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The Craft of Silence

Hot with the Bad Things. Lucia LoTempio. Alice James Books, 2020. 80 pp. \$16.95 (paper).

“You must see how this could be you,” Naomi Shihab Nye writes in “Kindness,” a poem that champions empathy, particularly for those who have died a public death. It’s one of the poems I cherish most, and the quote’s sentiment reverberates through the pages of Lucia LoTempio’s searing debut collection of poems, *Hot with the Bad Things*. The book juxtaposes a murder-suicide case in Geneseo, New York, LoTempio’s college town, with a more personal account of intimate-partner abuse, deftly shifting perspectives to highlight the larger cultural issue of victim-blaming and silencing. From the start, LoTempio moves beyond personal testimony to confront the layered narrative, the book as something *made*: “Hiding behind the poem is always another poem,” she writes. Later, she acknowledges the complexities of recognizing one’s own story in another’s catastrophic end:

As if I can play this mirror game. As if she could light through me. As if I am at the quiet swirling center. . . .

When I write about the girl, I don’t know a way that isn’t obliteration.

Hot with the Bad Things undertakes risk: if the subject matter is someone else’s story, the writer must interrogate their urge to see themselves in that victim and must avoid appropriating the victim’s experiences. On the other side of the coin, rising out of personal trauma to create art can reopen that trauma—and aggravate the perpetrator, as the work itself boldly severs the intimate pact of secrecy that often accompanies abuse. Fear, that silent ellipsis, fills the blank spaces of *Hot with the Bad Things*. Ultimately, though, LoTempio demonstrates ways to accomplish both of those risky projects, using tools such as typographical erasure, the negative space of caesuras, inclusion of antagonistic voices, and careful choice of pronouns.

LoTempio deftly navigates the difficult territory of writing about victims by capturing the unspeakable through typography. A black circle symbol, or a “blot”—as LoTempio calls it in an online interview with *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*—demarcates the speaker’s abuser, as in this selection from later in the book:

Even now, as I write, I have no direction for the curved line that touches him.

When other poets read this they suggest I take it out. It humanizes ●.
But humans do terrible things, and they do them all the time.

The circle symbol in place of the abuser’s name embodies the silencing nature of intimate-partner violence. Erasure, symbols, or redaction serve to protect the writer and those who also live under the threat of a perpetrator; ironically, these erasures serve to protect the abuser as well. The symbol also concretizes the cyclical nature of abuse, which is “not a line but a loop,” as LoTempio puts it. “Here a circle begins at a weapon,” she writes, “and can be penetrated.” I wonder, noting the opacity of this particular circle: can the silencing abuser be penetrated, understood, through a poem? Through LoTempio’s symbology and lines of questioning, I come to understand that poetry can’t pin down or reveal the intentions and actions of an abuser, but that his power diminishes when the victim’s silence is dismantled. In this way, once her truth lives on the page, the abuser’s most powerful weapon, silencing, can no longer exist.

In addition to the “blot,” several poems manifest silence through caesura, as in “When a girl is killed”:

When iced
with blame When a girl learns When to keep
herself safe When it’s a matter of yelling *Fire*
not *Help me* not *Rape* not *Run*

Caesura in this poem embodies the lessons a “girl” must learn about how the crime committed against her will be muffled: even at the memorial, as LoTempio attests, “they don’t / mention her.” In the wake of a murder, community members must fill in the gaps of a victim’s life—what she learned, what she knew, and the ways she had to protect

herself while keeping quiet. The gaps in LoTempio's poem also demonstrate the holes in the victim's story, the limitations enforced on her through a larger, societal shushing. In other poems, the caesura embodies the pause a woman-identifying person must take before expressing her fear, as this act can expose and infuriate an abuser.

In “[Status Update Upstate],” a series of poems spread through the book, LoTempio moves the point of view from the more personal speaker's “I” to a frightening collective voice, mining social-media posts and comments on the murder-suicide case in Geneseo. Writing in this manner of persona captures a patriarchal silencing of victims, but it also risks further erasure. LoTempio lets the harmful language stand on its own, though, encouraging readers to reflect on the lasting effects of such impulsive, misinformed speech:

Obviously you've never seen Fatal
Attraction. You ladies should protest by not
shaving your armpits. Go screw yourself. I
will protect everyone I can. Idiot feminist.
#awful news. 😞 A place I call home. My
sisterhood is a few houses down. Sheesh. So
sad to see this happen, especially Geneseo.
Actually, there's already a lot of deaths.
Actually, he was a really nice kid. Actually,
I'm surprised they even did a story about this.

Perspective plays a crucial role in *Hot with the Bad Things*; the “Status Update” poems serve as an antifeminist chorus with which the speaker must grapple as she interrogates her own ethical and creative dilemma. “I want her alive,” LoTempio later writes; “point to her, be able to see *this*. I want to find a younger me, tell her *this*. I want to write a poem that says *this*.” That word, “this,” captures the murky erasure of truth and precision in language that occurs with unspeakable violence. When discourse about the victims doesn't mention their lives, just their deaths, we lose a sense of their particularity. When the news media reports only on the murders of young beautiful white women, thousands of women of color who are murdered and/or missing are even further erased. In reckoning with her own failure to properly elegize

the dead, LoTempio holds space for a larger conversation: How do we create an antisogynist system when our culture is obsessed with the lives and minds of killers? How do those who have faced abuse and violence write about their personal experiences without simultaneously endangering their own safety and mental health? By acknowledging the complexity of the issue through these poems, LoTempio bravely opens that dialogue. Her poems extend beyond the felt boundaries of the self, risking a movement past silence. *You must see how this could be you.*

In fact, LoTempio fluctuates between the pronouns “you” and “I” throughout the collection, reflecting on what a present-day self could teach a former self. Poetry opens this possibility for past and future selves to encounter each other in an imaginative space. Late in the book, she addresses the retraumatization of confronting the past:

There are so many things ● did to me and I don't want to just say.

My small small self. . . I see your dead body everywhere. . . It's still coming. It's still happening. Even when I step over you and look at the sky.

Here, not only does the “I” separate itself from the “you,” creating a knowing distance between past and future self, but through the image of the victim’s body, the past self also becomes like the murdered woman in Geneseo, bridging the narrative between the speaker’s personal account and the more publicized murder, which serves to amplify the high stakes the future self recognizes in her past experience with abuse. In a later section in the book, LoTempio addresses epistles to her younger self. Again, she breaks the book’s fourth wall, addressing the book itself as a made thing that asserts its voice, dismantling the silence under which she has lived in the time since, that limbo between the experience of abuse and the silence-breaking the book embodies. At the end of that section she writes, “I’m writing these missals because I want you to look around & recognize the fiery & gorgeous that survived. One day you’ll write a beautiful book; the love you feel for him will be a palimpsest of joy—: the flurry of last notes he keys, then the jump, from the piano bench, onto you.” Through this imaginative leap, LoTempio reclaims the narrative, empowering the speaker’s past self

as well as any reader who can sympathize. It is through the speaker's connection with the past self that the Geneseo victim, too, can join a living conversation from which she has been violently severed.

The imagination is limited in its ability to understand, directly, the suffering of others, but in recognizing this failure, LoTempio validates readers who empathize with the victim of the Geneseo murder, the speaker of the book, and the speaker's former self. It is possible, through poetry, to step through the recesses of time and console the younger self, one less equipped with knowledge and self-empowerment. Rather than victim-blaming, this is a recognition, a forgiveness, a revision. I want to say that writing about personal and societal violence can set us free, but it can't, it doesn't, because "it's still happening" in a society that won't do the work of change. The shushing is relentless. Nevertheless, each poem that sounds its voice into the world in this way (even if, at times, enacting silence) is doing the good work of starting the conversation again.