

Jean Van Loon. *Nuclear Family*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 104 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-228-01115-6.

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Davis on Van Loon, *_Nuclear Family_*

"Hiroshima. / Nagasaki. / Fallout / taints vast tracts / sea and land / and my father's desk" (p. 31). In these haunting final lines of a single poem, Jean Van Loon encapsulates the sociopolitical and personal tensions of her childhood in Ottawa, tensions captured in both scientific detail and artistic nuance within *Nuclear Family*. The title of her poetry collection, along with the eerie green visual of a cup and saucer on its cover, offers clues about just how intimately connected international and Canadian events were with her domestic life. During and after World War II, Van Loon's father worked as a metallurgist supporting the Manhattan Project along with other key initiatives driven by the Cold War arms race. Her fifty-six succinct but sophisticated poems explore the family's grief process following his suicide in 1958 and question the fallout of private, regional, and global violence during the mid-twentieth century.

Relying on careful research and individual memory, Van Loon expertly weaves together the threads of household life with cultural moment. The first two poems—"Hiroshima, After" and "A Man of Few Words"—immediately connect the gruesome aftermath of the US bombing of Japan with her father's death, and just a few poems later, in "Jane's Birthday, July 16, 1945," Van Loon

compares her role as older sibling to two brothers with that of the "Birth / of the atomic bomb, christened / Gadget, its test Trinity, to be followed / soon by two more children / *Little Boy, Fat Man*" (p. 13). Within pages of mentioning key scientific minds in the development of nuclear weapons—Leo Szilard, Otto Frisch, Enrico Fermi—come her descriptions of Uncle Mel, his "plump wife Isabel," and "Aunt Selena, Aunt Lil" (p. 7, 9). The poem "Big Pile" couples memories of her siblings crawling on their father's back and layering themselves to stacks of "Black bricks ... blocks of graphite unprecedented for purity" (p. 26). The innocence of play contrasts sharply with the descriptive imagery of Chicago Pile-1, the first artificial nuclear reactor created in 1942. Even the monotony of family dinner is broken up by the children scanning dinner plates with their father's Geiger counter brought home from the lab. The seeming ease with which these poignant associations are made is jarring and disturbing but effective, forcing the reader to contemplate the everyday reproduction of atomic bombs and the subsequent lingering effects. From a duck-and-cover drill under a desk to testing the teeth of toddlers for strontium, the poems trace the radiolo-

gical pollution of playground purity through the eyes of a schoolgirl.

Another productive feature of Van Loon's collection is its lack of sections or other structural headings; the only differentiation from poem to poem comes from each title. This continuity mirrors the complex scope of her work, especially in the first half, as she seamlessly moves from family moments to historical events and back again without pause (reflected in the occasional period meaningfully missing at the end of a sentence). After her father's suicide, however, which is described as a detonation in the poem "Fallout (iii)," the collection shifts dramatically. Instead of the intertwining of research and memory found in the first two-thirds, she focuses many of her later poems on the everyday life of her mother, her brothers, and herself as they grapple with their quiet, nurturing patriarch's absence, searching "for anchor, for the hand / no longer there" (p. 69). The relatively mundane experiences of Chinese food and her mother's rare Pontiac sports car and summers at the lake highlight not the discreet nature of her father but the scolding, looming presence of a woman struggling to support her family while working for Canadian intelligence. From learning about uranium mines and Soviet defectors to remembering with siblings, the arrangement encourages the reader not to lose sight of the core of Van Loon's writing: her nuclear family.

With themes reminiscent of Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1992), Kristen Iverson's *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats* (2013), and April Naoko Heck's *A Nuclear Family* (2014), Van Loon's autobiographical poems emphasize the incredible impact of the atomic age on domestic life in North America. At the same time, her collection has a distinctive literary means for challenging what might otherwise seem like another suburban reflection on the 1940s to '70s. The poet and the speaker within the poems—

never assumed to be the same figure—are both represented through not only separate perspectives but different (pro)nouns and names. In many poems, Van Loon speculates about the flawed function of memory through a pseudonym, Jane (which also serves as a nod to the All-American *Dick and Jane* school primers used between 1930 and 1965). Each family member receives a pseudonym, as well: her father is Arnie, her mother Liz, and her brothers Dick and Teddy. By renaming her parents, siblings, and self, the poet distances herself from a painful past and maintains the appearance of objectivity, a key goal in the age of science, as well as relatability (or exchangeability) with her reader.

And yet some of the poems are written from the first-person point of view, reiterating the personal nature of *Nuclear Family*. Most of these "I" poems appear toward the end, just as Van Loon returns to motifs, images, and even lines from early in the collection. This reimagining of flowers in "The Perfumed House" and crying relatives and a tender touch foregrounds the cloudy, unreliable emotions associated with her father's suicide, even as the tone suggests more confidence in and acceptance of those emotions than a young Jane might have conveyed in preceding poems. Temporarily moving away from matters of the laboratory toward matters of the heart, the poet gives a vulnerable account of grief that is less exciting to read than her lessons on irradiated rocks and Fiestaware but far more significant.

The final poem in Van Loon's *Nuclear Family* once again utilizes a detached tone to describe the movement of uranium from Port Radium. Tracing an "ore-dust trail 1,500 miles" from the Eldorado Mine to "Port Hope's refinery" in Ontario, the twelve stanzas underscore the political and geographical impact of miniscule yet deadly particles as they travel across Canada and then around the globe (pp. 89-90). But perhaps more importantly, Van Loon reminds her reader of the "hundreds of millions of years" these radioactive grains survive,

a measurement in time that accentuates both the historical and familial genealogies her collection brilliantly collapses together (p. 90). Whether through “Fusion” or “Fission,” the poems of *Nuclear Family* offer revitalizing energy to an ongoing

conversation of the atomic age through the deeply personal microcosm of her childhood with a metallurgist father, a surveilling mother, two brothers, and radioactive dishes.

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