

Shot in the Head

By Lee Varon

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Review by Dennis Daly

HOW CAN ONE NOT READ THIS BOOK? From its provocative title—Shot in the Head, through its narration of adultery, revenge, edgy family lore, religious hatred, and racial violence, Lee Varon leads her readers to a generational promised land of understanding and bone-rattling reconciliation.

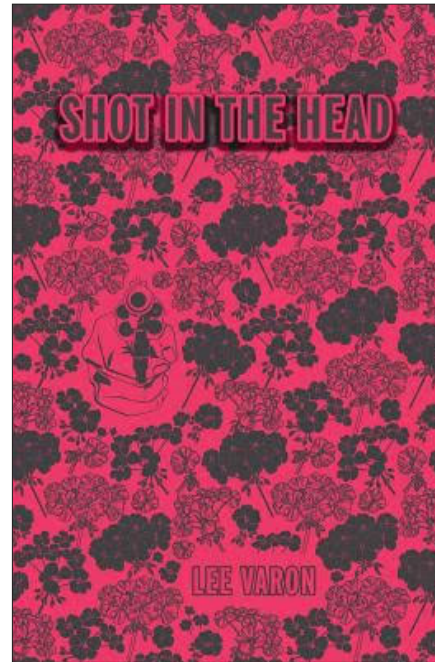
Varon's verse insights of damaged human beings in a deeply flawed culture are breathtaking. She pieces together her family history by chronicling a close knit, loving, but paradoxically fraught relationship with her undisputedly bigoted grandmother. Poetic short lines and stanza breaks both heighten events and invite atypical considerations of moral dilemmas among kith and kin. As one reads the geographical happenings of Petersburg, Virginia, circa 1930s, one can't miss the contemporary racial and religious implications. In short Varon seems to have conjured up a psychological portrayal of singular significance.

Beginning at the epicenter of her explosive lineage, Varon opens her collection with a poem entitled Millionaire's Son Shot. Here she introduces her Grandmother in perhaps her finest dramatic role as the "scorned woman" posturing in the local courthouse. Then comes her dapper grandfather with his "easy smile" offering the joy of new car ownership, in better times, before he was shot. Finally the "other woman" appears with her flirtatious red hair sprinkled with clots of blood in the aftermath of the shooting. The poet leads into those snapshot introductions with a set of lush, sensory images,

*Better if he had died
that night at the farmhouse?*

*I have heirlooms:
quilted satin trimmed with blue velvet,
brilliant cut diamonds,
turquoise cufflinks shot through
with black veins.*

*But what seeps into my bones
is the story of a marriage:
it began with bluebirds among the crepe myrtle
nearly ended with the smell of gunshot.*



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In Varon's poem *Grandmother Learned the News*, the reader enters the grandmother's sad, tumultuous world after the shooting of her husband by his lover's husband. She is appropriately dressed in mourning clothes after coincidentally attending the funeral of her father. The dastardly facts are bluntly detailed and etched with ire, but then pathos and wifely duty reign in the moment. Flower buds even bloom. Here is the heart of the poem,

*Your husband shot
With that woman,
The redhead with bold green eyes.*

*Magnolias were opening
with their cream colored
edge of pink lace,
fireflies scattered—
and you were almost a widow.*

*You helped your husband home
paralyzed on his left side,
taught him to use a spoon
hold a pen
almost write
his name.*

To many thoughtful observers of humanity utter randomness governs the logic of life with mail-fisted certainty. Varon's poem *Battlefield* buys into that theory by juxtaposing her family's tragedy with the cataclysmic Battle of the Crater during the Civil War's Siege of Petersburg. Consider these alternating stanzas,

*The bullet split in two
part coming through his left temple
part embedded in his brain*

*It slashed a great crater in the earth
... filled with screaming, dying men
If Lieutenant Douty and Sergeant Reese
hadn't volunteered to crawl back in the tunnel
and relight the fuse
the crater would not exist,*

*if you hadn't gone to your father's funeral
your husband would have come home,
eaten his chicken dinner,
sat down with the children
and played dominoes.*

I don't think that I've ever read any author of poetry or prose who, in his or her characterizations, exemplifies so well what Hannah Arendt famously called "the banality of evil" than Varon. She weaves in full-throated tones of love and hatred with seeming ease. Both of these tones connect in a poem entitled *We Sat Every Night*. The piece opens this way,

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*We sat every night, watched the news
As Freedom Riders boarded buses
In your home state,
Traveled to Montgomery, Birmingham.*

*I was eleven:
The government says colored people can vote, Nana,
Why are these whites against it?*

*You:
People up North are always criticizing us southerners
but the colored are still treated
with more respect here
than most anywhere else.*

*Pictures of a scorched bus, people choking
by the side of the road.
Where is that 'anywhere else'?*

*When I argued with you
you chalked it up to my tainted Jewish blood —
something I couldn't help.*

A few pages earlier in the collection, Varon sets her poem Uncle. Another relative. Another tragedy. This uncle, after getting engaged to a prohibited outsider, drops dead at eighteen. The poet recounts her grandmother's mode of grieving for her departed son in unvarnished terms,

*June 1948 —
Thalhimer's Department Store —
a tuxedo under his arm,
ready to elope
with that Catholic girl.*

*All Petersburg turned out for his funeral
Grandmother leading the way,
spikes of red gladiolas
at the altar.*

*After they lowered his casket
She lingered over the grave:
I'd rather see him dead
Than married to that girl.*

Late in the collection Varon's persona sets out independently in a new direction, notwithstanding the flawed relatives who loved and nourished her. Antagonisms have turned to knowledge and resolution. Compassion remains. The poet, addressing both her mother and grandmother, explains,

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... I've drawn

*a different course from you.
I wouldn't seek it
though I can understand betrayal. True,
You gave me the split*

*bullet in grandfather's brain
but half that shot passed through
as I passed through your pain
to the place where love drew*

*a picture and the dead
are stormless now...*

For denizens of today's troubled world, for those who despair in the face of generational hatred and prejudice, Varon's perfect-pitched poetry is required reading.