

A SUBTERRANEAN MEMOIR

Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles: An Accidental Memoir. Kate Braverman. Graywolf Press. 2006.

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In *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles*, Kate Braverman writes a memoir of subterranean Los Angeles—a place where, Braverman states, “It is of utmost importance that you do not lose pieces of yourself before your vanishing is complete. You must avoid gratuitous acts of unborn geography. I know this for a fact.” The gloss of Los Angeles is not a part of Braverman’s coming-of-age, but the fast-pace and surrealistic traffic and riots surely are a part of her adult world. “Wasn’t Los Angeles always a sort of massive studio set, a clever assemblage of facades...?” She stands apart from celluloid creations of Hollywood, except in a fabulist interview with Marilyn Monroe, which she includes in the memoir, yet even in that interview and throughout the book, she writes in a voice distanced from herself. As the reader, I too am kept from the superficial L.A. and come to know—through Braverman’s expert hand—the L.A. of immigrants and drug addicts and mothers who long to leave. “We were the offspring of disaster.... And we came to Los Angeles for the great American promise of a second chance.” This voice is consistent throughout the work, as if Braverman knows herself as an author of four novels, two collections of short fiction, and four books of poetry, but also sees this body of writing as something separate from the geography of her own body: “I know a woman, she was a writer, yes. I admit this. A poet from Los Angeles.”

A stream-of-consciousness memoir that connects location to identity, *Frantic Transmissions* is in no way linear. Braverman provides little in the way of dates, instead focusing on “[v]anished women [who] do not require specific love. They are never lonely.” Unique observations are part of Braverman’s text—why wouldn’t “vanished women” be lonely? This focus means the memoir reads as particularly feminist, however, that label suggests a narrow vision—an exclusion—and this memoir is at its base inclusive, in many ways because of the lack of linearity or specificity of time. Some readers might wish for more specifics of sequential development; however, I thought it was one of the strengths of the text, and there are cultural references that place it in time. Do we remember a life as certain development or as dream memory leading somewhere or nowhere at all? The somewhere Braverman’s life leads is to New York’s Allegheny Mountains where her husband takes

a position teaching. There is abundant geographic detail, both about the place she leaves and the place she enters. Braverman's very identity seems to change when she is finally able to leave Los Angeles. Earlier her uncle had warned her, "You feel that lucky, kid? Think you can just walk out the door into another life?" Says Uncle Irving, ruefully, the painter "Chagall left my people out of his paintings." It is the same way American immigrants were left out of the mainstream films that came straight out of glitzy L.A.

Braverman's fast-paced life slows when she lives in the mountains. She comes to know her daughter: "If you knew my family, you'd understand why people have been, for me, an acquired taste." I come to know Los Angeles and the Allegheny Mountains, but I'd like to know her family better. This is one deficit of the memoir—the reader is let into the topography of place and identity, but could have been further let into the geography of family intimacy. "But then again," writes Braverman, "falling in love with landscapes is what L.A. women do."

In New York, resettled, Braverman tells us: "That summer, I watched deer three feet from where I stood, memorizing the orchard turning yellow then red, while fields of sweet corn went to straw." Her view of nature, of her neighbors, remains urban and cosmopolitan. It is as if Los Angeles has so deeply formed her view of the world, of herself, that even though she leaves it, the place does not leave her. Braverman is aware of this: "Los Angeles and I came of age together. To actually claim Los Angeles as your city of birth or choice is a brazen admission. It puts you on the defensive, immediately and permanently."

Braverman's life is made visible through lyric prose much like "accidental prayers made visible" in the second essay of the book, "Escaping Los Angeles: Incantations and Magic." The excellence of her writing will be familiar to her many readers; in addition, the clever crafting and structure of *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles* shows wonderful experimentation and possibilities within the nonfiction memoir form. It is deserving of Graywolf Press's first annual nonfiction prize, which was judged by Robert Polito, who wrote the informative introduction to the book.