

Anxious Attachments

by Beth Alvarado

168 pages

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Reviewed by Ellen Santasiero

Make yourself a cup of tea. While it steeps, begin reading the first essay in Beth Alvarado's new collection, *Anxious Attachments*:

Imagine turning your head and holding out your arm, as if for a blood test. You feel a slight prick, you loosen the tie, and then suddenly this warmth floods up; you feel a rush that begins at the base of your spine and surges up until it explodes in your head, like light."

When the tea is ready, you are five minutes in, reflecting with Alvarado on her younger self, "Could this happen to me? Where nothing nothing nothing would matter? Not Fernando. Not if I was pregnant. Nothing. Except dope?"

You're hooked now, cup in hand for the duration. By the time you finish the piece, you understand something of the zeitgeist of 1960s Tucson, and how the writer, a "thin, thin" girl who once made marks with a needle on her arm, matured into the mother and grandmother who expresses herself with a pen.

Alvarado, is the author of *Anthropologies: A Family Memoir* (University of Iowa Press); and *Not a Matter of Love and other stories* (Winner of the Many Voices Project Prize, New Rivers Press). Her novel *Jillian in the Borderlands: A Cycle of Rather Dark Tales* is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press in 2020.

In this collection, she puts before the reader 14 essays that span five decades of life and loss in the Sonoran borderlands and the Oregon high desert.

I love many things about the essays, but a few things stand out in particular. First, Alvarado's frequent references to mystery, whether through folk tales, stories of otherworldliness, or, most especially, dreams. These mysteries and Alvarado's imaginative engagement with them give her—and readers—a world full of meaning and redemption from and for a dangerous world that is never very far away. To wit, the Tucson of her young adulthood, we learn, is a town “ringed by missiles where planes like dark predators were circling overhead.”

The major sources of meaning and redemption in this collection, however, are the family intimacies Alvarado writes of again and again. Love between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings. These relationships constitute order, sense, and beauty in a world of addiction, mental illness, poisoned drinking water, cancer, perpetrators, and forest fire, and are revealed through closely observed details such as Alvarado remembering her husband tenderly touching her bottom lip before kissing her, and carefully composed passages like this one in the essay “Stars and Moons and Comets” where she writes of her husband's last hours:

I remember putting Fernando's hand over my heart, and my hand over his ... in his gaze I saw all his love, all his faith, everything he wanted to say but couldn't. I felt a part of me rush out to him, as if to comfort him, or to go with him. He looked away. I could see that it was hard for him. When he'd told me I had to let him go, I hadn't realized that he'd been trying to let us go, too.

And in “The Motherhood Poems” she imagines one of her newborn grandsons saying, “I am strong. It is okay for you to love me, Nana. Don't be afraid. No one will take me away from you... When I hold him and I stop singing, he cries. Soon he will sing back to me. Oooo-oo, oooo-oo, he will sing, his voice against my neck breathy and demanding”. In the same essay, she remembers a thought she had about her own newborn son, “This is a love affair, I'll admit it. I will never recover.”

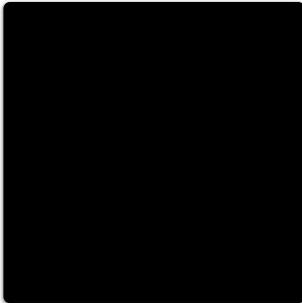
Alvarado's language, imagery, and reflections are redemptive in their beauty, too. In “Water in the Desert” she weaves couplets from the “Song of Songs” into a narrative about corporate toxic waste that shortened the lives of much of the south Tucson community. In “Shelter” she writes, “The desert sun, even in October, purified. Inside, in the cool dark house, they were playing pool, the click of the balls, the hum of their voices, music drifting out of an upstairs window.” And in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Grief” she reflects that “Spanish was simply a part of our landscape. Hearing it was like smelling orange blossoms. Either could trigger a wave of homesickness and, sometimes, homesickness is just what you need: it reminds you that you belong some place, if not where you are.”

I appreciate that these essays often describe what life is like for less-privileged Americans. As I read, I was put in mind of Tillie Olsen, another writer and mother who wrote on behalf of people of color and women and mothers of all colors. Alvarado has an acute awareness of the position of the less-privileged, as a woman, as a young person recovering from addiction, as a wife of a person of color, “what does it take for us to be considered Americans?” her American husband Fernando asks as a one-time recipient of welfare, and as a mother of bi-cultural children.

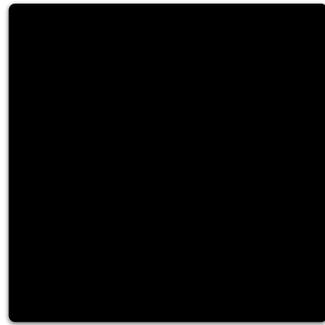
Finally, I love the way this author uses questions. Though they ring with bewilderment and exasperation, and sometimes border on the comical, “Whoever heard of syringe

feeding?” they are serious philosophical queries. In defense of her brother-in-law who suffers from schizophrenia, she asks, “I mean, who doesn’t hear voices? And what does it mean to ‘hear’ voices?” About her newborn grandson, she asks, “Does the baby want to be swaddled? Maybe he wants to lie face down on my forearm. Maybe he wants me to walk him up and down the hallway, my bare feet on the worn carpeting. Maybe he wants me to sway back and forth and hold the pacifier in his mouth and watch television. It’s as if she’s asking, what do we know? and what should we know?”

Anxious Attachments is a longitudinal study of the way life insists upon itself in terrible circumstances and places. Tillie Olsen wrote, “... and when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?” Alvarado has had time for such remembering and estimating, and fortunately for us, she still does.



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