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Pleiades: Literature in Context, Volume 40, Issue 2, Summer 2020, pp.  
276-277 (Review)

Published by University of Central Missouri, Department of English  
and Philosophy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/plc.2020.0072>



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## Soft Self: Mapping the Distance Between Global Trauma and the Personal Divine in Aria Aber's *Hard Damage*

Aileen Keown Vaux

Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.  
91 pages. \$18.00

The challenge with writing about global war and cataclysmic regime change is that the scope can become so unwieldy that it challenges the human capacity to fathom the damage. In *Hard Damage*, the 2019 Prairie Schooner Book Prize award winner, Aria Aber understands how to scale the gargantuan with unassailable image. Through five exacting sections, Aber mounts a lyrical argument that accounts for the cost of the speaker's physical estrangement from Afghanistan, trauma incurred by the speaker's mother's political imprisonment, and the palimpsestic life of learning language not just to survive, but to describe the landscape of the inner self, which, as Aber writes in her opening poem "Reading Rilke in Berlin," is a place within the speaker "where nobody has touched."

In "Covert United States Involvement in Regime Change, I" and "Covert United States Involvement in Regime Change, II" Aber lists, as the titles indicate, all of the campaigns from 1949 to 2005 the United States developed to influence regimes around the world. Even that sentence mutes and distances one from the fallout of those tactical operations. Aber's book is an attempt to close the potential distance between the reader and these conflicts, mainly Operation Cyclone, the CIA's 1979 covert program to counter the USSR's military invasion of Afghanistan.

If a poet does their job well they arrive at a place of epiphanic truth, and then reconstruct their steps for the reader by leaving the right combination of

images for them to experience their own transcendence. In *Hard Damage*, Aber masterfully transmutes the macro-level subjects that many writers feel drawn to cover—belief in God, the cost of war, relationships with parents—into micro-testimonials that yield profound wisdom. Central to achieving this transfiguration is the relationship between the "you" and the "I" of *Hard Damage* and the sublime images that bind the two together. The ever-changing definitions of "you" and "I" in *Hard Damage* create a meaning-making relationship, one where the two are always inventing and defining the other.

In *Hard Damage*'s second section, in the poem "At the Hospital, My Language," Aber writes, "I am TV screen, beaked/branch-systems. So, the I becomes/a faux fur to warm in...I swallow,/I sky. I desperate/to identify with everything I look at." The second section is a place where Aber yields to a hallucinatory construction of identity-mirroring what it might feel like to live in a world where others tell you who you are with such frequency that the self strains to construct an authentic relationship between one's interiority and exteriority. We are, as she writes in "Operation Cyclone, Years Later," "what we are taught." What, exactly, is the speaker of *Hard Damage* taught about herself? In "VII.Ares," we learn she's been called a "sexy little terrorist" by a man she once loved. She was taught, in "The Ownership of Naming Things," that she was "not like them, look at how light your skin is." The speaker teaches herself in "There" that her ancestral land and family members' trauma are not hers to "eulogize."

The reclamation of self is not just essential in the way one wants to represent oneself to the world, but it is also a necessary component of learning to own one's actions in complex human systems. As Aber asks in "Azalea Azalea," "How much/of my yearly tax is spent to bomb/the dirt that birthed me?" the speaker is evaluating self-implication in the context of a destructive governmental operation. This type

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of honest investigation is, by design, incredibly vulnerable and that vulnerability is emphasized when the speaker says she “never wanted to consider” it in the first place. The tenderness of the moment invites a sympathetic reader to ask similar questions of themselves.

Aber excels in commanding the reader’s attention through the taut drama of her lines and personification of abstract geo-political action. In “II: Blue Bottle Fly Condition” the call for the reader’s attention is revealed to be a conscious design: “What I mean is, I don’t want/your sympathy, I want your attention, and even that bothers me...How can I explain this? I stir flies into bowls of milk.” This poem’s ending is the perfect encapsulation of Aber’s poetry—forthright declaration, a personal interrogation of purpose, punctuated by surreal image, one that resonates as a representation of the speaker’s psychological state. How does a poet present the unknowable parts of herself? Through the strike of deep image.

It is no surprise, though, when a secondary through-thread emerges in *Hard Damage*. Aber’s investigation into the unknowable self leads to the most unknowable subject of all: God. Aber approaches this subject through the lens of reading Rilke in her “default” German language. In “Rilke and I” Aber writes, “I do not remember the formation of selfhood. Of course, I/wouldn’t—all existence before self was fluid, floating under me in/ icy shapes, it wasn’t *mine* yet; it was everyone’s.” That floating place underneath is where the divinity of *Hard Damage* lives. When the speaker says in *dir/ You*, “my entire life I wanted to live in you: Mother (physical origin) and God (spiritual) origin” she closes with a surprising answer in the form of inquiry that “isn’t that the first crime against the self, then? To be someone, to be a ‘you’?” The crime, of course, is to lose sight of the internal eternal in favor of the needs of the other, more ephemeral, “you.” Aber balances the drive for reclamation of the “I”

against the struggle to differentiate herself from the developmental dependence of the original “you.”

I don’t know that I’ve seen a poet so smartly address, in almost an essayistic style, the investigation of the divine self with complete, simultaneous allegiance to contemporary lyrical image. For Aber to accomplish both, with a polyglot’s virtuosity, is astounding. There is no possible way to account for the amount of craft on display in *Hard Damage* in a 1,000 word review, but I supposed that is part of its project—to remind us that it is impossible to reduce any formative human experience, whether it be war, the search for self, or the degradation of humanity, into a simple or small reckoning. Aber is a poet capable of mapping an account of such subjects with flash-points of image and insight that represent her unknowable landscape. We, the “you” in many of her poems, are offered an opportunity for a twin experience, one where we are compelled by Aber’s frank reckoning with these mighty subjects into thinking of our own place, and influence, in the world.

