Book review

AND NEVERMIND THE STORM BY SOHAM PATEL
PORTABLE PRESS @ YO-YO LABS, 2013, $8.00

Soham Patel’s and nevermind the storm is a maelstrom of fractured narratives and elevated consciousness. Within this sequenced, chapbook collection of poems are moments individuated by a speaker’s probing questions of placement, amid an imbricated landscapes—the 2011 earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku, Japan, the ensuing tsunami, scripts of disembodied voices, personal histories, etc.—for which even a single utterance is an accounting of survival.

Where grayed-out text references a speaker’s memory of Louise Erdrich’s novel Love Medicine in the opening section, this act of near erasure serves as metaphor and textual fulcrum for building the ambient narrative of a lost family member and those who remain to chronicle this absence: “[M]y brother, like someone from the fiction, ran away from home again this morning. Now we’re driving on the dirt road looking for him. / ... / Mom repeats my brother’s name between slow gasps of breath with her / head, neck and the end of her ribcage hanging out the rolled down passenger side / window.”

People, animals, elements, emotions—all become transmuted by their shifting relationship with one another. Everything, in turn, is connected, even if by absence itself or, in this example, a forced relationship with absence:

        Pages warp
        from water spill—

        dry and we read
        what is left but

        insert new arcs
        in place
        of erasure.

With the devastating aftermath of the tsunami serving as a backdrop, these highly crafted poems present the reader with landscapes rife with virgules, not necessarily ones functioning as “either/or” constructs. It is a thoughtful strategy, drawing the reader’s attention to the literal and figurative shifts that will serve as a chorus throughout the collection:

    grid marking affluence/color/and the sirens
    turned to bone after puddles found drains
    h2o/oil/skin/grit/faint smell of rubber burn
    set in stone/the warbling birds out of context
    pages of my braided essay street scattered
land on a map/a map landed on us/terrain
marked in lead then rubbed/chaossification

While technology has afforded us a means for defining, however temporarily, our reconfigured lives (“Any origins of / place recognizable for the people remain as redrawn borders on digital maps.”), existence and identity are dismantled and redefined through the poet’s considerations. A strained world flashes with the contradictions that compose it. Things are revealed, given a new life, and the voice, even among devastation, is a hopeful one.

Patel’s poems, clear-eyed and able, seek to expose what is hidden underneath the surface of things, as in the brilliant couplet housing within it the collection’s title, “the Garden of Eden—its oil, if freed could warm / the world for 20 years and nevermind the storm.” Out of revelation, what emerges is not simply a critique of the way in which industry has threatened the natural world, it is a document for every boundary that has been compromised.