

Cultural Daily

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Book Review: *Open the Fist* by Elya Braden

John Brantingham · Wednesday, August 19th, 2020

I meant to write the review of Elya Braden's *Open the Fist* fairly quickly. It is after all a chapbook, and those generally take less time because they are short and generally fairly focused on one topic. I've found myself sitting down at the computer and staring at it and then taking long walks trying to find a way in. The problem is that I am the product of a culture that is flawed in so many ways. One of the ways that I and we are flawed is that we have not developed a good vocabulary and means of discussion for incest, preferring instead to treat it as though we should be embarrassed of it. And of course, those perpetrating this crime should be ashamed, but the rest of us need to talk about it in a clear and direct way if we have any desire to end it.

Braden's collection is one of those works that give us the means and vocabulary to speak about it. It is both good poetry and a way to approach the subject. Her work is vulnerable and strong. It is exceptional. The inability to talk about this subject is what abusers want as Braden points out in "In my Father's Office" where she describes the sterile pictures that he keeps of her:

His leather chair on rollers: a throne for the king
of everything. His cup of pencils sharp as arrows,

hungry for blood. Lined up next to them,
the frozen smiles of our school pictures. This
is how he loved us: tidy, adoring, silent. (7).

This collection is part of the breaking of that cycle of silence, and it explores the pain that is inherent to that silence. It is enforced by threats from the narrator's father:

My world shrunk to dancing dots,
to wet, to black, to splinters,
his voice the hiss
of a thousand snakes:
I will kill you if you tell (10).

It is also enforced by the narrator's brother, also an abuser:

Try to forget the sticky touch of your brother's
beanbag chair on your bare thighs,
your brother's threat: *I'll tell everyone what you did.* (13).

The brother uses violence and shame, and the mother uses shame as well to keep her silent. It seems that our culture does everything it can to keep this abuse quiet rather than stop the abuse. That's not a new statement of course. Anyone who has been a part of this cycle understands this. However, I find myself disturbed that I have found it so difficult to write a review of this book because of this cultural perversion toward silence.

This collection then is an antidote to that larger problem. It is an attack on not only the act, but the hiding of the act as well, and as such it should be read and understood. And lest you think that this is only medicine, I should also say that the writing is tremendously strong. It should be read for that reason as well.

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