

*Barbie Chang* by Victoria Chang, Copper Canyon Press, 2017 paper 97p. \$16.00 • With her fourth book of poetry, *Barbie Chang*, Victoria Chang playfully and achingly reconstructs the icon of Barbie to examine the roles of mother, daughter, coworker, and lover. Barbie as an idealized and unrealistic female image is deconstructed by Chang's rueful attention to the internal doubts and expectations associated with race and gender. Without any punctuation in the entire collection, Chang relies on rhyme, word play, alliteration, and form to construct narrative. Through questions and tight repetition, Chang's verse is both sharp and circular, as in these lines from "Barbie Chang's Father Calls," an early poem that introduces the speaker's father's dementia, "Barbie Chang's father calls again calls / her again again he calls."

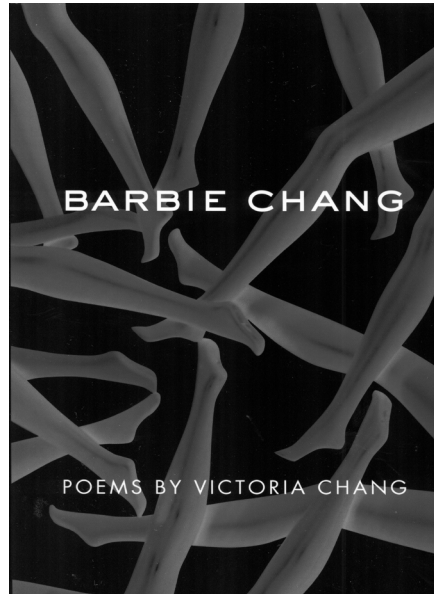
The collection is made up of three types of poems. Most common are poems written in couplets, where Barbie Chang is both speaker and character and only discussed through limited third person. In the middle of the collection is a sonnet sequence, "Dear P," and these epistolary poems use an "I" to meditate on moments of a child's birth and early childhood. The poignant last seven poems are a sonnet cycle titled "Dear P" but there is space between the words and the lines, and the speaker more directly advises her daughter about the world: "Someone will love you many will love / you many will brother you some of these / loves will bother you some will leave you."

Across the arc of the collection, Barbie Chang agonizes with the ailing health of her parents, as well as the social demands of work and those created by "the Circle," a clique of other moms at her child's school. The figure of Ellen Pao occurs in two poems, and Barbie admits that "helping Ellen Pao is not an / option," but by the end of the book Barbie "is done worshipping the / Circle." Barbie Chang has confronted her own experience, "between being a token and racism" and buried her mother: "*last breath* the word *death* hiding / in the word *breath* all / along." Barbie emerges battle-weary, but wiser, a condition endemic to women who

## Synecdoche

BRIEF BOOK REVIEWS

RACHEL MORGAN



are all too often sandwiched between multigenerational caregiving and work and home.

Mothers and daughters populate this book, and Barbie Chang is both, looking at her fate as well as her mother's and daughter's: "the / trouble with being a / mother is that you too must die." During the liminal space of dying and death are moments of isolation, but Victoria Chang celebrates the mother-daughter dyad in the midst of lament, "until you see that every woman / begins and ends with another woman." *Barbie Chang* is a wry and passionate collection, full of language play that devastates and delights.

*madness* by sam sax, Penguin Books, 2017 paper 80p. \$18.00 • In his dizzying and daring first full-length collection, *madness*, sam sax strides through the early days of mental illness, risky sex, addiction, and ultimately treatment. *madness* was selected by Terrance Hayes as a winner of the 2016 National Poetry Series, and Hayes notes the collection's "unbridled energy." Certainly, there are echoes of Whitman, and direct allusions to William Carlos

Williams, but the subject matter, lack of capitalization, and play with semicolons pay homage to D. A. Powell's work.

Structurally, the book is very organized while being flirtatiously experimental. At the beginning of each of the four sections is a prose poem based on Appendix C of the 1952 *DSM-I*, which is recognized as the *DSM's* first edition. The poem alphabetically lists conditions like "Homosexuality" and "Obesity," which have since been removed from the *DSM*. In these prose poems, the text starts out in bold but gets lighter until it disappears, leaving only hyphens between the spaces that once listed mental disorders. The titles also play with erasure; so the first time the poem appears it's titled "Nomenclature," and the second time as "Men." So many of the poems in this collection destigmatize diagnoses and ultimately celebrate science, despite its missteps from balancing the four humors, lobotomies, or the use of conversion therapy. The poem "On Syphilis" romantically observes, "there's something exquisite knowing without sex this illness / would not exist ... / ... the countless human houses the strain / must have passed through in order to move into me."

The collection twinkles with clever construction. Several poems appear in two columns and offer dual readings across the entire page or down each column. Yet, sax is equally comfortable in traditional stanzas where sharp observations can leave a reader breathless. In "Prediagnosis" the speaker observes, "anything can be a drug if you love it" and a few lines later, "anyone can be a drug if you love him."

*madness* toggles between the language of science and the language of confession, but when these worlds mingle the poems gallop with intrigue and certainty: "if only i met that stranger / in the basement / & our pleasure rose / through the hospital / bliss poultice / for the sorrow-skinned who sit / half-conscious & half-machinery." sax's willingness to experiment with form, to discuss the taboo, to declare confession, and to call out when science and governments get it wrong are at once brazen, provocative, and melancholic—an impressive and commanding range. To read *madness* is to be astounded. □