenture, and plantation capitalism; religious and homophobic violence; institutional (specifically police) violence. The overarching presence of violence is the thing that "everyone knows" and is intimately acquainted with, shaped by and living with.

The most evident evidence of the presence of violence is The Red Thread Cycle. Anchoring the book's other two sections, the poems stage the internal landscape of a rape victim. The haunting of the rape echoes through the titles of the poems in the section: "on the third anniversary of the rape," the title of the opening poem, and "You wait for five years, and then," the third, for example, set up the notion of haunting by their

very temporality. The event of the rape is one that is commemorated in the speaker's lyric domain. It is both past and not past, the anniversary dates inscribing that violence's lingering haunting over time. Both poems utilize the repetitive quality of anaphora to further emphasize this temporal haunting. The fractured anaphora of "the third anniversary of the rape," repeats the word "don't," which arises as the speaker attempts to both tell the event and frame it in less violent terms:

Don't say you have a vagina, say
 he stole your insurance policy/your bank boxes/your first car
 down payment. (35)

But, even as the speaker tries to exorcise the true nature of the occurrence, its violence breaks through. There is no way to escape it. In "You wait for five years, and then," the anaphora is the single "you," through which the speaker demonstrates the continuing presence of the rape as it influences (one might even say dictates) the speaker's thoughts and actions, and fractures the interior coherence of the speaking self who is the "you" in the poem:

You think of walking
 You want to take one step further
 than the riptide that nearly drowned you in '98. (35)

In "Nail it to the barn door where it happened," it is both a physical and a psychic haunting. The poem references the speaker's "ruined ankle" presumably damaged in the attack that "will still be ruined forever," a physical haunting of the violence of the assault. The poem opens "this is how you survive it," which both acknowledges a coming through and a remaining of the violence. The later lines "I have to mention that it will hurt./I have to mention it may not cure," points to a lingering and ongoing violence that not only remains in the recollection of the act itself, but that is also embedded in whatever acts might attempt to move the speaker toward healing: there is no escaping it.

Ramlochan is deliberate, however, in not coding violence solely as negative. Alongside the violence of destruction are the violence of liberation and survival. In "nail it to the barn door," the speaker, haunted—possessed, even—by the rape, tells herself she "must carry out the unspeakable thing you came here to do" which involves a ritual of "cut" "nail," "shatter," and "blast" (37–8). The final poem of the suite, "The Open Mic of Every Deya, Burning" is a poem of reclamation—an exorcism, one might say—in which the speaker attempts to burst through the shackles of the assault and make the hellish climb towards something that looks like freedom. Violence does not release its hold easily, briefly hijacking the speaker's weapon to reproduce itself:

the poem says
 truss him gullet to groin with leather and lyre-wire.
 Loop the cry around your wrist
 like he wound your hair to the bedpost and knotted you there
 for safe keeping.

Ultimately, we're left with a battle between two versions of violence: the destructive violence of silence and the liberating violence of speaking out. The latter triumphs: "I tell it,/flinching... each line break bursts me open/for applause, hands slapping like something hard and holy." But the win is neither complete nor comforting; rather, we are made to understand that sometimes what's available is not an exorcism, but a less acute haunting as the memory of violence cannot be fully erased: "There lies an ache/in the place I was ransacked" (45).

In *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* violence haunts romantic, familial and self love. It armors and cuts. It blesses and profanes. It is naturally occurring, bred, birthed, socialized, constructed. It is ephemeral and tangible both. It can bedevil love and hate alike. It is the province of language and of silence. Thus, the unspoken question haunting these poems, ultimately, is how to sustain a self forged in, begotten by, living with, and sometimes involuntarily inflicting violence? The poems answer: with tenderness, with acceptance, with connection. The brutality of the poems is mitigated by another persistent and powerful haint that grips the work as strongly as its louder companion—love. However deformed, scarred, and injured by violence, the movement of the collection is toward healing and wholeness—a daring of "despite" in which the speaker(s)

overlook, innovate, and risk. In "what Fights, still," love is not without danger, nor is the speaker recovered from the devastation of violence:

You kiss her like wildfire levels dry bush.
You can't give her less
than the ruination of you. (65)

However, here, love responds in kind—withstanding, persisting, destroying:

You watch it trespass over your barbed wire...

You watch her hoard the worst of you
defenestrate it whole.
Old pottery shards and pellet guns
Hurling to an earth and iron grave. (66)

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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