

“*Trace Evidence* is an astute, subversively reserved, and propulsive book, in which reverence for the line and its possibilities fashions an eros that’s made new through precise yet concussive turns of phrases. All of which reminds you what sits at the heart of these poems: that ‘*you are actually very good at joy.*’ A truly magical achievement.”

—OCEAN VUONG,

bestselling author of *Time Is a Mother*

“Revelatory and pulsating with truth, *Trace Evidence* is a dangerously wise book of poems. Each poem is full of muscular music and meticulously carved out of longing as they ask, not just why we live, but how we live, and for whom. Wholly human and deeply rooted in attention, this book is for anyone who has ever questioned where they belonged.”

—ADA LIMÓN,

24<sup>th</sup> US Poet Laureate and  
author of *The Hurting Kind*

“Charif Shanahan is examining race and sexuality in ways I have not seen. *Trace Evidence* mines the most intimate reaches of our colonial past to ask these important questions: *How do we live and love with so much betrayal? Betrayal of the self, by family, lovers, friends, the body’s betrayal of itself?* Notably, the book contends with an anti-Blackness beyond the familiar narratives of our contemporary moment: here, it emanates from the Arab world through the very parent who confers Blackness to her children, offering nuance and complexity to the ways in which we tend to consider the subject. And while there is a through-line of pain in this book, as it explores the liminality of mixed-race identity, time and mortality, it neither ends in despair nor seeks to assign blame. . . . Charif’s is a necessary voice.”

—NATASHA TRETWEY,

19<sup>th</sup> US Poet Laureate and  
Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Native Guard*

“Ecstatic in their exactitude, crystalline in their wisdom, these poems remind me of the period after a great struggle, when body and psyche recover one another. *Trace Evidence* is an utter revelation.”

—**TRACY K. SMITH**,  
22<sup>nd</sup> US Poet Laureate and  
Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Life on Mars*

“In *Trace Evidence*, Charif Shanahan writes a world. It is a whole world, a full world, because Shanahan knows what to leave out—his is neither a maximalist’s art, nor a minimalist’s art, but a completist’s art, an art that understands maximalism tends toward deception, and minimalism tends toward exclusion. A poet who is a completist is a welcoming poet, and in its treatment of some of the most divisive social issues of our day, *Trace Evidence* is a wholly welcoming book, a book in which a reader can live.”

—**SHANE McCRAE**,  
author of *Cain Named the Animal*

“Epic in scope, packed with emotional power, fiercely intelligent, sensual, erotic, audacious, tracing lineages of race and of family and of love, presenting the hard evidence of socially structured hatred and destruction, spiritually infused with human being: ‘If you are on this earth / You are of this earth,’ the poet insists, in a book brilliantly and beautifully shaped and alive with the hope that poetry alone can bring. I call out *Trace Evidence* for what it is: a masterpiece.”

—**LAWRENCE JOSEPH**,  
author of *A Certain Clarity: Selected Poems*

# TRACE EVIDENCE

**TRACE  
EVIDENCE**

*poems*

**CHARIF  
SHANAHAN**



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

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*for my brother Karim*

“I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions.”

— F A N O N

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## COLONIALISM

At intersections I knew to look both ways  
As she had taught me

As she had known to look both ways  
At the port of arrival—

Not to Ellis Island or to JFK  
But to the white blanket of my father

Then back to her mother and away—  
So that when the single summer we returned

To the land she had left  
And the four of us—she, myself,

My two tanned brothers—  
Stood below the open Casablanca sun

Waiting on a thinly grassed divider  
For a sliver to form

Within the traffic—  
The air smart and nearly visible as

Neighbor boys pointed down  
From windows—*Mrikani!*—*mrikani!*—and I

Dashed through the exhaust of four lanes  
Not exactly a highway

But still too wide to be crossing—  
And without a crosswalk, no less—

She rushed to the other side  
And slapped my backside hard: *Elash, mon fils? Why*

*Would you do that to me?—*

# TRACE EVIDENCE

“A sense of shame is the beginning of integrity.”

—MENCIUS

## "MULATTO" :: "QUADROON"

I want to tell you what for me it has been like.

To speak at all  
I must occupy a position

In a system whose positions  
I appear not to occupy.

Though some say such nonposition is  
My position—

*Speak from that placeless place outside the system etc.*  
Some would say and have said—

If the placeless place is created by terms  
Of the system then it must be  
Within the system even if it appears

Otherwise. And so

It may be that the position  
Presumed to be *of body*

Might better be regarded as  
A position *of thought* or

A receptivity to possible experience  
As conceived by the still  
Implausible eye

Of a man who defined  
The flimsy self he carried

Against those whom he did not  
Understand or know or in any real sense

See—

And if the possible vision  
Of that implausible eye

Accounted for you  
In name only

Then filed you under  
*Consequence—Side effect*

It is not that the system fails  
To position you,

It positions you actively  
And specifically nowhere

So that you appear on the outside  
But remain within

Or you appear within  
But remain on the outside

Which is to say in other words

*A part and apart—*

And so

If to speak in a particular social world I must

Occupy a position and that world consists

Of positions that are clear but none

Of which clearly I occupy

Then it may be that I cannot even if I want to

Tell you what for me it has been like

And so

## IMAGO

*for Marvin*

*Stay*, I repeated. *Stay*. And each time I said it  
You stepped further away.

I needed you, and it was all you  
Could see and the thing you questioned:

The borrowed chairs we sat in

Had the look of something once very dirty, then  
Cleaned incompletely, the dimmed lights

Threw a shadow of your dog onto the white walls  
As she circled our feet—were you

My self then, absent some days itself—?

*I wish you a good night and all the joy you can build*  
*In the time ahead*, you said. And what I heard, what I knew

You were saying was, *I will not figure*  
*Into the time ahead*, which I had expected to hear,

In some way—and so  
The feeling was not one of loss, exactly—

Though I have lost, and lose—  
But completion. The loss had occurred, I think,

Before we tried to give ourselves a name.

## THIRTY-THIRD YEAR

You can see already how this will work out for you.  
You will dither into and out of your days.  
You will find the conditions with which to talk a good game  
—*Oh, that California sun, the air is just cleaner out here*—  
As the vines grow tighter around the house—this time,  
A borrowed one, shared with twenty-two white eccentrics,  
Three of whom are the children you used to say  
You wanted, but no longer see  
As viable. Who gets to live the life  
They think they want? So few  
Curate with energy . . . You'll come to an end  
Which will feel final but naturally also be  
A beginning, and you can see how that phase will work out for you, too.  
It's all a single thread, after all, a single braid,  
Only looking closely do you see the frays, do the vines  
Grow tighter. You'll seek help from two women  
Dedicated to helping others and they will be unable  
To help you, despite your organizing your life around their help.  
That's the way it is, you know: you look to the left and to your right  
A golden ticket falls from the sky; you write a book of poems  
And your hero, at your book party, tosses her hand through the air  
To tell her friend who's just asked who you are that you are nobody.