

Sofia Samatar, *Tender*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2017. Pp. 288. Softcover, \$24.00 (USD)

As I read *Tender*, Sofia Samatar's collection of twenty short stories, I kept thinking about an experience I had a few weeks earlier on a subway platform in the Bronx. A woman with limited English skills began talking to me, and I eventually understood she wanted to know if the train we were waiting for went to a particular stop; however, as the train came roaring out of the darkness, I wasn't clear on *which* station she wanted to reach. I would say one station name, but she'd shake her head, and repeated sounds that were foreign to me in that moment. When the train's doors opened, she grabbed my arm, guided me into the car, and found seats for the two of us. I pulled out my cell phone and brought up my New York City subway map. We pored over the map together until she started jabbing a finger at the screen and repeating the same two words together. I pointed to a stop and asked, "Broadway-Lafayette?" She nodded her head vigorously. We laughed together for some time, relieved that we understood each other at last.

Something similar happens to readers as they work their way through Samatar's collection. Though the worlds Samatar shares with us are communicated in English, there are different meanings to her vocabulary. I began to mark with slips of sticky-notes scenes, lines, and single words, all laden with possible alternate meanings. In one story, "An Account of the Land of the Witches," there is a full lexicon that is simply fascinating. I read *Tender* over several days; Samatar's stories are not to be taken in at once, and each much be given its respectful due. When I was finished, my copy was swollen with lime-green strips of sticky-notes.

One must be willing to be a traveler in a world where the *sound* of the language is familiar but the *meaning* is sometimes obscured to appreciate Samatar's stories. One must allow the one who speaks the common dialect of each world to lead the traveler to the story's truth. Each of the narrators in this collection communicates their story; however, we are not told the whole story. Like students in the immersion method of language learning, we are brought in, sat down, and required to learn the curious alphabets and clashing syllables as the teacher speaks without translation. At times, it seems even the teachers/narrators don't know the whole story—they only know their scrap of knowledge in a world that is *almost* like our own. At times, those worlds are above the earth ("Request for an Extension on the *Clarity*"), not on—or near—Earth at all

("Fallow"), or some kind of post-nuclear-slash-post-climate-change-slash-otherworld-invasion dystopia ("Honey Bear"); we see how dystopias affect the colonized ("Those"), the outsiders, and disabled among us ("The Red Thread"). Like any language learner, I strained to find commonality with the narrators' worlds. Listened for phrases that I knew I understood. When I reached the novella in the collection, "Fallow," I knew I'd hit the jackpot: I'd found the Mennonites.

Of course, as a Mennonite reader, I knew beforehand that the author is "one of us." I had seen phrases and moments that hinted at her Mennonite-ness in her previous stories, but "Fallow" is the most obviously Anabaptist, both in ways that even a non-Mennonite would catch (there are mentions of pacifism and the narrator's sister, Temar, refers to "bonnets with strings or without") and in ways that a long-separated-from-the-fold Mennonite would recognize ("A hymn rose, faint but steadily growing ... We began to sing. *We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing.*"). Even beyond the universal Mennonite trappings, there are hints that made me as a Mennonite take pause, because the experiences of the narrator, Agar, recalled my own experience.

"On Fallow there is always a subtle sense of being closed in," Agar tells us, and a new lexicon is immediately necessary for the careful reader/traveler. The word "fallow" has a gentle connotation. I hear "fallow" and I think of a field resting from its labors, regenerating. But "fallow" can also be known as empty, sterile, and uncreative. Even Agar's use of "subtle" is deceptive, since her world seems anything but subtle. Agar's environment is one of rules that mute everything, from the light that only gloriously shines on Sundays, to the behaviours of each being in this place that is not Earth (Fallow's ancestors built an Ark set for the stars, not another country, since all of Earth was set against them).

Fallow is a community that has complete control over every part of life, both spiritually and physically. Even as she writes, Agar is convinced her story will be "pulped" at its end like every previous creation. When one is prayed for in front of all the community, it is not a prayer to truly bring healing or redemption. Miss Snowfall, Agar's teacher, is prayed for because of "unorthodox" teaching methods (apparently, engaging students' imaginations and accepting them for who they are is "unorthodox" in Fallow). Agar tells us that Miss Snowfall disappears under a "rustling bulge of bodies" during the prayer. Afterwards, Miss Snowfall appears "scrubbed, almost scoured," as if her very individuality has been disposed of. When Agar sees an Earthman

(which refers to both male and female refugees from Earth), she learns that this Earthman had been initially “shunned” for refusing to commit to work for Christ, but had repented and returned. Here one needs to read this “shunning” differently from our world’s definition. Shunning in our world might be arguably *emotionally* violent, but Agar shows us how a “pacifist” people has redefined emotional violence into physical violence: “They give them suits and enough food and oxygen for thirty days, and shun them.” Similarly, when Agar has the audacity to research “The Young Evangelists” – a past group of heretics who wanted to welcome the Earthmen into their midst whether they believed or not – her father shoves her into a wall, and her fellow students respond with a “wall of silence.” “Fallow” is a world that will be familiar to anyone who hails from a religious community.

Tender brings the issues that face our world’s refugees, undocumented immigrants, and the colonized to the forefront, and questions the behaviour of the Mennonite church towards those groups. Samatar tells the truth about our present world through new worlds, new definitions, and new syllables that initially baffle us, until we pause for a moment to listen as I did to the woman on the subway platform, take out a map, and wander with her.

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