

# ANYONE WILL TELL YOU

*The Truth, But Slant*

APZ Books

VIRGINIA KONCHAN

*Anyone Will Tell You*  
by Wendy Chin-Tanner  
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"Don't look away. Look straight at everything. Look it all in the eye, good and bad," said Henry Miller.

This form of courage, in poetry as well as life, is rare, and yet it characterizes the wonder that is Wendy Chin-Tanner's second full-length poetry collection, *Anyone Will Tell You*, beautifully. The speaker of these elliptical, spare poems is both subject and object, mother and child, mourner and celebrant—and in each poem, she proves herself capable of not just witness, but intervention—into the most complex forms of political and personal subjectivity, domestic life, aesthetics, and eco-devastation occurring in our world today. Chin-Tanner's poems function as load-bearing walls, and, in their delicious and generous ambiguity, are dependent on the reader to create the associative and etymological meanings—prior to or after the movement of reader-response criticism had its day.

Nothing, including nothing, escapes her raptor-like gaze: Chin-Tanner, also a trained sociologist, is an expert at both internalizing the playful and potentially destructive aspects of Language Poetry, while creating poems of astonishing beauty and lyrical virtuosity—a hard feat, indeed. A master at the use of white space, her painterly, sculptural poems bloom like Plathian "blood jets" across the page, using impressionistic brushstrokes to convey meanings that are equal parts cerebral and felt. The concrete poem "Velleity," in particular, anchoring the book's middle section, performs the near-impossible: it's a work of poetic auto-genesis that interpolates not just the beginning of the world, and word, epistemology, faith, subjecthood, and complicity, but also with the freefall (literally, on the page) of language through space and time.

An excerpt: "this is what / happens when / you are born / with a sail / set in one / direction . . . I always / place myself / back at the / center I / myself am / the center."

If a better rejoinder to Eliot's modernist salvo of fragmented ruins and Yeats's futuristic "center that cannot hold" exists, it hasn't yet existed like this. This is adamantly a feminist poetics: poems like "Child" and "This Bed This Room" allude to the aches and pains (physical and existential) of motherhood, but in a radically new, and unsentimental way—the child or children referenced in these poems might take from the speaker, but the child also gives back, lending the mother a kind of transpersonal consciousness, as well as connectedness to the generations that came before. Supposing, Chin-Tanner's work asks, channeling the ghost of Nietzsche, "truth is a woman—what then?" These poems provide the answers, gleaming like polished knives.

The devastatingly crystalline "Portrait," in its entirety:

Maddy draws me—  
a head,  
a pair of boobs,  
and beneath, a womb  
where the egg,  
a speck of black pen, lays.

The figuration of the fertilizing egg as a "speck of black pen" establishes a relation between the physical body of the mother and the generative work (however heavily metaphorized, in culture) of writing: an association that overrides the more bleak contiguity between women and materiality/maternity, and biology as destiny. The somnolescent "Blue Moon" and "Supermoon" poems describe a speaker who (hilariously, in "Blue Moon," "After the appointed fuck") wanders the house at night, in cahoots not just with her sleeping children but with the rhythms, wild, of the natural world. "And in / the lightless worlds within, a miniature moon / floats in my womb's slippery night, / heart beating time, time beating heart." This last line suggests a profound connection between the body and the cosmos, yet is rendered (as everywhere) with such a light, magisterial touch as to make it seem effortless.

To focus overmuch, however, on the aspects of gender and motherhood, and its concomitant tropes of labor and delivery, that score the book would be to do a disservice to its other fiercely political aims. This is a book of awakenings, and poems such as "The Mother in This Poem Is Me or You or Your Mother," "Truth in a Nonmoral Sense," and "Truth in a Moral Sense" reveal the speaker's own deep investiture in issues of race, identity, discourse analysis, and culture—and yet (lucky us!) they are crafted in the shape, tone, and form, of poems.

An excerpt:

both monster  
and slave shame  
and slay me  
  
this is the  
Labyrinth  
where you play  
  
Theseus  
and I play  
Minotaur  
  
it's okay  
it's just a  
metaphor

All seeming contradictions resolve with these lines, which both soothe and disquiet—the idea of role play (and, by extension, violence, figura-

tive and literal language, and perhaps even god) as "just a metaphor" betrays two colliding visions: if all is reducible to metaphor, does that make systemic injustice, to say nothing of war, less "real"? Or, conversely, can it provide a way out (through linguistic subterfuge) of absolute relativity and total indeterminacy? Either way, we are reminded of Aristotle's injunction: "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor."

Similarly, the companion poems "Truth in a Nonmoral Sense" and "Truth in a Moral Sense" don't just turn a blind eye to the decaying fetish of "truth" in a post-truth/fake news era: they drive straight to the core of the matter, and, with seemingly brio and ferocity, drag the (capital/lower-case) "truth" out, Medusa-like, by the hair.

An excerpt from the former:

"In sociology, we say mapping, / we say cartography instead / of understanding. To profess / to understand, you see, is hubris." Ay, there's the rub. But there's more: instead of truth, the speaker writes, "we should say subjectivity." But what do we say when subjectivity itself is undermined or fails? Then, in a gorgeous pivot, we read: "To name it, / I say loss, I say yearn, I say tell me . . . Before / us, our name stands constant, and the City stands / constantly shifting, like truth. Like words and meaning, / making meaningless the crude facts of my making" (emphasis mine).

This poem encapsulates the poet's titular project (which takes place in the poet's middle years, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*) so brilliantly—anyone (or, Dickinson's "no one") will tell you, and while it may read at first glance like an obliquity or formalism (tell you *what?*); to tell, or to ask to be told (the truth, knowledge, a story), is in fact, in the context of this collection, what it means to be anthropos, to be alive. "Telling" saved Scheherazade's life: to say "tell me" is an act of, above all, other-consciousness and empathy, and to be told, or to be willing to be told, is the equivalent, here, of conscience—of recognition of a power commensurate with the self.

Indeed, speaking of others—this text is haunted by a panoply of figures, both named (Orion, Bach, Lacan, Perseid) as well as ghostly present: Plath's cryptic visions and enraptured poem-spells haunt this text, yes (sans death drive), but also, within this pressure chamber of language, we find Nie-decker's elevation of the quotidian into the sublime, Oppen's radical use of white space and enjambment (her line breaks sever, indelibly, like tattoos), William Carlos Williams' condensed imagism, Bishop's ecstatic vision of the natural world, Sappho's erotic lyricism, and Marianne Moore's real toads.

Formally speaking, the poems are largely unpunctuated, mostly in trisyllabic tercets or couplets, and composed of short, pithy, but also winding and syntactically complex—often dropped—lines, often containing just one word, like cast jewels. Everywhere, there is a productive tension between the poet's mode of speech (interrogative, imperative) and its relation to the poems, which are ambitious in their rallying together of alliteration, consonance, assonance, and a wide-ranging juxtaposition between parts of speech, especially verbs and nouns (the reader is at times even milk drunk on her outrageous deployment of unusual nouns, sometimes bordering on glosso-lalia). Yet the emphasis here is less on formal conceits than it is on the intersection between the quotidian and the sublime. The poet has this to say of her compositional method: "Resolution lies / in resignation; this list of rhymes // scribbled on the back of a receipt." Equally narrative and neo-lyric in turns, the more narrative poems in

this collection (e.g. "Butterfly") do not spare the reader the shock of registered meaning any more than the more lyrical poems do—if anything, they mine the speaker's culpability in the world: her carbon footprint, yes, but also her hand in, or at least her witnessing of, the death of nature all around us. Yet this same culpability is also used, elsewhere, as in "Apoidea," to revel in the pleasures and joys of prosody, itself a kind of redemptive force:

*Though woman, lover, other, boss, the hive  
Without its matriarch, like Empire, dies.*

In an ever-unfamiliar global village/soulscape, is it frightening or comforting to acknowledge "the / sea too is / a mirror"? Along with granted subjectivity to women and other minorities who have too long been forced to apologize for their existence, where now is the place for the expression of power and passion? How can we, as poets and people, more radically embrace difference? What does it mean to bring children into the necromancy of our contemporary moment? Despite the "day's little deaths," this speaker (a self-declared "professional digger") is as adamant in her work as she is in her hopes: of, in the collection's final poem, "The Caravan," call and response, as well as the power of literature (read and written) to transform our consciousness and world.

Thus, "this / is how it / is written": the poignant, heart-breaking, and indisputably heroic plight of the human in a post-human world.

*Virginia Konchan is the author of two poetry collections, Any God Will Do (Carnegie Mellon, 2020) and The End of Spectacle (Carnegie Mellon, 2018); a collection of short stories, Anatomical Gift (Noctuary Press, 2017); and four chapbooks, as well as coeditor (with Sarah Giragosian) of Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems (University of Akron Press, 2022).*

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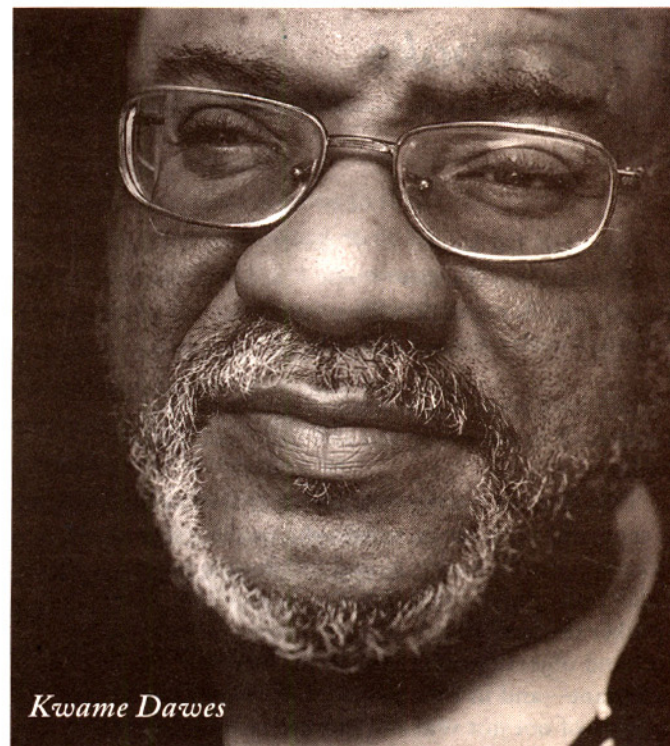
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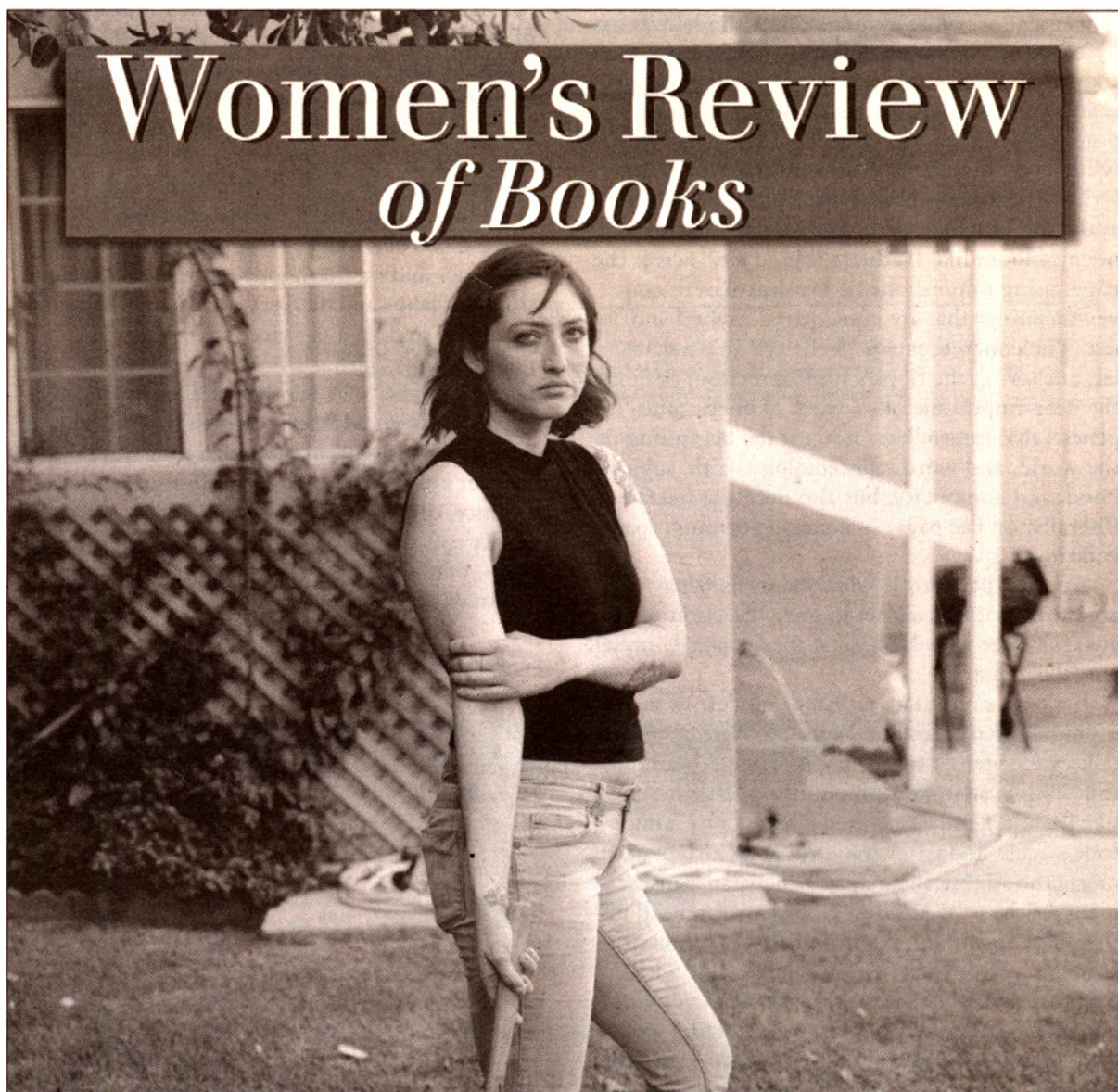
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