Who by Fire

Ariana Reines's art of anguished witnessing

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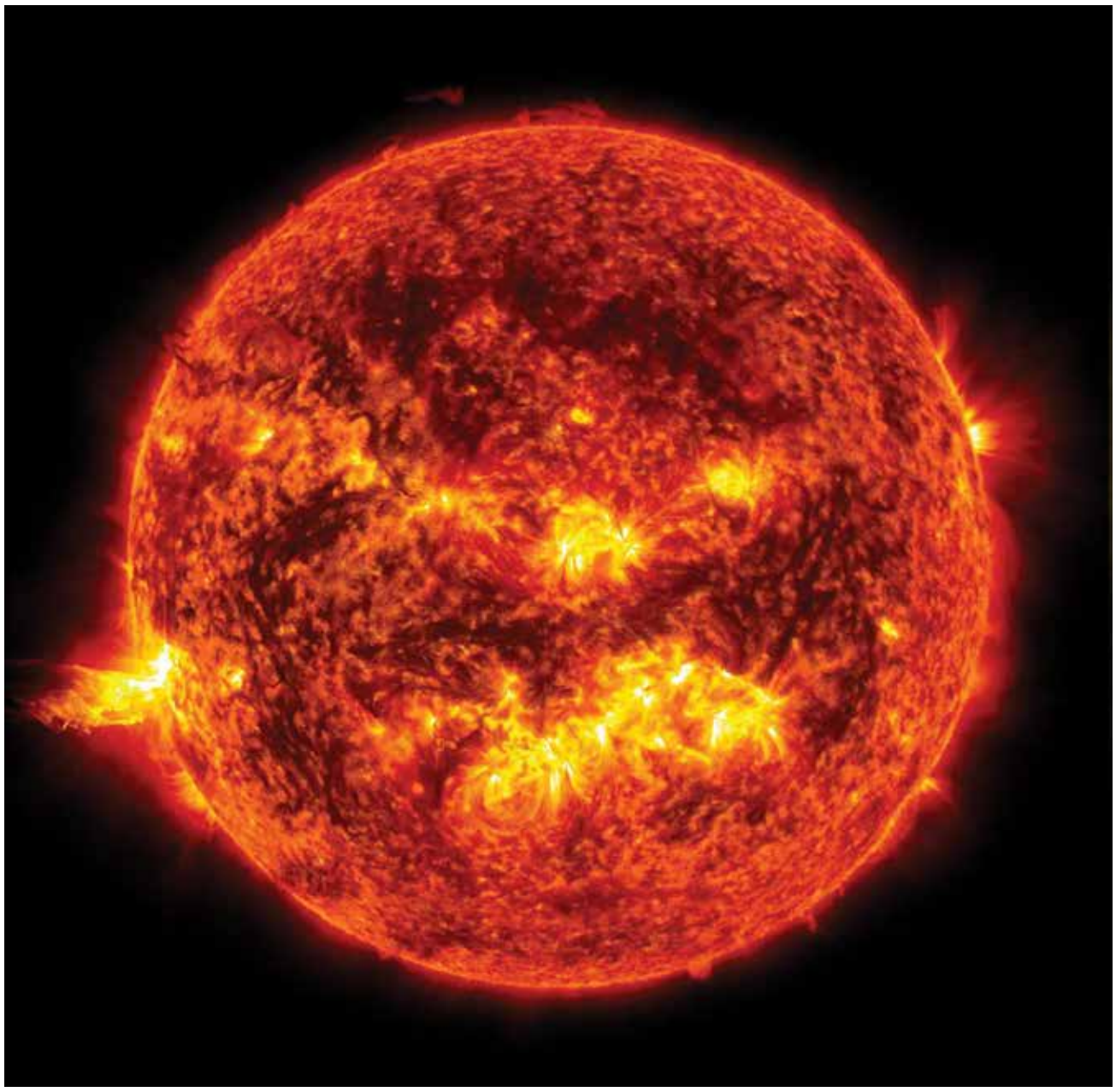
WAVE OF BLOOD BY ARIANA REINES BRUSSELS AND LONDON: DIVIDED PUBLISHING. 200 PAGES. $16.



Sun emits a solstice CME, 2018.

PHOTO: NASA/SDO

In her recent book *Wave of Blood*, Ariana Reines states the obvious: "It's a big mistake to kill someone, one person, one person." I pause on the word "mistake" there. An odd word: pared down, it means "to badly seize," to reach out and wrap your fingers around a reality that is incorrect. It describes an act of wrongness with an undertone of sympathy, partly because it does not immediately confer a fixed intention or punishment, like "crime" or "sin" does. I am moved by her use of repetition—"one person, one person"—for emphasis, or is it continuance? Instead of counting, one, two, three, could it be: one, one, one, one, one, one, one, one, etc.? Maybe it would teach us something to add it up in a slower way. Maybe when we are counting the alive or the dead, we could allow ourselves to be less functional but more accurate. Could we say "one person" fifty thousand times? "But especially the elderly, and the children, they're completely dependent on others," she continues. "And that is part of the way this whole thing is set up." By "this whole thing," she means the world.

Wave of Blood is about humiliation, witness, and unforgiveness in our glassy, red-edged shard of history, which Reines describes as "an age of the slaughter of children." It is a bewildering, heart-wrenching, candid, alarming, appalling, defenseless book. Defenseless meaning naked, un-walled, but also, I will not try to defend it here. I will not condemn it, either. It asks for neither of those things. It is a travel diary of the period "between the Libra and Aries Eclipses," October 2023 to April 2024: the first six months of Israel's genocidal bombardment of Gaza. During that time, Reines, a remarkable and respected poet, is on an ad hoc book tour across Europe, except she lacks a new book to promote: Amsterdam, Lisbon, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Prague. *Wave of Blood* yokes together poems written in the immediate aftermath of new war ("But there was always a war—already a war—before the war"); transcriptions of her public speaking in foreign cities, reacting in real time to every day's unfolding horror; and her Zoom lectures for her pedagogical experiment, Invisible College, where she is teaching Milton's *Paradise Lost*. She is also in the midst of mourning the recent suicide of her mother, a child of Holocaust survivors, who suffered from schizophrenia for all of Reines's adult life. "How do you heal the suffering of your mother?" Reines asks. "You must do everything possible and *also* everything impossible."

Wave of Blood is not about the Palestinians, nor is it about the Israelis: it is about a Jewish American woman named Ariana Reines, who practices "non-assimilation, non-Zionism—which is the same as nonviolence, at least in my own body," as she watches the Israeli military kill Palestinian babies, children, adolescents, young adults, mothers, fathers, the middle-aged, the healthy, the sick, and the elderly through the fuzzy, fractured medium of her phone, as she tries to do her job in public, which is to be a poet, scribe of feeling. I think it's fair to describe it as a grief memoir. It is a document of "carrying the wrongness we always knew and felt, but heavier and worse and more. What's new is the dilated compound eye of the witness of humanity." Already, centering this perspective—that of someone viewing an atrocity, rather than experiencing and surviving it—might be objectionable to many. Already, the reader must contend with what a literature of solidarity might look like, what the role of witness is, what can be taken (mistaken?) into language—what makes a sentence and un-makes a person.

What is the use? Does poetry require one? In the book's very first line, Reines answers that invisible question: "A tortured soul can have social value—within certain structures and limits. Suffering in a state of lucidity, you can draw out the repression and compacted pain in others." She compares her process of writing the book to "performing field surgery on yourself." Pollutants—the germs of language and ideology, discursive norms and demands, which can narrow and numb the heart—are everywhere. It might be a cursed endeavor, especially when "you must navigate in spite of your inner weakness and general lack of perspective," and yet, she asserts, almost as a non sequitur, "operating theaters are pedagogical spaces." There is something to be learned, Reines proposes, from observing her slice an aperture in her core, grubby hands against silky muscle, as she makes the most inner parts of herself visible. This operating theater is the page, which is the field, already dirtied, and the text is both the surgeon and the patient. Of course—field surgery, it's a war metaphor, it's outrageous, given the subject matter of what she is responding to. To compare writing to treating open wounds in an unclean place! It's what doctors in Palestine are doing every day, while Israel bombs their hospitals. I cannot fully express how audacious—that's putting a positive spin on it—transgressive, self-aggrandizing, against-what-I-know parts of this book felt to me. It recurred, almost rhythmically, as I read: a flaring in my diaphragm, a please-stop, a what-the-fuck, sometimes a propulsive laugh, the laugh of shock that feels chopped into bits, like ha! ha! ha! "Chopped into bits," another collection of words that means new things to me, conjures new images in my mind, since we

all saw the things we saw. Since we all saw what Israel has done. Is doing.

And yet, the jolt of Reines's unvarnished self-excavation is often useful, even the occasions of alienation and fury—that word again, "use," so trapped and paltry. Let me say that again: I wept in returning, through her language, to what my body felt like that fall. "To have seen / What I saw / Only yesterday / You would beg for God," the poem "Absolute Zero" opens. The poem rocks with nine "see"s and "saw"s, tipping backward and forward in time, away from an image and then into it again: "a crimson hole / In the delicate skull of a baby / Going gray in the arms of her rescuer / Who prayed over her to himself." The speaker of the poem "would that God saw what I saw," "this world we made / In its image." That "it" is floating: Does she mean God, an object past enlivenment, or does she mean, "this world," a world made in a world's image? A coning of representation that encompasses the unseeable, telescoping outward. It implies that we are copying ourselves, a mirror on a mirror, humans doing as humans did, instead of looking to other ways of world making. It implies a God that is not paying attention—or that God simply doesn't exist but still demands address in its nonexistence. An address *to* nonexistence, perhaps. The poem closes: "What I saw I did not know how to see / God almighty if there is a God / You must see it for me."

Lacan writes of *sujet supposé savoir*, "the subject supposed to know," or as my mother translates it in casual conversation, "The One Who Knows." "You're trying to find the One Who Knows!" she cries, a guardrail against recurring projection. (The unspoken part: "It ain't me, babe!") It's a common fantasy: there must be *someone*—a deity, a leader, a teacher, a parent, a lover, a friend—who knows what is going on. Someone who can take this all in and understand it fully and act correctly in response. Many ways of seeing blow the candle on this wish, hoping the dissipating turret of smoke will reveal another, bigger, wiser witness of witnesses. Reines writes, bluntly, "I'm always looking for a witness inside of me that is somehow above me that can help me see everything and not be damaged by them, or let them turn me evil or crazy." On the next page she writes, "Something I have always wanted: to see my life itself, like a white flame, a nothingness. To really stare it in the face." But the all-seeing forms that recur in Reines's texts do not offer salvation, simultaneously decaying and infantile: the computer, the algorithm, the artificially intelligent, the fascistic imaginary, the sensation when a mirror smashes over her head before a family wedding and the adrenaline kick-starts her "executive functioning": "You rejoice in your capacity to sort phenomena and prioritize rational action while blood drips down onto the screen of your phone, and down your breast, and down your face."

Even the sun, formerly a conduit of mystical knowledge in Reines's *A Sand Book*, does not offer deliverance: "The sun falls on my head like a priestly hand—the gentleness of its blessing is almost enraging—why won't it slap me, why won't it push me, why won't it force me to become better than I am." In another poem titled "New York," she writes, searchingly, "Why doesn't this kind of killing afflict the weather here? / Why doesn't the Earth say something? / But it does. In your body." Reines frequently insists on the somatic as a method of accessing a more cosmic discernment, which I fear turns inquiry further and further inward, into the winding gut and arcane bone, rather than outward, toward the articulations and solidities of other people. But her questions read, movingly, like the ragged half of an incomplete catechism. I am touched by the sun's failure to provide longed-for punishment and rehabilitation. The existence of a bright, warm day, and the whirring of the colonial death machine: our reality holds both. There are times when that can only seem like a terrible affront. Reines quotes Milton, where he describes Satan "shit-talking the sun": "O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state / I fell. . . ." She explicates, "Milton's Satan hates nature, and he hates what is, he's against what is, he's against what is real." It's hard not to relate.

Poetry, for Reines, is a means of "studying the feeling of truth as it moves through the body." The truth of genocide is unbearable, and poetry mutates in the face of it. Perhaps, as Adorno wrote, it becomes barbaric. (He did not say it becomes impossible, as is often misquoted.) I heard an interview with Reines where she described being a poet as being "a professional stranger," which made me think of being a professional barbarian. Throughout the book, Reines guards against righteousness and what she calls "piety": "I try to be very very careful and move very very slowly when I feel them rising within me." I felt wordlessly angry when she cautions against judgment—if we can't judge this, what can we judge? What can we *do*? But I also recognize what she means when she writes, "In this time of outrageous slaughter, I notice people are doing things in language that I see as a representation of their attempt to find a cleaner place to be." A place of distance. There is an emotional truth somewhere in here—in this book, in this cavernous year and a half, in this lifetime, in this century—about how genocide, a category that unequivocally includes Israel's relentless killing of Palestinians, makes it humiliating to exist in the same world as it does.

Wave of Blood is limited, and it knows that about itself: "I gave myself very little time to write this book. I gave myself only enough time to come up to the very edge of the violence and shame I have known within myself." To write a diary over six months and then publish it within the same year is a stark, strange choice, especially given that the events that spurred its existence have not ended, and that Reines has another book of poems, titled *The Rose*, coming out with a different (bigger) publisher this spring. *The Rose* is not about the war, as such; it is more similar to Reines's previous poetry—raw, exacting, horny, chatty, holy. I can't help imagining that *Wave of Blood* snuck into the interstice between the composition and contracted release of another, more formal work: a secret, second book, tucked into a fold. It demanded immediacy. I was assigned to review both *Wave of Blood* and *The Rose*, but they could not sit alongside each other for me, although they have a lot in common, not least their author. It was like *Wave of Blood* opened up a crack that grew into a chasm and threw my reading self into it. There was something difficult for me on almost every page: a belief in miracles, a defense of literature or art as the pathway to such rescue, a fascination with the self and the soul, a harrowing of individual trauma. It was answerless, leaking, and anguished. It was, in Reines's words, "unheroic and unrevolutionary." And yet: that baby girl, in his prayerful arms. She deserves every, and all, poetry. □

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