

Joy and Pain, Sunshine and Rain: Exploring the Nuances of Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain*

Lineage of Rain. Janel Pineda. Haymarket Books, 2020. 40 pp. \$10.00 (paper).

The beginning of 2021 was mostly heavy—the COVID-19 vaccine wasn't quite yet a reality for most, and the winter was particularly thick and unrelenting, stretching and stretching into the gray distance. Yet from that season, one of a few effulgent memories remains for me: the virtual launch of Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain* in February. That night, Pineda moved me in a way that I no longer thought possible for digital literary events. I found myself weeping from the poems, each a clear display of dignity, love, and affirmation in the face of difficulty, my tears a visceral reaction to the honesty of the artist. In the midst of incredible separation and solitude, Pineda read her work from her Southern California dining room, with family members who appear in her collection finding their way to her computer camera, demonstrating the delicious inextricability of art and life. I imagined how centering it would feel to read my work in Oakland around my family, English interspersed with our Sierra Leonean Krio dialect in between poems. Pineda cracked the Zoom screen and beckoned us to walk through its shards.

Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain* is a chapbook that achieves a narrative virtuosity even many full-length collections rarely do. In the span of forty pages, Pineda interrogates identity through the lenses of multi-generational personal and diasporic histories, bringing into relief themes of migration, familial kinship, race, class, and gender. One of the book's features is its focus on the symbolism of rain and its dual capacity to pummel and flood or nurture and replenish. What appears in greater abundance is the poet's scrutinization of emotional complexity—especially joy, hope, and delight in the context of challenges and sacrifices.

Pineda's collection is divided into two sections, opening with a proem, "In Another Life," in which the narrator speculates about how an alter-

native fate, perhaps one without war, might inform the legacy of the Salvadoran diaspora:

In this life, our people are not things of silences
but whole worlds bursting
into breath. Everywhere, there are children. Playing
freely, clothed and clean.

Stanzas, later, she imagines implications of a different destiny for her family:

My grandmother is
still a storyteller although I am
not a poet. In this life, I do not have to be.

These lines beg a rather philosophical question of artists—is the compulsion to create innate or borne out of particular circumstance? In Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, he posits that individuals who have experienced exile often become part of the intellectual, political, and creative classes: "Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugees from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive thesis that a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature is 'extraterritorial,' a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee." While the narrator refers to neither herself nor her family as exiled, her ability to lucidly and attentively articulate the ruptures caused by migration make the experiences almost seem as if they were her own.

Part I of Pineda's collection contextualizes the narrator's identity through a sequence of poems that highlight her upbringing, culture, and family. The poem "Rain" demonstrates the poet's preoccupation with this weather phenomenon. Even as the narrator speaks about it as part of the tumult of the natural world, the poem also reveals how the word *rain* itself can feel euphemistic:

the first time I ask Tana
why she left El Salvador,
me dice: *porque allá mucho llueve.*

for weeks, Tana watched sky fall
to earth from bus windows, she held on tightly
to herself and the thought of mi mami,
borders away and alone somewhere en la capital.

In this instance, rain connotes death and references the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992), which claimed the lives of approximately seventy thousand civilians and displaced countless others. Pineda’s work joins the legacy of artistic pieces that engage with water and forced migration, including Jerika Marchan’s *SWOLE* (2018), John Akomfrah’s *The Nine Muses* (2011), Patricia Smith’s *Blood Dazzler* (2008), M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), Ishle Yi Park’s *The Temperature of This Water* (2004), and Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Girl* (1966). While seemingly disparate, each of these works shows how water shields, water engulfs, water washes, water disappears, and water pushes marginalized bodies to new locations.

Water also relates to language and fluency for Pineda. “How English Came to Grandma” details the narrator’s grandmother’s relationship with English and her understanding of its powerful, albeit violent, history:

For grandma, everything americano
was soaked in English and she
wanted to bathe in that language’s
ocean, no matter how bloody
she pretended it didn’t look.

Written in English and Spanish, this poem examines language’s role in migration, including its effects on one’s sense of belonging and its manifestations in later generations. In this way, the poem reads as an origin story from which the narrator emerges. Another poem, “All This to Tell You: Grandma Still Does Not Speak English,” shows the grandmother’s English language acquisition, as influenced by life experiences and occupation:

her thick *jes mahm’s*
and *rright agüey, mahm*
from her jobs cleaning houses
in *wudlahn Heel* *paz á Dína*
sometimes even *beh-ver-lé Heel*

While the title might suggest that the poem is about failure, I cannot help but read it as about self-possession and the expansion of language. Here, Pineda undertakes the arduous and delicate task of transcribing and rendering the interstices of English and Spanish. Through innovating orthography, Pineda honors the music and curvatures of new language, showing the ways in which English must bend to the arc of the immigrant mouth.

Part II of this collection departs from interrogating family histories, instead mining interpersonal relationships, class structure, and the futurity of the Salvadoran diaspora. “Before the Interview,” “When The Call Finally Comes,” and “All This to Show You” form a triptych of poems that chronicles the narrator’s interview process for a prestigious international scholarship and the attendant anxieties, including imposter syndrome and other educational barriers commonly faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. However, the poems also show the evolution of the speaker’s self-regard, ending on a note of triumph in “All This to Show You”:

How I take English
by its bloodied shoulders
dissolving its body
into its own soris
until it offers its wallet
to pay for my flat
by the river
where I spend
months learning love
finding ways
to forgive
this tongue
its treachery
this language
once monstrous
made wholly
my own.

This poem brings a circularity to the text—a language steeped in a

colonial legacy is ultimately vanquished by the poet. This is not assimilation but liberation, arguably the greatest of joys.

One of the narrator's other defenses is love—namely that which comes in plenitude from her family. Of particular note is the poem “To the Eldest Daughter,” an ode to her older sister, who made innumerable investments in the speaker:

years of my jet-setting
big dreaming
sleeping soundly
knowing she was
home doing everything
that needed doing
and still she drove
six days
cross-country
alone
to watch me
descend
Old West's steps
graduation cap
and all,
the string of roses
she spent all night sewing
draped over
my neck—

This is a praise song to the eldest sister, whose enduring love helps relieve her younger sister of some of the weight of racialized, gendered, and class-based struggles, and inspires her to continue to construct a boundless freedom.

In the last poem “& It Is Green,” the narrator orients us toward a tomorrow that has been nurtured by rain, whose vibrancy is evidenced by its title. In this poem, the narrator and her mother revel in a sensation that feels like the dissolution of oppression:

mami and I still alive
viejitas together, rocking gently
on the porch of a wood-framed house
in a future worthy of our joy.

Time is suspended, and the safety of laughter, touch, and the certainty of survival carry us to the close of the book.

From a mother and father who work indefatigably in the service of their children, to a little brother's prayers to *Diosito* for the prosperity of his sister, to the elder sister who gently braids her little sister's hair—how can the narrator sink when the sweet pressure of care only forces her to rise? Pineda's collection is faithful to the wise and perspicacious eye of the child of immigrants, as it accurately renders a nuanced joyfulness that denies neither the existence of heartache nor the wages of the "American Dream." Pineda's words are urgent, elegant, and true, never losing sight of the waters from which they spring.