



Isabel Allende
Violeta

Trans. Frances Riddle. New York.
Ballantine Books. 2022. 319 pages.

ISABEL ALLENDE OPENS her novel *Violeta* with a quote from Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Our protagonist, Violeta’s, life certainly is wild, as she lives through major historical events such as the Cuban revolution, the Great Depression, the Chilean dictatorship, and the women’s suffrage movement. Told in the form of a memoir written for her beloved grandson, Camilo, Violeta recounts her one hundred years of life, bookended by two pandemics.

Born during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1920 and passing away from old age during the start of Covid-19 in 2020, Violeta Del Valle could not have possibly planned for what fate had in store. Although she was born into a well-known, wealthy family, the 1929 Wall Street crash led to her family’s exile from their home in the capital. Violeta quickly learns her time as a spoiled child is over and begins her new rural life in Nahuel, located in southern Chile, where she thrives. This early juxtaposition of lifestyles dependent on her family’s current economic status establishes Violeta’s pragmatic, although

hardly cynical, outlook on life. In Nahuel, her mentors repeat the saying, “It’s much easier to be generous with a full belly than an empty one.” Violeta assures Camilo, “I’ve never believed that, though, because I’ve seen that both kindness and cruelty exist everywhere.”

Life goes on, and Violeta’s story includes a marriage to a German man during World War II, an affair with a famous pilot, which leads to her two children, the running of a business despite the limitations placed on a woman’s right to do so, and surviving the military dictatorship in Chile. Allende manages to make readers feel as though they’re right next to Violeta on her journey; it’s easy to forget it is a work of fiction and not an intimate memoir. Violeta’s travels range from rural to urban with in-depth looks at Cuba, Miami, Los Angeles, Norway, and, above all, her cherished home country of Chile. Each location is described so vividly they almost feel familiar, thanks to Violeta’s bright recountings and personal relationship with each locale.

For every incredible experience Violeta has, there are just as many tragic ones. Allende tackles topics such as sexual assault, grief, poverty, domestic abuse, natural disaster, addiction, homophobia, and political unrest in her heartfelt prose, to name a few. The closeness we feel with Violeta makes these subjects feel all the more real and painful. Reading about her grief and struggle is like hearing from a close friend. By the end, we know Violeta’s no-nonsense attitude isn’t cynical but rather the worldview of a passionate and driven woman who has seen it all and knows there is no time to waste.

Amidst the turmoil Violeta faces both internally and externally, her story urges us to seek out the precious amongst the wild. If she can do it, we certainly have a shot.

Alexandra McManus
University of Oklahoma



Ocean Vuong
Time Is a Mother

New York. Penguin. 2022. 128 pages.

TIME IS A MOTHER is Ocean Vuong’s second poetry collection and his first book since 2019, when the award-winning novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* was published and Vuong received a MacArthur Fellowship. In *Time Is a Mother*, Vuong, thirty-three, born in Vietnam and raised in hardscrabble Connecticut by his illiterate mother, Hông (she went by Rose), expertly picks up familiar themes—self-discovery as a gay man, the legacy of war, how language is both garden and minefield—while also presenting more abstract, challenging material. The result is mostly successful.

The book is divided into four sections, all of which address Vuong’s grief after his mother’s death from cancer. The first section is preceded by a stunning prologue, “The Bull,” rich with surreal imagery and evocations such as “needing beauty / to be more than hurt gentle / enough to want” that gesture at the desire and intense fragility present throughout the collection.

The first and fourth sections are arguably the least engaging. “Dear Peter” is a predictably melancholy epistle to a partner written while hospitalized, while “Skinny Dipping” is a sensual double entendre



about leaping from a bridge into the water below that gets lost in its own descent:

some boys
have ghosted
from this high
but I wanna go
down on you
anyway to leap
from the bridge
I've made
of my wrongs.

Confusing descriptions of flight continue in “Beautiful Short Loser”: “I’m on the cliff of myself & these aren’t wings, they’re / futures.” Vuong’s attempts to capture the fraught feelings of attraction, diversion, and grief are earnest but underdeveloped. Even “Dear Rose,” which describes his mother’s journey from wartime Vietnam to immigrant life in the US, verges on being incoherent. So many potent and recurring symbols—bullets, ants, anchovies, flowers—vie for significance that they muddle the poem.

In the first and fourth sections, only “American Legend,” a wry recollection of a father, son, and dog in a car crash, is refined enough to be compelling:

he slammed
into me &
we hugged
for the first time
in decades. It was perfect
& wrong, like money
on fire.

These lines are violent and vulnerable but also biographically fictitious, since Vuong’s father was absent. “I did it to hold / my father, to free / my dog,” writes Vuong. “It’s an old story, Ma. / Anyone can tell it.” The occasion of losing one parent inspires mythmaking about the other, already lost.

The second and third sections, however, are a triumph. In “The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica,” the protagonist is “not a writer / but a faucet underwater.” “It’s true,” they continue, “I saw a boy / in a black apron crying in a Nissan / the size of a monster’s

coffin & knew / I could never be straight.” Such vignettes depict the drama, dignity, and discovery possible in the most quotidian moments in blue-collar American life.

The third section contains two poems, the longest and most memorable of which is “Künstlerroman” (German for “artist’s story”). The poem depicts a kaleidoscopic range of events, from the attacks of 9/11 to domestic scenes in the protagonist’s own life, all in reverse. The Twin Towers “reassemble,” and birthday cake candles reignite in front of a child’s lips, as though to solve Proust’s dilemma: only through language is time retrievable. And, of course, so too is Vuong’s departed mother resurrected through tender verse. The exercise might feel like a party trick if attempted by a less adept writer, but Vuong suffuses the montage with a powerful lyrical longing. Overall, such exquisite articulations of longing and grief sustain the collection.

Peter Krause
New York

Mai Al-Nakib
An Unlasting Home

Boston. Mariner Books. 2022. 400 pages.

MAI AL-NAKIB’S debut novel, *An Unlasting Home*, circles around the complicated family legacy of her main character, Sara, an academic with Arab parentage, who grew up in Kuwait but was educated in American schools and universities. With her parents and grandparents dead, Sara returns to Kuwait to the family house, to reckon with her “bifurcated” identity. The title, *An Unlasting Home*, is taken from Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and refers to wanderers, like birds, who build nests, “an unlasting home under the eaves of men’s houses.” The book is an ambitious family epic with a historical sweep, an elegy to grandmothers and mothers who were forced from their original homes by personal or political circumstances in the Middle East to build nests elsewhere.

The novel opens with Sara’s dramatic arrest for blasphemy in Kuwait in the recent present (2013). Recorded by one of her students in *niqab* of saying, “God is dead,”



she is arrested and taken away to jail, just like that: every teacher’s nightmare. Sara is a serious academic, determined to explain the ideas of Nietzsche, yet the girls she teaches are steeped in a conservative Islamic tradition. Education is not expected to be transformative. How unlike the Kuwait of the 1970s Sara knew, brought up by parents who sent her to American schools and encouraged her to be independent.

Part 1 rotates between Sara’s point of view, in the present, and her maternal and paternal grandmothers’ point of view in the 1920s and ’30s, both part of an Arab diaspora. Sara’s maternal grandmother, Lulwa, was born in Kuwait and married a pearl merchant. From a poor family of fisherman, Lulwa is married off at a very young age and moves to India with her husband in the 1920s. However, with “the changing winds of Indian independence,” the Al-Mustafas move back to Kuwait in the 1950s. The children, fluent in Hindi and English but with broken Arabic, feel displaced when they move to Kuwait. Her mother, Noura’s, alienation as a child is echoed in the life of her daughter.

Exploring the problems of those in diaspora, especially an Arab diaspora, is fresh territory—and gives one a sense of just how