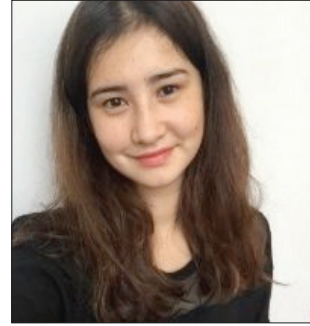


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hundred and eight prayer flags, a book of poems by Simrin Tamhane Ibbetson Street Press

Review by Michael Todd Steffen



Inward Accompaniment

In the February 13 & 20, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker* (pp 93-5), Joyce Carol Oates comments on refugee and fiction writer Viet Thanh Nguyen. "It is hardly surprising," Oates writes, that the displaced person "is obsessed with identity, both personal and ethnic...likely to be highly sensitive to others' interpretations of him and his 'minority' culture. And so his peripheral status confers certain advantages, for he is in a position to see what others do not."

The insight applies to Simrin Tamhane and her expressive debut book of poems, *hundred and eight prayer flags*, issued this year as part of the Endicott College Young Poets Series by Ibbetson Street Press (series director Emily Pineau, Founders Dan Sklar, Doug Holder).

Tamhane sees from her experience and memory, in the title poem, the embodiment of her natural and homeland energies, in

*thousands of faded mantras printed on
rows of endless white
prayer flags that cling*

*onto tall bamboo poles while
dancing with the swirling Himalayan wind... [page 3]*

The poet poignantly documents the significant coincidence of her young displacement from India to America with the loss of a cherished grandfather:

*When I was flying
to the United States, leaving
behind everything,
the time zone didn't let me
know that you died
until 2 days later...*

*And so I lit candles for you,
In this foreign land,
And prayed for your soul...*

*Hidden in the dorm bathroom,
Silencing my pain with
Cheap toilet paper ["my father's father," page 9]*

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The physical sense of isolation, however, is sustained inwardly with accompaniment in images of multiplicity like the “hundred and eight prayer flags” of the poem, or even more subtly in Tamhane’s choice word for a particular red denoting plenitude:

*i am vermillion
power clouds [“who am i” p. 6]*

The genius of the poetry, however, while allowing the consolation and inspiration of memory, faces its counterweight in what has happened with a striking concluding image:

*Goodbye was 3 pistachios placed
On your hand while you
Struggled to have them touch your lips [page 9]*

Whether she is conjuring from her past in India a poor maid that looked after her, forays with other children stealing passion fruit from her grandfather’s bamboo trellis, or witnessing the contradictions in the lives of her young American encounters (a would-be animal-rights activist who wears a vintage leather jacket, a medical student who works as a nightclub stripper) Tamhane’s vision is pristine and her language vivid and to the heart.

Charlotte Gordon has called this book “luminous and clear-sighted.” Mark Herlihy has noted the range of Tamhane’s powers of empathy which convey “loss, longing and heartache on personal and universal levels.” It is a promising first collection, accented with talent, imagination and consideration.