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minds through shifts of language and awareness, which function like verbal “seeds” traveling on poetic winds. As “Ars Poetica: Platanus Racemosa” so beautifully remarks, “Love breaks open the bark to feed itself / on what’s exposed” (69). Such lines suggest profound poetic method; exposure (including of the self) forges a poetry tender and brave in its exhortation of hope: “May language be an act of love” (69). Melendez fuses ancient wisdom with ecopoetic insight into an innovative poetry that is, like the “maíz” she contemplates, truly and importantly *desmadre*.

Quiet As They Come.

By Angie Chau.

New York: IG Publishing, 2010. 200 pages, \$15.95.

Reviewed by Christopher Schaberg

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Angie Chau’s debut collection of stories follows the dispersion of a Vietnamese family who fled the American war to settle—if that’s the word for it—in San Francisco, California. The book brings to mind a constellation of earlier works: some western American, some literary in a wider geographical sense, and some philosophical.

Quiet As They Come is vaguely reminiscent of Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925): each book involves a collection of reoccurring characters, many of whom are traumatized by a war whose temporal and spatial proximity is often ambiguous. And like James Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), Chau’s book is a meditation on people adjusting to an unfamiliar continent, balancing newfound freedoms with bouts of disorientation, and constantly reflecting on ocean expanses and water movements that facilitate and bar transit back home. Chau’s writing also resonates with echoes of Sandra Cisneros’s classic work *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and shows stylistic resemblances to Maxine Hong Kingston’s multigenerational narrative *China Men* (1980). But Chau’s work is perhaps closest in form and content to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). In fact, *Quiet As They Come* can be appreciated in terms of its critical addition to O’Brien’s Vietnam War stories: Chau contributes another set of vital stories that emerged from that conflict. Through the shifting perspectives of multiple family members, Chau narrates the obverse side of the war: the distant ripple effects and far-reaching consequences of a war that punctuated the age of modern globalization. Chau’s take on this Pacific Rim curve suggests the geographic möbius strip at work: this western American literary work demonstrates how “East” and “West” are anything but distinct sides of the world—and yet, their myths still circulate with force.

In chapter-stories that she strategically weaves together, Chau develops threads subtle and profound, deeply personal as well as complexly cultural. Chau does especially well with a certain unexpected focus on minute images, such as a mother's "perfume samples that will never know the inside of a wrist, old keys that open forgotten doors"—and a high school gym class in which "everyone wore blue short shorts with a serial number on the right leg" (166, 137). Chau does not deploy these images gratuitously; every detail is placed tactfully (but quietly, as it were) in the broader composition of the narrative.

Quiet As They Come cumulatively shows how a range of characters brush up against American pop culture to varying degrees of influence, numbness, and mania. For instance, Chau surrounds her characters with the ever-present, synaesthetic buzz of television, a media form that the characters experience as enchanting and oppressive, as a sign of status and as a phenomenological sinkhole. One character, Huong, sits on a couch "with her remote control, vigilantly watching the twenty-four-hour news channel, waiting for the next cruel blow to hit" (74). This scene is especially stinging when one considers the Vietnamese American shrimp fishermen on the Louisiana Gulf Coast in the aftermath of the April 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion—an event at once heavily exploited by the media and intensely immediate, a "next cruel blow" indeed.

Another character, Viet, was a philosophy professor in Vietnam but is relegated to a monotonous job at the post office in San Francisco, where he stands over a bin, "sorting mail by zip code" (71). His life follows a downward spiral in which TV functions as a visually dominating vortex. This is Viet's daughter, Elle:

I came home and asked my parents, "Why don't we talk more?"
 My father said, "We talk plenty." He switched back to the TV.
 One day I said, "We watch too much TV."
 My father said, "But we watch TV to improve our English.
 You said you wanted us to talk more." (104)

Here is the viciously circular logic of an advanced consumer society, in which TV constrains possible forms of life by presenting illusions of total knowledge and constant access.

Still another character, Duc, who was held captive and tortured in Vietnam, is finally reunited with his family in San Francisco only to find himself a prisoner to posttraumatic stress syndrome, a condition refracted by the TV screen and reflected in his somatic engagement with the media form:

In the living room, Duc changed the channels incessantly. Images flickered by of human bodies loving or abusing each other. He stared ahead with the television set on mute. All the while his thumb beat on the buttons, click, click, clicking. (114)

This scene recalls a similar moment in Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible" (1984), when the narrator, Lyman, buys a color TV set and finds it to be the only thing that can tranquilize his Vietnam War veteran brother, Henry—but the TV also triggers Henry to bite with a "click" right through his lip, sending blood gushing down his chin. Like Erdrich, Chau lingers on the "clicking" tensions between the television and war-scarred soldier: the TV soothes the traumatized soldier, but being transfixed does not equate to being healed. Indeed, Duc does not easily assimilate back into his family, and this thread of the story becomes one of the cleverly elided chapters of Chau's book.

Chau's TV scenes illuminate what the French theorist Guy Debord called the "Society of the Spectacle"—another Western theme, in the broader philosophical sense. In such a society, Debord suggests, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (*Society of the Spectacle* [1995], 12). In *Quiet As They Come*, the characters are not simply or blandly Westernized, but rather their interactions and self-expressions are actually produced (and reproduced) by the matrix of sounds and images that swirl out of the television sets blaring around them.

One can thus read *Quiet As They Come* as a densely packed Western, in multiple senses of the term: the stories comment on a distinct western American urban geography; they consider the cultural politics of immigration and western expansion; and they reflect rich philosophical debates concerning representation and social relations.

The Last Reader.

By David Toscana. Translated by Asa Zatz.

Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009. 188 pages, \$26.95.

Reviewed by Beth Pollack

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The setting is the arid region in northern Mexico, the town Icamole, where it has not rained in more than a year. All but one well has run completely dry, and the inhabitants rely on Melquisedec, their neighbor, to bring them water in his mule-drawn wagon. However, Remigio can still manage to extract small amounts from his well with which to wash