



*Hands That Break and Scar* by Sarah A. Chavez, Sundress Publications, 2017 paper 99p. \$15.00 • *North American Review* contributor, Sarah A. Chavez's debut collection, *Hands That Break and Scar*, is set in California's arid Central Valley, where the speaker comes of age among the working class, young mothers, and the space between two languages and cultures. Organized into five sections, these memoir-esque narrative poems trace the speaker's journey from childhood to adulthood, where the hard edges of poverty, objectified female sexuality, and manual labor influence a growing child's worldly perspective. The childhood Chavez creates is both nostalgic and estranged, but it is the granular details that impress. In the poem "Constructing Childhood," two girls play in a dumpster, arranging bricks into a room, where they "watched the cycle of the sun, / gazed at the stars, held hands, and felt at home." These girls, these poems, they both build beauty where it otherwise is not conjured.

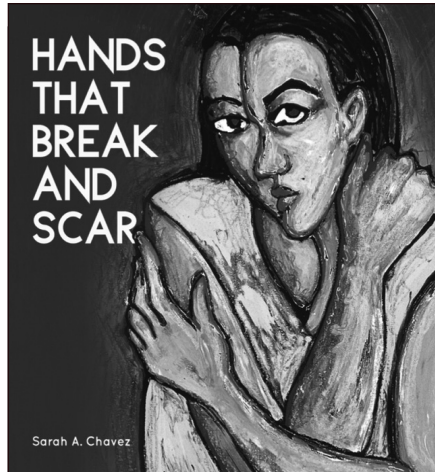
"Doing Laundry," is a poem in the third section of the book, when naivety begins to disintegrate. The speaker describes visiting her fourteen-year-old cousin in the maternity ward and observing, "the wrinkled purple heads of newborns like soggy raisins." Even titles of poems, "How Waitresses Walk Home in the Dark" and "Waiting for the Bus," plainly tell the dangers and trials of being not only a woman, but a woman of color in the working world.

Geographically, culturally, and linguistically, the book is decidedly an examination of Mexican-American heritage, and what that means for a young woman who belongs to both and therefore neither. In the opening poem, the speaker notes a T-shirt depicting, "two eagles, their claws / clutching fast to flags—one red, white and green, the other red, white and blue." In aubela's yard the "cilantro whispers seductively / the green onions sing us psalms." But in her other grandmother's house, where only English is spoken, a telenovela plays and the speaker knows, "Spanish / is my language too, and I know that I

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am supposed to know," and the poem ends with these resolute lines, "the only words I recognized—*beso, abrazo, amor, and familia*— / are all anyone needs for a good story."

Ultimately, *Hands That Break and Scar* is a book of praise, be it family, community, the surprising moments of human connection with strangers, and the earth: "*La tierra, te alabo.*"

*Four Reincarnations* by Max Ritvo, Milkweed, 2016 cloth 79p. \$22.00 • Since its publication in 2016, *Four Reincarnations* by Max Ritvo has discharged waves of lamentation and awe into the American poetry world, and rightly so. The biographical and thematic connections to John Keats are unavoidable; both men—aware of their immediately impending mortality—died young in their mid-twenties, attached to beloved muses, and their verse haunts the liminal space of dying—when living is urgent business, and this makes their poems electric and essential. Max Ritvo died at twenty-five of Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare cancer; however, in an interview recorded about a month before his death for *Poetry Magazine's* podcast, Ritvo says he wants audiences to "make a bigger deal of the poems than the sad cancer man." By Ritvo's admission, the poems

in the collection "make sense, in part, because they were written by a dying twenty-five-year-old," and yet the poems themselves coruscate with humor, wisdom, celebration, and mysticism, giving us moments like: "The more there is, the more loss there is— / true not only of the world, but of perceiving it," from the poem "The End."

Many of the poems meditate on what it means to be in a body, be it sick or well; human, bird, or butterfly—from "Dawn of Man": "After the cocoon I was in a human body / ... My mouth produced language / which I attempted to spin over myself / and rip through happier and healthier." Obviously, poems consider what it means to be in an ailing body, perhaps most notably the poem "Poem to My Litter," part of which appeared in his obituary in the *New York Times*, and describes how the speaker's genes have been placed in mice for scientific study. Knowing he will not have any children, with genuine fatherly wisdom, the speaker addresses the mice he's named Max who now carry his genes: "I hope, Maxes, some good in you is of me. / Even my suffering is good, in part."

"Of course there is another world. But it is not elsewhere," Ritvo writes in "Plush Bunny," and everywhere and elsewhere is the exact space his poems occupy, from stepping out into a sunny afternoon to an imagined afterlife. Often poems move in and out of lucid dreams to the intimacy of a bedroom and bathroom, emerging to the body carnal, "Your breast / is like the delicious voice / in the telephone. / Your bones when I bite too deep / are the phone's wires, / full of voice, blue marrow."

It's a given that most poetic traditions write about life in view of death, and *Four Reincarnations* is the epitome of this, with its sparse and exact language echoing the clean, imagistic verse of a Haiku master who is always composing his death poem. However, *Four Reincarnations* is also a study in desire, humor, acceptance, and being—whatever shape that being becomes. Ritvo's sparing and exacting verse takes your breath away while reminding you to breathe. □