

LOOK
By Solmaz Sharif

A book review by Audrey Metzger

Look has been attracting quite the buzz since its 2016 release-- the book of poetry was even a National Book Award finalist and earned a spot on the New York Time's "100 Notable Books of 2016" list. This is Solmaz Sharif's first book. *Look* takes a unique approach to how we dissect the language of war and utilize it in artistic settings. Sharif, of Iranian descent, writes extensively about the Iran-Iraq war. But she does so by utilizing Dickinson's famous adage: "tell the truth, but tell it *slant*." We are reading "war" poems that are so much more than that. While these poems utilize language taken directly from the US Department of Defense's own *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, they still harness subtlety, they still bring the reader into them with a sense of empathy. We are seeing a war, but we are seeing it personalized and filtered through one woman's eyes and one specific conceit of language.

From the outset we are met with powerful language and image. Sharif's first poem of the collection, also entitled "Look," immediately works to breakdown and rearrange how we as readers experience and examine language. Sharif takes us to the word *exquisite*, to the words *thermal shadow*, to the very word *look*. And in taking us to this deep level where the reader must inspect the language so carefully, Sharif brings us wholly into the book from the start. We are hooked by her reappropriation of language, we are hooked by her elegantly frantic need to make sense of vicious language.

The second section of the book, what could be considered the magnum opus of *Look*, is a poem entitled "Personal Effects" that the poet has written for her deceased uncle-- an unwilling victim of the Iran-Iraq war. Sharif writes a compelling elegy while still appropriating the languages of violence and war. This is a poem that utilizes these languages in an attempt to get closer to that lost familial bond. This is a poem that can move the reader to tears with its pervasive desire just to *look* at this uncle, just to hear him say "*hello*." The beautiful desperation throughout the poem heightens those moments of militarized language to a place few poets can go-- Sharif goes without hesitating into the crux of what war means for families and humanity, she goes without fear. In "Personal Effects," Sharif makes that long-desired contact with her uncle, she is able to *look* and see that she has indeed made him proud.