

BECCA KLAVER

## Darker Than a Country Song

*Run*, by Kim Gek Lin Short. Boston, MA: Rope-a-Dope Press, 2010.

Kim Gek Lin Short's chapbook *Run* makes me feel alternately woeful, ecstatic, deranged, and awestruck, and this paradoxical jumble leads me to think about aesthetics and violence—the aesthetics of violence, but also how style can cause pain. Let me start with Short's prose, which is sharp enough to do damage. In the chiseled prose blocks that make up *Run*, Short works in taut, rhythmic phrases on the level of the sentence. Her pacing is powerful: some of the most agonizing moments of *Run* are two-word or run-on sentences, such as this moment from "The Live Album":

What I saw. His sliding. I didn't make that face mother the one you said not to. I didn't blot the blur that swelled what I saw. When I looked. The rope. Tuned guitar strings. Fast as fire. Dissolved sugarcubes in my ankles scraped [*I need you to know what happened to me*]. I just wanted to do something. Mother. I never got to do anything.

"The Live Album" is my vote for the most wrenching poem in *Run*, and there are several contenders in a book that presents the tale of a girl, La La, age 12 or 20 depending on the section, who was trained in a life of violence by an abusive, obsessive mother, and is later kidnapped by a man, apparently straight out of hell, named Ren (pronounced "Run"). Although the book never presents narrative details quite this directly, it appears that "The Live Album" is the story of La La's death told in her own voice. As the climax of our heroine's pain and misery, it is perfectly placed at the end of the chapbook's second section, "Fist City, Hong Kong 1997," two-thirds of the way through. Short's narrative pacing, like her sentence-level rhythm, is extremely precise. The first and the third sections take place in 1989 and are told in third person, while "Fist City" is told in first person from La La's point of view. All three are set in Hong Kong, though Hong Kong seems to include places called "Hell," "Fist City," and "La

La Land," and at one point seems to include the woods of Missouri as well. Even in the context of a tale with supernatural details, it doesn't quite make sense for Missouri to be in Hong Kong, but I feel inclined to trust Short, who is interested in temporal and spatial derangements as much as syntactical, sexual, or violent ones—indeed, all of these seem to go hand in hand. It appears that *Run* does violence to linear, single-setting understandings of narrative in order to represent La La's perspective, irrevocably damaged from the start.

The violence of *Run* happens on a straightforward narrative level, too. This is one of the most viscerally horrific, disgusting books of poetry I have ever read, and I say that with awe, and just a touch of fear. Short's ability to sketch dark fantasies in exacting prose is the crux of the question of aesthetic violence that swirls around the book. Take, for example, this scene of La La and her captor, Ren, from "Nebulizer":

On a hunch he puts an old black and red jockstrap to my face,  
pushes the yellow cup against my nose (the warm of yeast).  
He tapes toilet roll to broken mouth retainer to hard semen-  
gauzy sock, it goes in my crotch. But I stay away. At first there  
is little air. I open searching and then a closing. An event.  
Something recent but long ago, I forget who, it happens.

This scene horrifies and disgusts me; it makes me want to turn away, and makes me want to warn readers not to eat anything while reading *Run*. And yet I admire it: I admire it for its unflinchingness and for its ability to make suffering feel real—to make the reader empathize with La La. Later in the poem, La La says: "In my new life I will be white heat, pure I will rise." This is one of many "promises" she is making to herself in the face of death as Ren holds the nebulizer to her face. This, like the other redemptive moments in *Run* (most notably La La's country singer aspirations), arrives as a glimmer in deep horror. Language itself is the redeeming force, and here as elsewhere, Short gives us a lot to ponder regarding language's power to construct and diminish violence.

On the level of plot, *Run* leaves me with plenty of questions: Is La La dead or alive or someplace in between? Is the cabin in Hong Kong or in the woods of Missouri? Does she ever get to live out her country superstar dreams? And yet, I have a hard time assessing the importance of these concerns for a book that shucks straightforward narrative in favor of a series of vignettes. Perhaps *China Cowboy*, the

full-length version of *Run* forthcoming from Tarpaulin Sky Press, will provide some answers. In any case, *Run's* only weaknesses seem to be ones that emerge out of telling a disturbing narrative in an innovative form: Short perhaps underestimates the strength of our identification with La La. We hardly know her, and yet we see terrible things happen to her, and we want to make sense of these events on a basic human level. I trust that the aestheticized violence of *Run* is being crafted by a supreme stylist, and I'm not looking for a moral to the story, but I'm still unsure what it all adds up to, besides pathos darker than any country song.

It's worth mentioning that Rope-a-Dope Press has created a gorgeous book for *Run*: it's hand-sewn using fine papers; the interior fonts and layout are crisp and appealing; the cover is printed with archival ink, and its blue banner, cowboy boots, and other design details evoke the country western sensibility that is the lighter side of *Run*. It's not often that you hold a chapbook for which the craft of the book object matches the superior literary craft, or vice versa, but with *Run* you get the total package. That the book is itself a beautiful aesthetic object further complicates the relationship between aesthetics and violence in *Run*: this pretty book, like Short's striking prose, belies the darkness underneath, and it's a fascinating paradox to hold in your hand.

Thinking about the paradoxes of *Run* leads me finally to the question of genre. Short's writing is often called "hybrid," but my sense is that this is not precise enough, because the fictional narrative element is so strong. Thinking about these questions of terminology, Alice Notley writes in her preface to *Reason and Other Women* (Chax, 2010), regarding the writing in that book: "Is it prose or poetry? It is of course poetry, which is much more a matter of sound and compression than of white space and line breaks. I am, as I've often said, trying to steal story back from prose to poetry." Short's achievement in *Run* is to "steal" for prose both the compressed sounds of poetry and the tugs and pangs of story. Terms such as "prose poems," "short shorts," and "flash fiction" are in rotation right now, but perhaps we need a new term such as "poetic novella" for series of linked prose poems that work as discrete entities but add up to a larger story. ("Novel-in-verse" comes close, but ultimately doesn't work because "verse" implies lineation.) Or, perhaps we need a broader term that brackets a tradition, because it's easy to see *Run* as an heir to, say, Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, and as part of a larger contemporary cluster that might include Danielle Pafunda's *My Zorba*, Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance*

*Revolution*, and Sabrina Orah Mark's *Tsim Tsum*. That these are all written by women, and all contain elements of fantasy, sci-fi, myth, or fable, seems worth noting, too. When I read writing like this, I think of Adrienne Rich, who said 40 years ago in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision": "For writers, and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored." The psyche Short explores in *Run* is indeed geographical, and the fantasia-maps she sketches open up new worlds even as they leave a trail back to the brutality women and girls endure, and sometimes survive, in the real world.