

REVIEW:
MAW SHEIN WIN, *STORAGE UNIT FOR THE SPIRIT HOUSE*
(OMNIDAWN PUBLISHING, 2020)

I want to begin with a probably unanswerable question: What does it mean to be a poet?

One way of dealing with that question is to suggest that it means to enter a wordworld, a world created out of nothing but the reader's interpretation of vowels and consonants--a world created out of "letters." This world is not a spirit world: it is not transcendent but dependent upon human consciousness; it is also historical in the sense that most of the words we use go back centuries and carry with them at least the echo of previous usages, though changes and new coinages of course occur. The wordworld is both ourselves and not ourselves. We define ourselves through it, yet the words, with all their history, go beyond the specifics of who we are and our particular usage of them. They are not a parallel universe but they are like a parallel universe: both ourselves and not ourselves, inner and outer simultaneously.

It is also important to note that, though we die, the words--if we are lucky--do not.

Maw Shein Win's new book, *Storage Unit for the Spirit House*, begins with a quotation:

“Nats are spirits believed to have the power to influence the everyday life of people in their orbit. The vitality of this belief is embedded in the rituals, including people’s worship in daily life, the role of mediums, and the holding of nat festivals. The list of 37 official nats (that were integrated with Buddhism by King Anawrahta in the 12th century) includes only some of them. Because nats hold sovereign power in particular geographical locations, small shrines called spirit houses are often placed in a village or even inside or near a worshipper’s house where offerings can be made to the local nat. As the doorkeepers, guardians and protectors of a home or locale, nats are powerful entities. Failure to honor them properly—through offerings and appropriate behavior—can bring illness, injury or disaster on family or community members.”

--Qiao Dai
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The wordworld shifts into local mythology with extraordinary ease. *Wikipedia* adds a little more about nats: "spirits worshipped in Myanmar and neighboring countries in conjunction with Buddhism. They are divided between the 37 Great Nats and all the rest (i.e., spirits of trees, water, etc.). Almost all of the 37 Great Nats were human beings who met violent deaths...Academic opinions vary as to whether Burmese Buddhism and Burmese spirit worship are two separate entities, or merged into a single religion. Some Burmese might say spirit worship is superstition and downplay its role in

society...Worship of nats predates Buddhism in Burma. With the arrival of Buddhism, however, the nats were merged, syncretistically, with Buddhism." Interestingly, nats have a role to play in ecological awareness: "The widespread traditional belief among rural folks that there are forest guardian spirits... and mountain guardian spirits appears to act as a deterrent against environmental destruction up to a point. Indiscriminate felling particularly of large trees is generally eschewed owing to the belief that they are dwellings of tree spirits...and that such an act would bring the wrath of the nat upon the perpetrator."

Does the author "actually believe" in these spirits? This is a more complex question than it first appears to be. Qiao Dai tells us that "spirit houses are often placed in a village or even inside or near a worshipper's house where offerings can be made." Win's spirit house is not located in or even near her own dwelling: it is located in a "storage unit," a place where we put things we don't have room for in our houses but which we don't want to give or throw away or recycle--things not absent from but also not quite in our lives. Win even gives us the number and location of the storage unit: 202, El Cerrito. But nothing in this book is simple: *Win herself may be the "storage unit" for the spirit house.* Wikipedia tells us that "one may inherit a certain member or in some instances two of the 37 Nats as *mi hsaing hpa hsaing* ('mother's side, father's side') from one or both parents' side to worship depending on where their families originally come from," and the book is dedicated to the author's mother. What is the status of tradition, ethnicity here? In one poem the contents of #202 are listed as "secondhand gloves"; "a king drinking pear juice trapped in a glass jar"; "wet hair & wet fur"; "velvet spurs"; "directions to the otherworld."

If Win's book is successful--and it is--it will perhaps leave us believing (or half believing) in what Southerners call "haints." "These spare poems," remarks Ingrid Rojas Contreras in one of the blurbs, "are haunted."

This is "Spirit House (one)," the opening poem of the book:

the nats have stolen my hair

mosquito net winds itself around limbs

watch clumps of black hair blow across the room onto balcony

the house on Inya Lake presses down on my neck & back

smell of jackfruit & sweet orange consoles me

eat semolina cake under crackling palms

hear the cousins gossip: *she is so idle, not as enterprising as her four sisters*

sometimes I cannot bear to watch these sunsets

As they age, some women begin to lose their hair, so that may be an issue here, but it is framed as something the "nats" are doing: "watch clumps of black hair blow across the room onto balcony." "The house on Inya Lake" is perhaps a family house; it "presses down on my neck & back," though the speaker seems to be consoled by food. Are the "cousins" gossiping about *her*? It seems likely but we can't quite be certain. Finally we are almost in the realm of "The Saint Louis Blues," W.C. Handy's famous 1914 song beginning, "I hate to see the evening sun go down." Here, "sometimes I cannot bear to watch these sunsets."

The poem remains a kind of riddle throughout--nothing is quite certain--yet it nevertheless moves us through the realms of "the sovereign power of the nats," in which the speaker certainly believes; to her inability to act to prevent what the nats are doing to her ("mosquito net winds itself around limbs"); to a woman's aging; to family history; the disempowering effects of gossip and negative comparison to other family members; to the "consolations" of eating sweets; and finally to the pain of living through time and the anguished coming of night upon night.

If the final effect of the poem is the communication of the pain of being trapped in an extremely difficult situation, if the emotion of the poem is a kind of self-pity, it is a self-pity that moves in various directions and sees the self from various perspectives. And, importantly, it never complains directly: it never says, "Poor me." We are given a number of statements, and together they (perhaps) define a situation, but we can never be absolutely certain of that. *We* deduce that the speaker (is the speaker the poet?) is in pain; she never quite tells us that she is, though she makes various complaints. The poem engages our minds as we pull together fragmentary utterances. It is possible that none of these statements has anything to do with any other. They may even be the statements of various people--a central Modernist technique. As we read we are pulled between a sense of some sort of unity and, at the same time, a somewhat chaotic reality. Self-pity is a sentimental ploy. Though the poem in some ways asserts it, in other ways it refuses to acknowledge it at all. It simultaneously reveals and conceals. It teases the reader into the belief that s/he understands it but it never affirms that the emerging understanding is correct. Why does the speaker, unlike Handy's heroine, say, "*sometimes* I cannot bear to watch these sunsets"? Are there times when it is all right to watch the sunset? This is a wordworld that moves us through various contexts and possibilities and which does not allow us to rest comfortably in any of them. And it is only eight lines long and merely the opening poem of the book. What, we may seriously inquire, are we in for?

Following the practice of California poet Robert Duncan, *Storage Unit for the Spirit House* has one sequence, "Spirit House," whose six sections are interspersed throughout the six sections of the book, opening each section. The title poem, "Storage Unit for the Spirit House," concludes the second section. It is a kind of family drama of the uneasy, perhaps loving/hating relationships between a father, who apparently sits on a "wobbly throne," and his three daughters. (At 5 a.m. the father "drops a cold wet towel" on the face of "daughter #2." Is this a benevolent or sadistic act?) Mother is nowhere to be seen, though "a forest *nat* haunts the master closet among / the clothes moths, felt wolverines" and later "flutters above in air smoky from Kent 100s." The contents of the storage unit in this poem are listed as "boxes of LPs, Joni, Dylan, Carly / back cover of *Jimi Hendrix Experience*: on two hits of acid / this will blow your

brains out." Also included are "dusty military jackets, punishment belt, piles of lockboxes / missing keys, jars of Nescafé, VHS tapes of Burmese pop singers."

Storage Unit for the Spirit House is a marvelous book full of what Keats called "Negative Capability": "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge." How many poems in this book offer us couplets whose first and second lines may or may not be related:

the moon appears
reversability [sic]

lucent coin
pre-operational stage

Indeed, in that particular poem, "Sky Space (one)," there is even a single, highly ambiguous phrase: "stranger anxiety." Is "stranger" a noun or an adjective? There is also a considerable sense of verbal play and interest in "sound" in the book. These are poems, after all: "I drink moonshine at dawn" (my italics); "ourselves, our cells"; "ferns of Kamakura, deer of Nara." The most extravagant instances of play occur in "The Cellars: A One-Act Play": "ziggurats of slabber / & air-built cellars / unfurl the sparge & kyle / of siccative welkins / bedew savanna." "Sky Space (two)" is a symphony of o's; it ends,

stone cold in hand

girl cold in air

gold forest

If you meet Maw Shein Win, you find yourself in the presence of a vivacious, charming, even chatty woman, freely expressing her enthusiasms, laughing easily. The poems in this book--riddling, perplexing, half silent, full of violent events and barely spoken suffering--are perhaps the product of her anti-self, a deeper aspect of consciousness that cannot easily exist in social settings. One fascinating sequence is based on the work of the great French thief, prisoner, and literary stylist, Jean Genet. Being a prisoner, being "trapped" is a constant issue of this book: "mother trapped / in a tree"; "my next door prison / neighbor"; again, "ourselves, our cells." Indeed, the prison in "Halls" is a panopticon. "Tomb" is a particularly chilling example of the trapped motif, a motif that extends to seeing the entire world as a theater from which one cannot escape. The book also explores entrapping physical issues: one poem is called "MRI"--another sort of "theater." *Storage Unit for the Spirit House* allows the poet both to reveal and conceal her past: though much is said, we are never certain at what point imagination and verbal play stand

in for memory. One might even ask how much of what happens is not the result of human interaction but the result of "nats"?

Iván Argüelles, writing of his own practice, remarked to me, "*not meanings but sounds...as the air fills the ear...with sounds and longing from afar...to enter the mind in a literal discord of vowels and consonants...job of the poet to unravel with wonder...*" Argüelles' wordworld is vastly different from Win's but his description of what happens to the poet in full throes of creation fits her work as well as his own: "job of the poet to unravel with wonder." As I was reading *Storage Unit for the Spirit House*, I found myself writing (as Win does) in *scriptio continua*:

allelegies
allghosts
cometousinour

dreams

Storage Unit for the Spirit House is also graced by the equally teasing, enigmatic ink drawings of Mark Dutcher, slightly reminiscent of the work of Philip Guston. The notion of prison/theater/tomb is present in Dutcher's work as well.