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Book review: "Things Come On: An Amneoir"

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Things Come On: An Amneoir by Joseph Harrington. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011

Joseph Harrington calls his new book "an amneoir," a blend of the words "memoir" and "amnesia" because of the disconnection between crucial life events -- for Harrington himself and for the country at large -- and what we can remember about them. Blending the twin stories of personal and political cancers, Harrington maps, juxtaposes, poeticizes, patishes and asks questions of the singular story he lived through of his mother's death from breast cancer and the politically cancerous Watergate scandal, which both came to a head in the early 1970s. As Harrington himself explains in the first sentences of this book, "I watched the Senate hearings in the summer of 1973. My mother lay in the hospital, away, doing nothing. I remember Daniel Inouye and Howard Baker better than I remember her. They left records" (5).

At the core of this book is the truth that many of us, when going through the most life-shaping events of our lives, must grapple with not just what we experienced, but what ways we can tell ourselves and others the story inside the story without exaggeration, romanticism or amnesia. Just as the pain of childbirth is difficult for women to remember viscerally, often so is the pain of irreconcilable losses. The familiar markers of such a time -- particularly historical in the case of this book -- can help us circle back to the question of what really happened, and yet as Harrington shows, in many cases, we can't step into the same river twice: the telling of the story is not the actual story.

So what Harrington has done in this book is to use poetry, journal entries, hospital records, Senate testimony, letters, newspaper clippings, woodcuts and drawings, illustrations and photographs, dialogue and cartoons to convey the gestalt of what he experienced. While there's poetry, this isn't a collection of poetry. While there's memoir and non-fiction, this isn't a book that fits into either category. Instead, this form he created, pieced together and uncovered is more of a collage of found objects that puts like beside unlike, personal heartbreak alongside the news of the day, and what can't be fully remembered in the space between what's said and not said.

The two sections of the book, "Investigation" and "Resignation" also speak to a progressive of loss, but beforehand is a kind of invocation. Beginning with the statement, in an oversized and ornate font, "Your Mother was a Perfect Southern Lady," Harrington quotes comments from friends and acquaintances about his mother alongside an illustration of her shopping guide, "Her Sizes" (issued by Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey), containing her hand-written height, weight, bust, coat, hat and even girdle sizes. The combination of reading "She was a very feistery woman when she wanted to be" and seeing that Harrington's mother was a petit, slim woman immediately gives the reader a sense of how Mrs. Elizabeth Peoples Harrington is seen from the exterior world.

From there, the book takes off on a twisting drive through the personal and political. Harrington at one point combines a self interview with news, asking himself, "So you would have been ten, when your mother was diagnosed? What did you know, and when did you know it?" and answering with a quote from a senator and then a quote from Sally J. Harmony, G. Gordon Liddy's secretary in her testimony before the Senate Select Committee, who said, "I did know absolutely nothing" (8). This interplay between news in Harrington's household and the country at large continues with bits of transcript from the impeachment hearings across the page from a piece called "Reach to Recovery Lady Eases Patient Suffering with 'Pathetic Puff of Lambswool'," in which Harrington deconstructs what "being fine" means after a masectomy, writing:

The Patient; The Mother; The Woman; The Norm

We didn't want the Wretch to become a witch.

Fine, in fine.

Falsie fine.

The Norm. (13).

In the overall arc of "Investigation," Harrington looks at the household and political landscape undergoing massive and rapid change while trying to convey a new normal as his mother loses her breast, hair and hope for the future. One of the most moving passages of the book is a conversation, presumably between Harrington and his father or a close friend of his mother's:

"...the cancer that it was, you know, advanced, and that -- she

cried and she said, I'm only sorry -- she said -- I won't get to see him grow up."

"She said that, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Me too." (30).

This first half of the book ends with the reality that Elizabeth Harrington wouldn't be coming home from the hospital, a listing of her address over six years, and a small poem that asks, "What do you think/ they call us ghosts?" this section seals the fate of the investigation.

"Resignation" begins with the startling statement, "Sensitive Material," surrounded by a thick, alarming border and soon moves into the reality of late-stage cancer, a nation experiencing grave betrayal and a young boy trying to make of it all to the extent that he even lists books he's read, Senate testimony between Senator Baker and Mr. Dean, lists of chemotherapy drugs, logs of how Elizabeth Harrington is doing each day, family snippets of dialogue and reports on Nixon lead to both the resignation of Richard Nixon and the death and aftermath of Harrington's mother. Her obituary reveals she was executive secretary to Sen. Albert Gore, Sr., her letters convey her kindness and compassion to others, and her medical logs convey her realization that there is nothing to do but die. Meanwhile, her son asks "Is it not enough to just write down the story?" (71), and in the aftermath of her death:

my mother lives under the ground

so I am drawn to that country

still air cools water trickles blackberries

roots tower down in her house

up here a sky never whole

buoys around light of the moon

I could spend half a year
down where she always lives (72).

Through the tenderness and complexity, personal loss and national betrayal, Harrington points the reader toward essential questions: What is memory? What is the nature of what we remember and don't remember about pivotal events in our lives? How do we live with what we can't completely forget or completely remember? And what does it mean to live and tell a true story that changes everything?