

Muscle Memory

by JENNY LIOU



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"You know your life is fucked when you're on better terms with the person you just knocked out than you are with anyone who loves you."

Excerpt from *Muscle Memory* by JENNY LIOU

"In one of [Jenny Liou's] many remarkable poems, she writes being punch-drunk is like thinking in little pieces with big feelings, over and over. She may as well have been describing her own poetry, backgrounded by deep literary learning, flashing bursts of eloquence and beautiful imagery in quick jabs and crosses, her strophes suddenly upon you as a spatter of your own blood sprays from the blows of her viciously gorgeous verse." —GARRETT HONGO, author of *Coral Road*

"A stunning new book, *Muscle Memory* by Jenny Liou, her poetry moves through powerful narratives of the ways women fight for a sense of self... Jenny Liou is a very gifted storyteller, she loves language and images, and the collection has a distinctive narrative voice where the precision of her deft choices of diction and details locates and keeps you in the present moment of each poem along its dramatic arc." —GARY COPELAND LILLEY, author of *The Bushman's Medicine Show*

"Liou writes as the trained fighter she is, her poems feinting across the page with the deft precision of a body turned weapon... Within the ring of these pages, wilderness, blood, and diaspora weave together with the calculated ferocity of a truly singular voice." —TESSA HULLS, author of *Feeding Ghosts*

"Across diaspora, the visceral body, and meditative elegy (including poems that refuse elegy), this book sings of "sour-sweet starfruit" and grits its teeth for the "JAB-CROSS" of "the boxer's iamb." Weaving familial grief with her journey as a MMA fighter, these poems are both narrative and lyrical, swinging into muscular tenderness." —JANE WONG, author of *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*

In *Muscle Memory*, Washington-based poet Jenny Liou grapples with violence and identity, beginning with the chain-link enclosure of the prizefighter's cage and radiating outward into the diasporic sweep of Chinese American history. Liou writes with spare, stunning lyricism about how cage fighting offered relief from the trauma inflicted by diaspora's vanishing ghosts; how, in the cage, an elbow splits an eyebrow, or an armbar snaps a limb, and even when you lose a fight, you've won something else: pain. Liou places the physical manifestation of violence in her sport alongside the deeper traumas of immigration and her own complicated search for identity, exploring what she inherited from her Chinese immigrant father—who was also obsessed with poetry and martial arts. When she finally steps away from the cage to raise children of her own, Liou begins to question how violence and history pass from one generation to the next, and whether healing is possible without forgetting.

JENNY LIOU is an English professor at Pierce College and a retired professional cage fighter. She lives and writes in Covington, Washington.

***Muscle Memory* links your career as a boxer and your career as a writer with unadorned directness. How did you come to find this connection between fighting and poetry?**

JENNY LIOU: I started taking jiu jitsu classes at my father's urging and hated it. But by the time I returned to the sport as a poetry-immersed teenager, I recognized that jiu jitsu and poetry feel like the exact same thing. The way I sort out lines and turns of phrase is precisely the same way that I envision a sequence of grappling maneuvers, experimenting with what exactly that is going to mean for my body.

Stories of immigration form one of the throughlines in *Muscle Memory*. Does writing embody a similar act of transit for you, and if so, what do you imagine yourself moving towards as you write?

JENNY LIOU: I know that when most of us contemplate immigration, we think about motion and transience. But, as a second-generation immigrant, what I've experienced in this phase of my family's journey is a perpetual burrowing in, and poetry and fighting have been my own ways of digging in. This isn't to say that I'm not also hungry for travel. It's just to say that poetry isn't the thing that pulls me somewhere new. It's more like my way of exploring how to belong wherever I find myself.

There are different "you"s addressed throughout *Muscle Memory*. Who do you envision speaking to as the poems' speaker?

JENNY LIOU: The small poems are addressed to many different primary audiences, but instead of taking a narrative that feels very public and revealing its private dimensions, I hope that my book takes a story that feels intensely private and transforms it into a public story about what it means to be a multiracial second generation immigrant with two continents and two vanishing family histories evading me, the story perpetually slipping away, despite my best attempts, as John Donne would say, to fetter it in verse.

***Muscle Memory* appears to be one undivided passage—why did you decide to use this structure for the book?**

JENNY LIOU: As I considered my own positionality and experiences—all the times in which, in response to the features of my face, my long black hair, my Asian femininity, people expected me to be compact and quiet and obedient—I felt compelled to explore what my poems could look like and sound like if I leaned into their messiness, their sprawling interconnections. I decided that I want the poems, and all of their transitory allusions and echoes and resonances with each other, to careen off of each other without the artificial walls of section breaks getting in the way.

What do you want readers to take away about the intersections of your identities as a Chinese woman in a male-dominated space of boxing, especially at a time when violence against Asian women have become hypervisible in the media?

JENNY LIOU: I think we all understand that in our current historical and political moment, to be Asian and female is to be laid bare to violence. My last professional fight was in January of 2017 as America was riding a tide of White nationalism after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In this climate, after retiring from fighting and recovering from birthing two children, I've started competing in grappling tournaments again, but it's not about competition or even self-defense at this point. It's about building community. Writing is also more and more like that for me these days. Now, I write to say: *Let's be sure to know each other. Here I am. There you are. This struggle is going to go on for a while, so show me your favorite take down. I'll teach you my favorite arm bar. Let's bleed. Let's sweat.*