

Language for a New Century: A Review

Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond

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Language for a New Century (W.W. Norton, 2008) is an exceptional anthology of contemporary Middle Eastern and Asian poetry featuring over 400 poems from 61 countries.

In the Foreword, poet Carolyn Forché describes a poetry festival in Macedonia where thousands – yes, thousands – gather to hear poetry read. There is a similar feeling of celebration here, where poems in languages as diverse as Urdu, Russian, Khmer, Nepali, Dari, Arabic and Korean have been translated into English and selected by editors Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal and Ravi Shankar.

This review will offer only a taste of those selections.

Witness

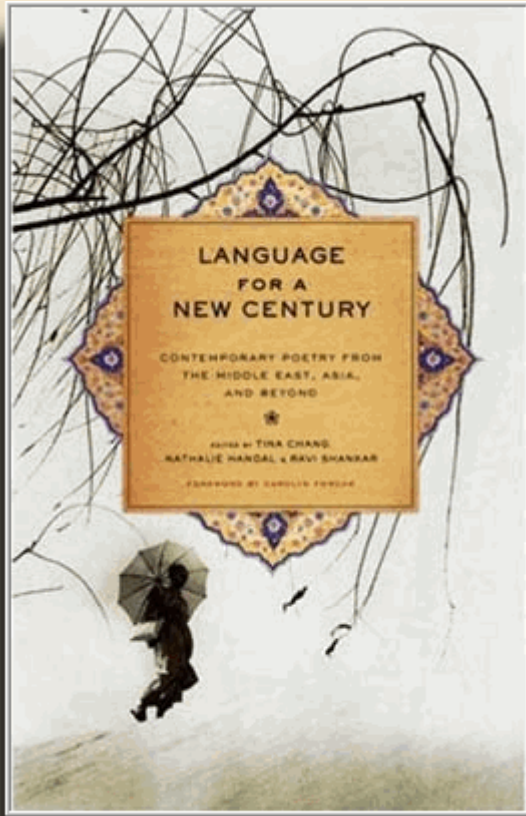
“The story of my country/ is a fractured mirror/ a continuous fire/ a burning garden,” writes the Afghan poet, Asadulla Habib. “Where are the old storytellers/ to tell the story of my country?/ Where is one listener?”

It carries a kind of shock to encounter poets whose countries have recently been invaded by North America. But listening to these voices offers the opportunity to identify, witness, even take on the obligations of world citizen.

Dilawar Karadaghi’s poem, “A Child Who Returned from There Told Us,” describes the effects of [Anfal](#), the 1988 Iraqi campaign of genocide against the Kurds. His images of loss ignite the poem and sear the reader’s eye and ear: “Anfal... locked the songs away from our voices.../ separated ... toddlers from their babble/ trees from birdsong/ ... strangled the wheat stalk...”

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'Language for a New Century': Poetry from Asia

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Contemporary Poetry From the Middle East, Asia and Beyond

Edited by Tina Chang, Nathalie Handal and Ravi Shankar

Norton; 734 pages; \$27.95 paperback

Article By **Megan Harlan**

The numbers behind "Language for a New Century" are impressive, if a little daunting: Collected here are poems from 59 countries and territories spanning Asia and the widest definition of the Asian diaspora - from Cambodia to the United States, Japan to Tajikistan, Tibet to Morocco. More than 400 contemporary poets, writing originally in more than 40 languages and dialects - including French, Uzbek and the 2,000-year-old East Asian seal script - are represented, using forms ranging from haiku to ghazals, from avant-garde word puzzles to luscious erotic odes.

With such wildly divergent cultures and voices, the scope of this anthology could have reached Tower of Babel proportions. Yet the editors' exacting sense of artistry sculpts a cohesive, moving and marvelously textured book.

The editors are young poets themselves, and their continent-hopping biographies mirror those of the contributors: Palestinian poet Nathalie Handal was educated in London and Paris and lives in New York; native New Yorker Tina Chang grew up, in part, in Taiwan; and Connecticut resident Ravi Shankar was born and raised in India. In the introduction, they explain that the project was largely inspired by 9/11, and their desire to address, through the shared language of poetry, the shattering violence of that event and the cultural rhetoric thereafter, including "the one-sided and flattened view of the East being showcased in the media."

The anthology's American roots may explain why, according to its Country Index, in which the poets were asked to "self-identify," Americans of Asian and Middle Eastern descent are the most featured nationality - 76 in all - with native Indian and Chinese numbering 35 and 18, respectively.

But identity, tends to become a richer and more fluid subject the deeper one delves. The editors cite poet Sargon Boulus - an Iraqi of Assyrian descent, now an American citizen, who writes in Arabic - as one example of a background defying neat labels or categorization. So while nationality and ethnicity are often at play in the poems here, they lead, through heightened language, to both finer and broader realms. Or as Shankar elegantly puts it: "At the intersection of politics and culture, there is simply human consciousness."

Rather than organizing the poems by geography, say, or the poets' ethnicities, the editors made the crucial, insightful decision to structure the material by theme. The nine resulting sections are described by Carolyn Forché in her foreword as exploring, in this order, the subjects of "childhood, selfhood, experimentation, oppression, mystery, war, homeland and exile, spiritual life, love and sexuality."

The haunting titles of these sections are taken from the poems themselves: the amazing section "Slips and Atmospherics" is composed of experimental poetry; "Earth of Drowned Gods,"

presents poems on persecution and censorship. (and where Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef implores, "America:/ Let's exchange gifts."). Each section begins with a short personal essay by one of the three editors, which frames the work that follows at the scale of human portrait rather than panorama. Chang introduces "In the Grasp of Childhood Fields," recalling the "bananas and mangoes, lush gardens, clear honey" of her childhood in Taiwan after her father died. Such delicate memories are searingly contrasted by poems such as Dilawar Karadaghi's "A Child Who Returned From There Told Us," in which the Kurdish city of Anfal is personified: "Anfal stopped us on the way to dating/ searched our pockets, tore the letters, set fire to the pictures. ... Anfal said: don't worry children,/ it's just a trip and you will be back."

The editors explain that quality ultimately guided their decisions on which poems to include - and the extraordinary quality of these hundreds of poems bear this out, limned by fresh and surprising imagery. Ideas of home, for example, span haunting evocations of exile (in Sudeep Sen's "A Blank Letter," "An envelope arrives unannounced from overseas/ containing stark white sheets,/ perfect in their presentation of absence.") to Asadullah Habib's war-torn homeland, Afghanistan: "The story of my country/ is a fractured mirror,/ a continuous fire,/ a burning garden." But love and beauty also abound in these landscapes, as when Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati writes in "Aisha's Profile," "The winds of the north awakened her desires/ She changed into an apple/ wine." Editor Handal writes, "It is through words ... that I keep my own specificity alive. My existence gleams. It is part of, yet lives outside of, history. That is the beauty of words; they refuse boundaries. They belong everywhere." This anthology stays true to the numinous power of poetry and the cultures that take it up as their own. The result is a vast, beautifully fashioned mosaic of indelible, variegated pieces. {sbox}

Berkeley writer Megan Harlan's poems are forthcoming in TriQuarterly. E-mail her at books@sfchronicle.com.

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