Book review

**THE TULIP-FLAME BY CHLOE HONUM**
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With an inscription from Sylvia Plath opening *The Tulip Flame*, readers are immediately introduced to the pervading presence of suicide found in Chloe Honum’s introductory collection. Like Plath, Honum (whose poems appear in *TAB 2:2*) uses natural imagery alongside tragedy, challenging readers’ notions of nature’s supposed consolatory influence. The book’s sections cycle through portraits of dance and loss, themes that intermingle across the poems. They follow a loose chronological form while readers silently witness the speaker confront the pain of living with, and loving, a suicidal mother.

The first section, “Seated Dancer in Profile,” depicts the speaker’s budding understanding of her mother’s desire to die. Still a child, the speaker copes with this knowledge by immersing herself in dance: “drag[ging] aside the living room chairs, like heavy dreams” to practice ballet (“Ballerina in Winter”). Her youthful hope deceives her into believing she can spur, in her mother, the desire to live, simply by asking:

[…]
Because I asked
her to, she said she wanted to live—promised she was happy
she hadn’t died. Birds flew by like white scarves in wind. I was
fourteen, a trembling ballerina, a stone. My love was a knife
against her throat (“Visiting Hours”).

Here, Honum successfully braids the natural element into the scene with birds that are re-imagined as scarves, creating an effect of seeming serenity. There exists a tenuous connection between life and death, however, as the mother concedes only because of her daughter’s emotional entreaty. A sense of insecurity is felt in these lines, as the otherwise strong ballerina is in despair at her inability to create in her mother the desire to live. Honum’s language is a powerful yet delicate force that mimics, perhaps, the strength of nature and dance. With jarring grace, her language does not allow readers to ignore the ever-present proximity of death that lingers throughout her poems.

The speaker acquires a deeper understanding of her mother’s pain in the section “Alone With Mother,” but there remains a distance between mother and daughter. This distance is best revealed in “Thirteen,” where she admits, “Silence grew inside me. By winter / my voice felt like a bowl / of very still water.” Silence, however, happens to be her mother’s native tongue. In the poem “Alone With Mother,” there is a sense that something is missing in the fourth stanza, which is one short line, that contributes to this feeling: “[…] silence / a kind of love between us.” The silence left by the irregular stanza reflects the silence in the relationship. The mother’s suicide also occurs in this section and is most directly addressed in the title poem, “The Tulip-Flame,” where Honum writes, “Last year our mother died, as was her plan.” Here, a painting done by the speaker’s sister portrays a tulip-flame which “startles the scene” and is representative of the mother, a beautiful and vibrant, but tragic, figure. Judging by its length alone, this section is the most pivotal one in the book. In it, the reader is not only privy to the intimate moments between mother and daughter but also to the conclusion of those intimacies.
Moving from the loss of the mother, the next section, “Fever,” quickly turns to the loss of romantic love for the speaker. The young girl is now a young woman facing sorrow of her very own. In “Fever,” we are confronted with an image of restless desperation: “Alone ... / I sweat in our old bed. In the bay, the storm’s orchestra tunes.” Honum weaves the sounds of nature into the background of her misfortune. However, her ability to integrate love, nature, and suicide into her poetry is best demonstrated in “The Good Kind”:

Our hands were so young.

The hurt we'd cause
was always there, waiting,

like death—the good kind.
And didn't we hear it

while making love
in the steamy grass:

birdsong, as it sounded
in the minds of the trees. (33)

Here, the speaker refers to her mother’s suicide by suggesting there is a “good kind” of death even while talking of love and birdsong. Even when topics change from maternal suicide to romantic tragedies, the shadow of death is around every turn.

The final section, “Dusk,” is a culmination of the various misfortunes the speaker has experienced. The speaker reaches for closure to her mother’s passing, her lover’s abandonment, and her friend’s death. In contrast to her original request that her mother “Go” in the poem “Thirteen,” “Come Back” signals a maturation in understanding her mother’s pain, the speaker now having gone through her own. As the final poem in the book, “Come Back” is the prayer made to counter her former imperative plea. It follows the same structure as “The Tulip Flame,” signaling that it, too, is in remembrance of the mother. The poem culminates on the cusp of forgiveness, yet it is a forgiveness the speaker cannot fully grasp, as she admits, “I can’t see all of any horse at once.” The daughter’s inability to clearly make out horses amidst a storm points to a haziness that is reflective of her inability to fully understand her mother’s decision. She is never quite able to reach her mother, even if it is only “field and dust” that separates them. Because of the distance her mother created through self-imposed isolation into her bedroom and into nature, the seemingly short distance between the two is magnified, making it an impossible crossing. In spite of this, the daughter continues her quest for reconciliation with her mother. It is forever beyond reach, however, as she awaits her mother’s impossible return.
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Cindy King is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Texas Dallas. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in Callaloo, North American Review, River Styx, American Literary Review, jubilat, Barrow Street, and elsewhere. She will attend the Sewanee Writers’ Conference on a Tennessee Williams Scholarship this summer.

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