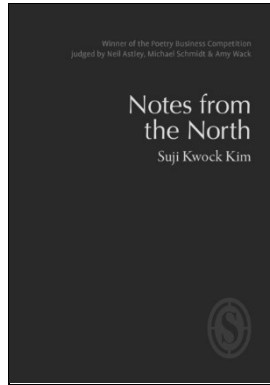


THE KOREAN EXPERIENCE: KAY SYRAD REVIEWS SUJI KWOCK KIM'S *NOTES FROM THE NORTH*



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In the introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché proposes a term for the space between the personal and the political: the 'social'.

The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we are to give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.¹

In Forché's anthology, the poets (almost all men) have themselves suffered at the hands of the state, in wars and as political prisoners. Their work, sometimes found after their deaths, can become, as Walter Benjamin suggests, 'Poem as trace, poem as evidence.'² Here, in Korean American poet Suji Kwock Kim's prizewinning pamphlet³, the poet shines a searchlight on the experience of her family during and after the forced separation of Korea into North and South, and the poems are dedicated to her 'grandfather, aunt, uncle, and cousins in North Korea'. She dwells in particular on her father, whose own father disappeared in 1951:

Near the border, you must walk carefully. Each road is a crossroads: each step a trap-door, leading to the labyrinth of the moment your grandfather left your father as a child, whispering *Wait in the woods until I come back*.

The hours pass. Larch-light, spruce-light, Siberian fir-light, twilight. Pine-needles rustling like the whispering of informers. He never comes back.

Searchlight

The arresting juxtaposition of narrative and lyric is employed throughout the collection. *Notes from the Forgotten War*, the pamphlet's first poem, is dedicated to 'my father' and written in the voice of the son for *his* father. It is a poem which is hard to bear for its war injury detail, but the poet's attention to syntax, the half rhyme, the repetition, keep the reader facing forward:

¹ Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, Norton, p.31

² Ibid

³ A winner of the 2019 International Book & Pamphlet Competition run by The Poetry Business.

[...] we knelt like beggars before the blasts,
 using the dead as shields, corpse-greaved,
 covering our faces from the blizzard of shrapnel,
 blizzard of limbs and flaming skin,
 of all who left this world in a grave of smoke.

The refrain of these poems is a refracted loss, a kind of veiling – a “Snow of not-knowing” (*Snowlight*); and “Seek, and ye shall / seek: but how will you know him, if you see him?” (*Notes from Utopia, Inc.*) – if you see him in “Utopia™, *eu-topos*, “place-where-all-is-well”, or is it *ou-topos*, “no-place””.

Suji Kwock Kim is writing the impossible: her speaker is angry, tender, curious, sickened, driven to record, in this delayed witnessing of what took place and what continues in the complex name of ideology. And the poet is operating in this middle zone of Forché’s ‘social’: facing history, commanding a future, whilst allowing intense *but not purely private* emotion to imbue every poem.

Another Korean American poet, Don Mee Choi (again a daughter drawing on her father’s history), also addresses the North/South Korean divide in her extraordinary prose-art-poetry collection *DMZ Colony*⁴. Inspired by a surviving political prisoner, she explores and interrupts that concept of ideology, reducing it to a repeated expression of vowel sounds (because *ideology has no history*⁵). As a translator, as a poet, as a human being, she says ‘The language of capture, torture and massacre is difficult to decipher. It’s practically a foreign language.’ But, as Don Mee Choi says in her Acknowledgements, ‘poetry [is] a language of resistance. Poetry can defy erasure.’

Where can we go from here? In Suji Kwock Kim’s *Notes from the Demilitarized Zone*, “Between war and peace, between now and not-now”, hope is a presence – as ‘tomorrow’:

Is there hope, even here,
 the earth beginning again, angel of changes,
 tomorrow after tomorrow, blowing forwards,
 countless as seed-down or snow:

Hope soars in the final poem of this startling and profound collection, *Sono*, in the birth of a son, in the blood and mucus of new life, so close to, but this time, *not* death:

And may I never forget when we first saw you
 in your afterlife which was life,

 soaked otter-pelt and swan-down crowning,
 face cauled in blood and mucus-mud, eyes soldered shut,

 wet birth-cord rooting you from one world to the next,
 you who might not have lived, might never have been born, like all the others,

 as we looked at every pock and crook of your skull,
 every clotted hair, seal-slick on your blue-black scalp,

 every lash, every nail, every breath,
 with so much wonder that wonder is not the word –

Notes from the North, Suji Kwock Kim, Smith|Doorstop, 2022. £6.50. ISBN 978-1-9121967-7-7

⁴ Don Mee Choi, *DMZ Colony*, Wave Books, 2020

⁵ From ‘The Apparatus’ where Don Mee Choi draws on Kafka, Freud and Louis Althusser, *ibid*, p.81