

Connie T. Braun, *Unspoken: an inheritance of words*. Vancouver: Fern Hill, 2016. Softcover, \$20.00.

Connie T. Braun's debut poetry collection follows in a tradition of Mennonite witness literature that explores the claims and traces of a traumatic past on the present. Braun composes a multi-generational "memoir in poems," along with select photographs, which she dedicates to her mother and her maternal grandmother, revisiting a common Anabaptist-Mennonite history of multiple displacements, losses, and resettlements prior to their immigration to Canada. With its references to the Gulag and to the voicelessness of her traumatized grandparents, who seek to shield subsequent generations from their never fully exorcised pain, *Unspoken* risks becoming yet another sober celebration of this small ethnic group whose identity is often predicated on noble suffering for the preservation of faith. Certainly Braun makes explicit her desire to bequeath to her children "passed along stories about / God" and a "birthright" of pacifist faith, at once "ephemeral and enduring." Yet what emerges in this slim collection of nineteen poems is a meditation not only on what may be transmitted, whether or not it gets verbally articulated, but a rich, complex inquiry into the meaning of selfhood and the work of witnessing to others.

Braun touches deftly on the intensity of her longing for the untold or partially stories of the elder generation, while alluding as well to the potentially transgressive nature of her project. A hint of worry emerges, for example, in her confession that the "family secrets" slip "out easily / past [her] lips," in stark contrast to her grandparents: they "wordlessly" bind wounds, physical and psychic, and speak "of them no more." That Braun chooses to turn to words, in spite of some hesitation, invites readers to consider, in

turn, the delicate nature of bonds and boundaries in intimate relations. The first and final poems in the volume provide important clues to her poetics and to her ethics of testimony. Both feature the first-person speaker as lovingly, physically indebted to other generations, including homelands and experiences that do not readily lend themselves to explanatory language or coherent narratives. Citing Paul Ricoeur, Braun characterizes herself as one whose “life cannot be grasped / as a singular totality,” but only in terms of an ongoing, relational experience of dwelling with others in their simultaneously proximate and elusive particularities. Moreover, *Unspoken* ultimately suggests that all beings, sites, things, and eras not only possess the capacity to testify to the unfinished histories of loss and survival, but also that all implicitly call for a witness. Even silence needs a witness. How else would we know it was there?

Unspoken opens with a poem that identifies “History” as “a silent country” when it comes to “memories/ . . . too painful to unearth,/ buried in the ground of Elsewhere.” Nonetheless, her central paradoxical premise of inheriting not only silence but also “words unconsciously proffered and silently tendered” (to borrow the phraseology of Michael Levine from another context) performs complex work. Like other accounts of largely unspoken trauma and loss, hers queries the multiple sites where memory gets stored and the dynamics of physical and affective transmissions. Memory, Braun discloses, lodges not only in human minds and documents, but in everything from the flesh and blood of the body to built and natural landscapes, food cultures, and the Low German language. Consider her unique figuration of the potato as a source of transmission and connection across a myriad of geographical and inter-subjective boundaries. Her grandmother, in her flight from the old country to British Columbia, guards the “golden nuggets” of potato eyes like precious familial heirlooms, subsequently recreating in her bountiful new world garden aspects of the nourishing taste and hospitality of her former familial home. Buried like memories, the potatoes in another soil get unearthed, cooked, and laden with a thick cream gravy, becoming a “currency” of the still present past and of the affection the grandmother lavishly proffers to her large family, often in lieu of words. The silence speaks of what she cannot bear to say – that is, what has been irretrievably lost – and of what remains: the shared pleasures of appetite, embodiment, and sustaining loves.

Such juxtaposition of sharp losses and the “honey-like sweetness” still to be found in material-linguistic family ties recurs

throughout the volume. And, illuminatingly, both the absences and the sensual, relational pleasures conjure longings in Braun. In one particularly affecting poem, she figures the pain of her relatives as a kind of treasure she has coveted from childhood and wishes to keep with her, even as her grandmother preserved her golden potato nuggets. In “Polished Buttons,” Braun recalls her young self entering into the sewing room of her grandmother’s home where the elder kept “leftover / buttons shining in the mason jar beside her treadle machine” as well as the undiscussed photograph of her long-dead teenaged son. In turn, the speaker comes to tuck away pain “like a polished button in the pocket of [her] grandmother’s apron.”

The silent pain of the one can also be borne silently by another, silence becoming, counter-intuitively, an affective currency of recognition. As poignantly, Braun figures pain and difficult histories as quietly coterminous with the gleams of everyday lives and objects. Neither venerating nor abjecting pain, Braun allows it a place in the “Long, tangled ribbons of affection / our family ties” and thus in the very stuff of selfhood, which belongs to and with others. She concludes *Unspoken* with gratitude for her multiple inheritances, and then bequeaths herself, lovingly, to others. This is a powerful, poetic witness to the unfinished nature of history and the inherently inter-subjective nature of the self.

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Works Cited

Levine, Michael G. *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.