

Ahmed, Dilruba.* *Bring Now the Angels*. University of Pittsburg Press, 2020

By Liz Chang

I approached Ahmed's second full length book *Bring Now the Angels* as if the title were a command, but I was wrong—it is an appeal, almost a cue. The poems in this book are fierce whispers into the void: first against the loss of a father and then spiraling outward to include different types of grief, including a sense of mourning so large that it encompasses the entire Earth (the clinical term is “ecological anxiety,” and now almost entire generations can be said to be suffering from it).

Surprisingly, the angels that are called forth in the title are not necessarily the religious kind. The paperback cover shows a close-up of a worn-down (weary?), headless angel. I was simultaneously reminded of the façade of one of a million churches in Europe somewhere and the statue with the vacant eyes that graces the cover of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. This angel once observed the world, but now is lost. In “In the Hours Just After, In the Hours In Between,” Ahmed describes the doctors attending her dying father as adorned “in angel-white gowns/and shoes, their hairnets/like deflated haloes/clinging to their heads.” (lines 35-38). So perhaps these are the angels she's invoking in the title: decidedly earthbound ones.

Many of the poems here speak in the voice of a mother who is finding her way between the generations. The poem “The Children” stretches this tension to its limit in alternating couplet and single-line stanzas that bounce between routine images of daily life with children (getting them ready for school, dropping them off) and the language of loss. There's a reach of this poem that is fabulist in scope. In general, there is a wide range of poetry in this collection, even if the theme of sadness and close reflection runs throughout. Many of these poems move through mysterious iterations of form: both the classical Ghazal and a poem that uses Google Autocomplete are at home here. The lines of “Healing Effects of After-Death Communication” dance around the page as the graph of a heart monitor might, with long pauses in each line to stand in for the spaces, the silences. I found the smaller, more intimate poems like “Final Registry,” which, as a list poem, describes the contents of a dead man's (presumably the speaker's father's) wallet after his passing, to be welcome meditations.

At the same time, there are sarcastic poems in this collection—not every poem has an elegiac tone, but taken together, it does feel as though this poet is trying to wrap her arms around the extent of the world's injury. In the end, this is a book about love that constantly ends up slipping away. The book opens with the poem “Phase One,” in which the speaker attempts to absolve herself of the normal oversights of modern life (leaving a library book near an open window in the rain, for snapping bitterly to a crying infant, and for not being nicer to her mother), but closes with the words, “...For being unable/to forgive yourself first so you/could then forgive others and/at last find a way to become/the love that you want in this world.” (lines 51 -56). One might read admonishment in these final lines, and a tiny bit of hope.

***Dilruba Ahmed judged the 2018 Sandy Crimmins National Prize in Poetry.**