

Casandra López. *Brother Bullet*. University of Arizona Press, 2019. 95 pp. ISBN: 9780816538522.

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/brother-bullet>

It is rare that I find myself reading a new volume of poetry cover to cover in a single sitting, but Casandra López's collection, *Brother Bullet* absolutely rewards such an approach. While its individual poems all stand up as discrete lyrics, any reader picking *Brother Bullet* up for the first time will be well-served by attempting to experience the book as a whole. There is remarkable power in López's depiction of what grief and trauma do to the survivors of violence—in her case, the murder of her Brother (always capitalized in the book, but never named) in her family home. For López, surviving that night is a recursive process, one that involves constantly re-visiting and re-scripting experience. Not surprisingly, the full effect of that realization on the reader develops only gradually. While many poems in *Brother Bullet* explore the same ground (and even recount the same moments), they do so in ways that perform the necessity of slowly working with (but never entirely through) the raw material of memory. Somehow, López also manages to write about her experiences in a manner that avoids making the reader feel voyeuristic or ethically compromised in witnessing the process of grief. She also periodically broadens the scope of the work by including subtle gestures that link her personal loss to larger historical patterns (as in poems like “An Unknown” and “I Am Sorry for Your Loss”). In this respect, *Brother Bullet* may remind some readers of Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, another first book that brilliantly blends the processes of ethical witnessing and the aesthetic transformation of experience. I think this is because, on some level, López's work consistently registers the truth of N. Scott Momaday's insight that we are all “made of words.” *Brother Bullet* offers an implicit argument that, in the end, this may be the most important contributor to survivance.

To say that we are made of words, of course, is not to minimize the role we play, as users of language, in that work of self-making. Throughout *Brother Bullet*, López regularly reminds her readers of this. In the first lines of the poem “Dear Bullet Brain,” for example, the speaker remarks, “Because of you, we danger into feralness, / open our mouths wide— / speak to the dead” (34). The opening transformation of a noun to a verb here (a strategy deployed regularly throughout the book) indexes some of the key elements of López's poetics. In a book focused on recounting the most traumatic of circumstances, López continually reaches to find a language that can express how profound loss both breaks down boundaries and opens gaps inside us in ways that challenge our sense of identity and purpose. She dramatizes this, in part, through the kind of lexical inventiveness just mentioned. She also does it through the intentional use of space on the page, and in her approach to enjambment and line break. And she does it, finally, through the complex deployment of figuration and personification that runs throughout the collection. Because of their encounter with “Bullet” (the co-protagonist of the book), López and her family must learn to:

animal

our wounds, lick them

clean,                    taking needle

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to fissures,                      stitching  
 wanting to mend                      hurt into      aperture  
  
 a pinhole star of clarity. (34)

What makes this particularly challenging to do, however, is that on a rainy night in San Bernardino in 2010, *Bullet* both literally and figuratively became inextricably a part of *Brother*. To remember and to honor the one, then, requires continually wrestling with the enduring presence of the other, employing all the resources that language provides as a way of doing so.

So, what then does it mean to survive such an act of brutal violence? In the poem “What *Bullet* Teaches,” López begins by noting that “I learn to speak in metaphor / name your murder / *Bullet*” (29). Metaphorization is always a paradoxical act, of course—both a deflection of experience (rendering something in terms of something else that is it not) and an act of connection (tying disparate things together through that act of comparison). It is López’s ability to recognize and explore this complexity that gives her work much of its great profundity. In subsequent lines, Lopez confesses to having imagined her brother “dead many times before, / for the good of story.” Now, however, she acknowledges that “Without you / I want to knife / the writer out of me—” (29). On one level here, of course, López is clearly registering the pain of survivor’s guilt (and even some of her own ambivalence about her poetic work throughout the collection). But at the same time, she is exploring that way that violence, writ large (to which “*Bullet*” always relates synecdochally), always lives in our imagination. This is why, in the end, imagination also provides the most effective tool for dealing with it. As López puts it in “When I Was a Young Girl,” a late poem in the collection, “We try to right this. / We try and try / to right this / And I write this—fearing no one else will” (82).

López’s insistence on rendering a particular, Southern California urban geography and experience visible also bears mentioning here. It will be valuable for readers, in time, to place *Brother Bullet* in dialogue with the work of other emerging Indigenous writers (in poetry and fiction) who are interested in the exploring the contemporary city as an Indigenous space. López’s approach to doing so is deeply entwined with her collection’s autobiographical foci. In her hands, 10<sup>th</sup> Street in San Bernardino becomes both the vividly rendered site of her brother’s unsolved murder and also something much more than that—a metonym for family history, for the culturally generative encounters between communities (particularly of color), and for the complex history of Southern California. In the poem “The Sweet and the Bitter” (located explicitly in the “Inland Empire” as a region), López moves quickly from *Brother*’s death to a figurative meditation on family and place. She recalls a time before the shooting, “When Father is / sweet citrus, a tree-lined grove, feeding us orange / globed stories” (20). This kind of connection between family bonds and history and orange trees reappears throughout the collection as a regular motif. Here, it allows López to take the reader from 10<sup>th</sup> Street in San Bernardino, to the citrus packing plant in nearby Rialto (where her grandfather worked), to her grandmother’s childhood home in San Timoteo Canyon. Through such moments, López is able to make her family “more than a note in a local / history book where we remain unnamed” (30). She is also able to connect the way Indigenous people have persisted, despite efforts to erase them from the Southern California landscape, with her family’s endurance of personal loss. Weighing “witness” in one hand, and an orange in the other, López notes that “Sometimes / it’s

hard to distinguish the sweet from the bitter.” She then reminds herself that both are essential, and intertwined, recalling her father’s admonition that “we must not juice our navels, we must peel and eat / them whole” (21). In the final poem in the collection, López will concede that oranges are not indigenous “to the place I call home, / not like we are” (91). Yet in a poem like “The Sweet and the Bitter,” López explores the way that, for good and ill, many things not originally a part of our experience and heritage become, in time, intrinsic to it. What to do with that experience—how to grieve it, honor it, accept it, rage against it—becomes López’s ultimate theme.

*Brother Bullet* concludes with lines (in the poem “Oranges Are Not Indigenous”) that find López in the backyard of the family home, reflecting on a celebration of what would have been Brother’s birthday. She conjures the scene of a family friend taking “Nephew” for a cruise through the streets of San Bernardino in Brother’s beloved ’67 Riviera, showing off its detailing and shiny rims. She bends down to smell the ground, picking up the scent of mint growing along the side of the house, fed by a leaky water faucet. López reminds herself that this mint is always growing, “even when Brother’s children do not visit / or I have been away” (92). Then, picking up on the full range of her final figurative image, she acknowledges, “I need these reminders of / how we survive and still grow / so fiercely against the edges of this earth.” This moment, which balances a line earlier in the poem where López speaks of not wanting to box up Brother’s clothes after his death (out of a desire to keep his scent “alive” as long as possible) is remarkable in its artistry and restraint. López offers no false sense of closure, no sentimentality. And yet readers will notice that the final poems of the book are less fractured than those at the start (with less use of white space between words and fewer gaps on the page). In this respect, López further reinforces the lessons taught both by the enduring mint and by *Bullet* itself. It is possible to “[take] needle to fissures,” but to do so in a way that keeps us fully open to the past and to the scars it leaves.

*David J Carlson, California State University San Bernardino*