NONFICTION

A Memoir of Divorce and Xenophobia, Narrated by a Clam

Anelise Chen’s genre-bending book “Clam Down” sees an insightful metaphor in a text message typo.

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CLAM DOWN: A Metamorphosis, by Anelise Chen

The narrator of Anelise Chen’s off-kilter new memoir isn’t Anelise Chen. At least, not exactly. Instead, the events of the book — Chen’s divorce, a soul-searching trip to New Mexico, a reckoning with her family history — are told in the third person, a deliberate artistic choice that grants Chen “a top-down view,” she writes, “like seeing yourself from the perspective of a map.” Oh, and the protagonist of her story happens to be a clam.

Yes, we are talking about the humble shelled sea creature, tight-lipped and tasty in chowders. On the page, it’s not as strange as it sounds. “The clam and her husband were sitting on a bench overlooking the East River,” reads a typical sentence. Chen adopts her clam persona after she notices that her mother keeps texting her to “clam down” rather than “calm down,” an opportune typo she seizes on and runs with for roughly 350 pages. Like clams, she too “swallowed whatever was bothering her and worried it under her tongue until it gleamed.” As her marriage falls apart, Chen transforms — emotionally, at least, even if she isn’t literally confined to the ocean floor.

“Clam Down,” then, is an exploration of the clam state of mind, and the benefits and great costs of shutting oneself off from others. It’s a personal story, but its ambitions radiate out to familial and eventually even societal questions. What does it mean to be part of a certain family, or Asian American, or a clam? For Chen, these identities are all linked.

Her father, Henry, also exhibits unmistakable clam-like tendencies: “withdrawing, closing, retreating, hiding.” During her childhood, he spent a decade living alone in Taiwan, apart from his wife and daughters, attempting to create an ultrasecure accounting software named — incredibly — Shell Computing. “Certainly, if *she’s* a clam, it’s because *he’s* a clam,” she realizes on a visit home. “They were all shut tight against one another. It was the classic Chen family coping mechanism.”

To tell her story, she must tell her dad’s; and she does this masterfully, with a novelist’s ability to enter another person’s head (Chen’s previous book, “So Many Olympic Exertions,” is a novel that deftly blends fiction and nonfiction). “Clam Down” includes entire sections written from Henry’s point of view, convincingly

plunging the reader into the mind of a put-upon husband and father. “For almost her whole life,” Henry grumbles about his daughter, “whenever she need something big, she always wait until last minute in order to force me to give it for her. Almost like, you know, hostage situation.” Chen’s rendering of a certain kind of Taiwanese American dad is almost painfully accurate: the blend of petty criticism and implicit affection, aggravated and funny at the same time.

But the true goal of Chen’s investigation into their shared clamhood is the unfurling of Henry’s memories, his particular life story. As she draws him out through phone calls and interviews, his recollections illustrate how one comes to favor a life of isolation: a childhood overshadowed by exploitative parents; a stint in corporate America that was tinged with racism; the series of apartments and office buildings he occupied in his search for solitude and peace. “Well, I always been trapped, always been abused,” he thinks. “This is how I learned to protect. Put up a barrier and close up so nobody can touch me.” These are poignant, sometimes tragic glimpses of a life. But they also read as strikingly fresh — a record of an interior experience rarely seen in American letters.

Despite its ruling metaphor, “Clam Down” is in one respect distinctly un-clam-like: It sprawls. Crammed in around the central narrative are bits of mollusk-adjacent research: discussions of the animal-transformation fables of Kafka, Ovid, Leonora Carrington, Italo Calvino and Yoko Tawada; capsule biographies of Georgia O’Keeffe, who painted clams and mussels in the 1920s and ’30s, and Charles Darwin, who spent eight years meticulously investigating barnacles. One intriguing “imaginative exercise” recounts the history of Asian clams (Corbicula fluminea) smuggled in ships from China to California during the Gold Rush — from the perspective of the clams.

There is a larger insight here, about clamming up as a response to historical xenophobia. But by the time she hikes the Camino de Santiago in Spain, “one of the oldest pilgrimage paths in Europe” (its emblem: a scallop), and interviews climate scientists about ocean acidification, what began as daring formal experiment becomes strained and unwieldy.

Thankfully, the clam conceit loosens by the book’s end. As the pandemic arrives and ebbs, father and daughter both open up to the world, a triumph that feels hard-won. On its cover, “Clam Down” is billed not as memoir or novel but as a “metamorphosis,” and the word is apt. The story it tells, of emotional change and growth, is a human one — which is precisely what makes it so moving.

CLAM DOWN: **A Metamorphosis** | By Anelise Chen | One World | 356 pp. | $29