

Book Reviews

Literary Reviews

Di Brandt, *Glitter and Fall: Laozi's Dao De Jing Transinhalations*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2018. Pp. 85. Softcover, \$17.

Glitter and Fall, Di Brandt's seventh full-length collection of poetry, is less of a departure from her earlier work than it may at first appear. Over the past thirty years, Brandt has fashioned an ethos and a mythos for the Canadian prairie, filtered through the lens of her upbringing on a farm in a Manitoba Mennonite community. She has interrogated the institutionalization of oppression not only in patriarchal religion, but in the structure of the family, contemporary capitalism, and the violation of First Nations peoples by European settlement, and she has testified to the ache of living through environmental degradation. In her collection of essays *So this is the World and Here I am in it*, Brandt practiced what she described as a "reparative poetic meditation"—a term borrowed from critic Eve Sedgwick—to reframe elements of her Mennonite upbringing. Positioning the modern farming practices employed by the male heads of Mennonite households as violating an ancient sacred trust with the land, she argues that a strain of earth-based pre-Reformation peasant culture had survived in traditional Mennonite farming communities, especially through the oral tradition of women. And, in the multilingual poetry collection *Walking to Mojácar* (2014), she experimented with expansive, creative translations. Although the turn to ancient Chinese thought in *Glitter and*

Fall is certainly new territory for Brandt, its exploration of the sacred and of nature, its earnest reclamation of the feminine, and its expansive and experimental use of translation, is not.

Even so, Brandt takes a new approach to intertextuality in *Glitter and Fall*, which is presented as a creative re-translation of a fourth-century BCE Chinese masterwork. Working with English translations of the *Dao De Jing*, Brandt did not aim to produce a scholarly interpretation. Instead, she attempts what novelist Robert Majzels defines as “a process of *transinhalation* (inhalation is the movement of withdrawal, concentration and restraint to make room from the other, that precedes all creation),” offering a record of her “poetic engagement with the text and gradual understanding of its precepts in our contemporary intercultural context.”

As a collection of poetry, the nature-based imagery of the *Dao De Jing* proves a perfect foil for Brandt’s own passion for the natural world, and her desire for reparative human effort. The poems themselves are often delightful and playful, transposing the somewhat murky ruminations of Laozi’s ancient text into the imagery of contemporary Manitoba, perhaps in Winnipeg, where she now lives and teaches at the University. The collection appears to revel in its own eclecticism. Brandt captures the feminine spirit in the midst of her daily life, as in “Highbush Cranberry,” which begins

You stride through the city like a queen.
 Your silver wolf coat, earned in recent dark days,
 sways above your shapely ankles.
 Presidents hesitate over their coffees
 in their silver towers.
 The rivers may flood their banks again in spring.

The feminine “you” of this and many other female subjects in this poem is permeable and echoes the movement of life, as the opening poem, “Wild Rose Petals” suggests: “Her heart was a noisy playground / eager children chirping like seagulls.” In “Hole in the Wall,” the female subject “makes poems out of images and sounds / reverberating vividly into silence,” as she “carries vegetables home from the market in a little cloth bag”; she sews yellow curtains for the kitchen window, “invisible glass over a hole in the wall,” declaring, with a nod to the *Dao De Jing*, that “Everything that is lives in everything / that is not.” In “Can She Bake a Cherry Pie,” Brandt mixes the political and the domestic, stirring up instructions for rulers and the media with a recipe for pie crust. The “glitter” of the title is the motion of the divine feminine shining in the world in both the ecstatic and the mundane.

As a larger project, however, Brandt's engagement with the *Dao De Jing* raises some questions. To be sure, Brandt inhales the Dao and exhales a vision of the feminine missing from or obscured in so many of our sacred texts. But the Dao itself, based on dualism (yin is never without yang), invokes a feminine principle that exists only in relation to a male principle—and thus would seem to resist this type of revisionary work. Laozi unsettles readers with paradoxes that urge them to take a passive or feminine role, perhaps to undermine superficial understandings of power. "Know the male / but keep the role of the female / and be a ravine to the empire" reads D. C. Lau's classic translation of the first three lines of Book One, XXVIII. In my understanding, The Way, that mysterious force of the universe, is intentionally non-gendered, a paradox beyond duality, but shaped by it. At times, the feminine divine in Brandt's poems seems to suggest a deliberate revision of Christian patriarchal imagery, a *transinhalation* that would be daring indeed:

The raspberry canes in Her Garden
are deep-rooted.
The hand in Her Hand is secure.
Through Her Grandeur everything
is made new.

But the question remains as to whether Brandt's revisioning depends on the evocation of an unspoken male presence. Is she inadvertently caught in a dualism that she has spent much of her career struggling against? If she is commenting on the *Dao De Jing*, then on whose terms are we supposed to understand the conversation?

Glitter and Fall is an ambitious project, and several of its poems stand up among the best of Brandt's illustrious career. It offers readers sharp imagery, creative play, and plenty of paradox to help us question the way in which we live amidst the contradictions of our current world. Taking simple inspiration from great sacred works can be profound, and avoids the risks of appropriation while giving the poetry room to stand. Yet I am less sure that framing these poems as a reinterpretation of the Laozi's *Dao De Jing* allows them to shine. In my reading, the author's extended foreword, which attempts to explain the use of *transinhalation*, and which takes time to situate her own work in the Canadian literary context, overshadows poems that deserve to be read on their own merit, inviting the reader into their linguistic play. I had to push through the foreword after several unsuccessful tries, believing it was essential to my reception of the poems. It was not. Rather, it

sent me on a long detour through the *Dao De Jing*, which had its rewards, but distracted me from the poems at hand. I would have preferred to encounter the poems first, and then find out about the intertextual and scholarly context in an afterword.

In its ambition and many of its themes, *Glitter and Fall* is consistent with much of Brandt's larger oeuvre, and the poems are well worth reading in relation to it. She has always been a willing risk-taker in her poetry, unafraid to risk offense as she follows her seemingly inexhaustible curiosity. Perhaps that is why her attempt to frame this project, to justify it, and—most surprisingly—to tell us how to read it, feels disorienting. A stand-alone essay by Brandt on the process of interacting with the *Dao De Jing* through transinhalation could make for an engrossing read, but the poems deserve to stand alone on their own merits.

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Works Cited

- Majzels, Robert, with Claire Huot. "After Li He, Li Ping plays the Kong Hou." *Cipher Journal*. www.cipherjournal.com/html/majzels.html. Accessed 2 Feb. 2020.
- Tzu, Lao. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. D. C. Lau. New York: Penguin, 1963.

Daniel Shank Cruz, *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Pp. 184. Hardcover, \$119.95.

Daniel Shank Cruz's *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community* is an important, ambitious work of Mennonite cultural studies. Not only does the book present a comprehensive account of queer and trans Mennonite literature, it argues for a new vision of what it might mean to be Mennonite. By linking the radical anti-normativity of the earliest Anabaptist resisters to the anti-normative, often politically radical and sexually transgressive ethos of contemporary queer life, Cruz seeks to extend Mennonite identity beyond its ethnic and religious roots, arguing that the term Mennonite ought to be understood as signifying a transformative political outlook rather than simply a religious identity. As Cruz puts it himself: