THE KINDNESS IN ANGER

a review by Onyx Bradley

Eric Tran. *Mouth, Sugar, and Smoke.* Diode Editions, 2022.

ONYX BRADLEY was born in Charlotte, NC, and grew up in Pikeville, NC. They were awarded honorable mention in the inaugural Jaki Shelton Green Performance Poetry Prize contest in 2023, then joined the *NCLR* staff as an Editorial Assistant after enrolling in the ECU MA program in English.

ERIC TRAN is the author of *The Gutter Spread Guide to Prayer* (Autumn House Press, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021), as well as the chapbooks *Revisions* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2018) and *Affairs with Men in Suits* (Backbone Press, 2014). He completed his residency at the Mountain Area Health Education Center in Asheville, NC, graduated from the UNC School of Medicine, and holds an MFA from UNC Wilmington. He is an Associate Editor for Orison Books and a psychiatrist in Portland, OR.

OPPOSITE Eric Tran reading at UNC Asheville in Asheville, NC, 2 Nov. 2023

Whether it be in ancient Greece or modern-day life, the queer experience is often intimately linked with death and mourning. Eric Tran often writes about grief, and much of his poetry is about the specific type of grief that hangs over LGBTQ+ individuals' lives, so many of which end far too early. In his collection *Mouth, Sugar, and Smoke*, Tran handles these topics masterfully, without letting the poems get too dark. It's no wonder that this collection won the Diode Editions 2021 Full-Length Book Prize. It is a riveting collection that centers on the poet's experiences as a queer Vietnamese American poet while also focusing on his career as a psychiatrist and the deaths he's experienced both on the job and during his studies at the UNC School of Medicine.

The book is broken into four sections, and while the entire collection focuses on the underlying topic of death, each section features a smaller "story" within it related to drugs and drug use. The first is about witnessing drug use, seeing how it affects those that one cares about. The second explores living with addiction and learning to deal with the habits that are a byproduct of dependency. The third and fourth sections deal with recovery and healing, even as the temptations are still present.

In the opening poem, "Aubade with Withdrawal," the speaker wakes up in a detox center's lobby after releasing a partner into their custody, immediately setting the stage for the collection. The attendants are polite, and while not angry, the speaker answers their ambivalence with a question: how could they possibly understand the loss he is experiencing?

> The attendants see me
> startle awake and play polite,
>
> like they're too familiar
> with this loss. *What do you know*
>
> *about me*, I want to ask. Not
> from anger, truly, but because time
>
> is always a question.

The next few poems focus on the speaker's time in medical school and residency. They grapple with the fact that one can never really be just an observer. After all, to witness an event is to interact with it, however insignificant that interaction may seem at the time. In the case of "Poem Starting with Underwear and Ending with Ghost," the speaker uses his personal time to buy underwear for one of his patients, a deed he knows will ultimately go unappreciated: "my dead don't remember me, I know. This near dead man won't / either. No one knows what ghost they leave behind." Even so, the speaker leaves the gifted clothing with the patient's nurse.

One of my favorite poems of the collection is in this first section, the first of two titled "My Father Worries War is Coming." It's a poem many queer people can relate to. It speaks of the divided self, the gap between a person's childhood self and the person they become when allowed to be open about their identity. The speaker mentions photos of his family, his father in his younger years, and how "the men I've loved / have never seen those pictures" despite wanting to get to know him better. Similarly, "Besides himself, my father / has never seen a photo of me / with a man I love." Both parts of his life – the boy his father holds on to and the man he's grown into – want to merge, but the speaker is scared of what could happen, so he keeps them separated, an unfortunately common experience for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KENT THOMPSON

The second section (perhaps the most interesting) tells a story on two different levels, through the poems and through the titles. Most of the poems are named after drugs, and while knowledge of each drug's purpose isn't required, it makes the overall story clearer. The section starts off quietly, almost relaxed, with the first four poems named after sedatives and muscle relaxers. Then it becomes a bit frantic by moving onto "Naloxone," which is used to reverse opioid overdoses, followed by opium itself, "Papaver Somniferum," which is grittier than its predecessors. "Suboxone," a medication used to treat narcotic dependence, continues the story; the narcotic pain reliever "Tramadol" suggests a relapse. After a small interlude, the medications switch to slightly tamer ones that speak of recovery, like the SSRI "Lexapro" and the anti-nausea medication "Zofran." The sequence ends with another antidepressant, "Trazodone." Those who have dealt with their own or a loved one's addiction will find this story familiar.

The third section of the collection is slightly lighter, concerned less with the speaker's experiences with addiction and death than with how to simply exist in the world. It opens with another one of my favorites, "Commuting by the Confederate Flag on I-40." Based on the title, many would expect the poem to be angry, perhaps even accusatory. But instead the speaker strives to understand:

> I want
> to play the angry faggot
>
> but in truth I burn
> to know what grief
>
> demotes your pride,
> neighbor. Did you lose
>
> your son, a lover,
> a dog?

Anger is easy; it's so common for people to let differing beliefs make them forget that we are all human. Yet this speaker is compassionate. He hopes that even if the person who hung that flag opposes his existence, they will never feel similarly trapped: "I'm scared / for any of us / to run out of gas / in an unfamiliar place." The speaker doesn't let his anger make him cruel and instead chooses to be kind when the same consideration would likely not be given in return.

The fourth and final group of poems is less about experiencing and living with all the terrible matters mentioned before, and more about living in their aftermath and dealing with the results. Poems like "On the Psychotic Unit," which is about the speaker's sympathy for his patients and the small things that make their days brighter, show the happier moments of life found in the mundane: "After the fire, my patient is visited by her estranged son, who brings / flowers he must take home with him. They matched the pink lipstick she / hasn't mustered the energy to wear. It's crazy, she says after. This whole / thing made my day." Conversely, pieces like "How My Mother Named Me" discuss the bitter realities of life, namely how the speaker's mother "wishes she had named me better / in a language we no longer share." She settled on Eric because it was "fast and easy to write / on form after form after form / you don't understand." A more complicated name or even a simpler, more traditional Vietnamese name would bring questions and comments from Americans. As a poor immigrant, the speaker's mother couldn't afford the time a different name would require to write or explain to others.

Death, addiction, and queerness are at the forefront of Tran's collection and are matters most people have dealt with, or at least know someone who has. Given the injustices and disappointments the speaker has suffered, one might expect the final poems in this collection to lash out angrily at the perpetrators. Instead, Tran ends the book with "Angier, NC," in which he wishes others better luck than he had:

> I wish you the bounty
> of double coupon day, of dented cans
> sold for cheap. A slab of bloody roast
> with the most perfect marble.
> A flat of strawberries near spoil,
> right when they're sweetest. ■