

Connie T. Braun, *Silentium: And other Reflections on Memory, Sorrow, Place, and the Sacred*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017. Pp. 186. Softcover, \$27.50.

At first, Connie Braun wrote poems about her mother's grandparents. Eventually her mother's story became her focus, as she tells us in her introduction. Now a more complete story of both her mother's and her maternal grandparents' lives in Poland comes to us in the form of Braun's new work, *Silentium*. This book comprises poems as well as a series of connected essays that place these poems into a specific context. This collection examines, through both historical data and reflective envisaging, what happened to Mennonites who lived in Poland during World War Two, and the effect of these circumstances on them and on their descendants. Themes that surface and re-surface include silence, loss, and ultimately, life.

Braun positions herself as "a witness" to this time that has to a large extent remained "silent," or as Jean Janzen writes in the introduction, "essentially untold for decades; [a time that] wait[ed] for a truthful telling." Braun wants to unearth this past with its sometimes suppressed facts and memories, and surely its trauma. But she does so with sympathetic gentleness, and with respect for those she writes about. She chooses to write poetically, inserting her own imaginings in amongst the harsh details of what her family members experienced, ensconced within the metaphor of spinning thread: "thread is spun by a woman working endlessly at the wheel"; "out of silence, a genealogy spun like a silk thread." Nostalgic and probing observations are inserted between paragraphs that speak of stark historical data. Indeed, this book moves easily and often from the concrete to the poetic:

In 1950, the family was again examined and rejected for immigration... [but eventually] relocated to another rural town, into shared housing. Siblings Anna and Bill worked threshing in the fields.

Insert crochet hook into yarn. Loop over. Pull through. Continue, stitch by stitch, row by row.

Specific images, too, are significant and carefully placed in this work, often bookending individual chapters. "Between Worlds," for example, begins with Braun on her grandfather's lap, the two of them cosily watching the decades-old TV sit-com, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The narrative then switches to her seventy-something grandfather's return trip to Poland, for the first time re-connecting with a past that included spending "nine months in a camp before being transferred to Lodz for another four years." The chapter ends: "I'm getting too old to sit on his lap [but] ... on [the] screen in black and white, to the opening tune of banjos, Granny, Jed, Jethro, and Elly May ... are driving through palm tree- and mansion-lined streets." In this way Braun offers historical information about this horrific period, while softening that horror with images of a later, gentler time. This strategy also allows the reader to see how Braun, as narrator, views both the historical events and their effects on those who come after.

The personal inserts are not only revealing, but they also provide a useful relief from passages that are at times chock-full of historical information. One set of recurring "meanderings" includes Braun's candid and descriptive reflections on her own visit to Poland, as she researches her family's emotional past. "I wanted to know where I had come from, at once a geography of the self and a landscape of otherness."

As its title suggests, this collection explores the reason for silence, "like a thick snowfall," on a difficult past. While there are many reasons for silence, one of the reasons Braun proffers is that, for the Mennonites,

it [was] ... a contested history wherein personal stories unfold only long after the public narrative of the War in Europe, the Holocaust, are over. Who could talk about the suffering of Mennonites and Germans under the weight of the Jewish experience?

Braun also considers the ethics involved in the way the Mennonites responded. Indeed, what Braun does so effectively is allow the story to develop in ways that are neither judgmental nor exculpatory. The Mennonites in Poland were placed in an extremely vulnerable position, and research implies that some of them may have acted in ways that were ethically compromising in order to alleviate their own suffering. But rather than explicitly indict anyone, Braun chooses to ask questions: "Did they think they might at least treat prisoners with a measure of dignity? How would they have answered if we could ask them why?" The fact that Braun does not

skirt this issue makes this collection not only a nostalgic and poetic re-telling of traumatic events, but also a credible one.

Braun's choice to format this work poetically is a good one, for the most part. One section of prose moves seamlessly into the next one of poetry without explanation; readers are free to make connections that work for them. Occasionally, however, the format effected a sense of busyness for me, as in "Gathered Fragments: 1944-1948," where short quotations from a chapter in Ecclesiastes were interspersed throughout the narrative. Nevertheless, I understand the poetic intention to demonstrate visually the idea of fragments, and other readers may resonate with the technique.

Overall, this work is a lovely combination of difficult facts and tender imaginings. The reader is always aware of the personal aspect of the story, aware that the writer is emotionally and honestly invested in this telling. As Braun testifies: "I am learning that in the aftermath of violent histories, telling stories and listening to stories are acts of peace." Surely *Silentium* represents Braun's personal "act of peace."

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