

L.A. Stories

Elegance, emotion, and the L.A. landscape in Kate Braverman's new book of short stories

By Karen Kevorkian

Los Angeles, toxic and vital, is a place where conventional description of emotion doesn't apply. Kate Braverman, a poet, novelist, and short fiction writer, whose second novel *Palm Latitudes* (1988) gave her a wide and appreciative audience, in her new book of short stories, *Small Craft Warnings*, employs the area's lovely and bizarre urban landscape to articulate her characters' experiences. Imprinting itself on our "intricate private geographies," description of the exterior landscape provides a way to emotionally survive.

"North or south of Wilshire," she writes; "are an immensity of possibility, everything writhes, stung by citrus and pastel." Even something as familiar as the oranges that hang above the streets becomes "a sort of promise, a sequence of lanterns in the afternoon," that perhaps defined childhood "the way buoys outlined the shallows of the bay." Or she calls oranges the "secret eyes above the boulevards," noting that "you were watched, but without interest."

But if our sensual connection to the city and the Southern California coast provides us with emotional landmarks, the memories and sensations we accumulate can be a burden we carry, "the same way we carry diseased cells or abnormal chromosomes." She underscores the point that for this work of interior mapmaking, "love is an inadequate coordinate."

Her lush descriptions of place are anything but a refuge. Santa Monica Bay looks "overmedicated. It was a Prozac harbor, manageable and contained, artificially tranquil." The sound of its water is indistinguishable from the traffic on the Pacific Coast Highway. "It is all a sort of subsound, metallic, like what you imagine you hear on the periphery when you're half asleep on an airplane...unny and sharp and awful. It makes you think your mouth is bleeding." The beach at night is spotted with fires, where people cook potatoes or heroin. Afternoons here smell of ash, making you think "of what happened to children in foster homes at dusk when they took their clothes off, things that were done in stucco added-on garages with ropes and pieces of metal and the freeway rushing in the background like a cheap soundtrack. It was in sync, but it had no meaning."

Perceptions and feeling pile up into a gestalt of emotional understanding. For a girl whose Vietnam-vet father appears for the first time in her life when she is 12, his transient life will always be recalled "laminated by a certain lamplight...the color of brutally overripe lemons." There will be the smell of rotting sun-sick camellias, of bour-

bon and marijuana, and shirts that should be washed. His transience, and ultimately hers, feels like "flesh being severed and hospitals." It resides "in the carpets that reeked of recent disinfectant and insecticide." She hears "the fathers in nearby bungalows yelling at their daughters, their Tracys and Darlenes, calling them sluts, calling them no good."

Thus, she writes, "it is always the hour of the fathers, when the mouth bruises and soils the night." It is a collection of sense-memory that we permanently carry. "When we are asked for our papers, this is what we are really reaching for. It is for this we are frightened."

Because we are ever identifying our emotional geographic coordinates, and because we are always changing, the world is one of fluid potential. Everything resonates; everything has something to reveal. All the elements in the landscape—the mountains, bay, freeway, and bitter oranges, but also the crushed iris, larkspur, and an atmosphere of broken amethyst—lend their properties to each other. A junkie recognizes

who worry about their daughters, who have married and find marriage is "a kind of amulet." Literally or figuratively, Braverman's characters struggle against death, against those for whom the world is "gray and gray only." Incapable of making a response to the cruelty of her mother, Lindsay finds herself standing at the refrigerator eating a stick of butter. When her mother finally leaves, she notes the "atmosphere of yellowed gauze in the air, if only she could decode it." The mother's heels on the grass "are digging in like she was trying to hurt the earth or perhaps something fragile just beneath it." When Gwen's sister is dying, outside the hospital window she notes the "windswept and brazen" palms, saying, "what is there to see, anyway, that would not break your heart?"

As if the extravagant, ripe language should be satisfying enough, these stories don't emphasize event or resolution. It's not that they break off or feel incomplete—sometimes they even end with one line too many. It's that their meaning resides in a web of language, and sometimes, in the way

our comprehension of experience is multilayered and overloaded, the burden of meaning feels too big.

Another writer associated with L.A.'s physical and cultural landscapes has been Joan Didion. Her 1970 novel *Play It as It Lays* depicted a psychically wounded protagonist whose pre-women's-rights-movement passivity has, after 30 years of preoccupation with gender issues, become almost incomprehensible. Didion's pared and unarguably elegant language contrasts with Braverman's sometimes over-the-top rhetoric, and perhaps serves as an index of the ways women's ideas about themselves have changed. It's possible the idea of elegant, pared language and elegance itself can now be seen as a cultural construct of what women have kept at bay (like an anorexic rejecting food). In contrast, Braverman's sensual, voracious language signals a forceful effort to incorporate the external as a coherent part of her characters' experiences.

Not that all of Braverman's characters pull themselves through their crises or even know how to. The difference is in the drive to figure it out. The soprano Leontyne Price once said she sang because she loved the sound she made. Though you might sometimes feel Braverman could do with a little less fondness for her own sound, it is this same powerful narrative voice that propels the stories from one intense perception to another and provides the characters with the means of making-sense of their lives. As she herself says, the danger is that "language is limited by the heart, by its capacity for grief and ambiguity. Experience makes us mute."

Small Craft Warnings, by Kate Braverman, University of Nevada Press, \$16, 180 pps.

Karen Kevorkian's fiction has most recently appeared in the *Mississippi Review* and *Fiction International*. She works as an editor in San Francisco. □



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that "sounds combine a darkness, find other elements, transmute, become a fragrance, a pathway and a resolution." In Braverman's lexicon, for example, the colors of blue accrue possibility of emotional connection. Described as "dark purple in the crushed iris night," even bruises from needle sticks have their own amoral beauty. Lying on sand, but feeling as if she is "drifting, partially submerged," an unnamed narrator says, "there are equations of blue, there are geometries you can sail to and fluid architectures." The complexity of her imagery suggests that her characters have the possibility to come to an understanding of their complex pasts, even though, as in this particular story, these geometries and architectures may "have mouths but refuse to speak."

While drug culture and the drug culture detoxed and grown-up figure in her stories, there are also women who love flowers,

January 7-13, 1999

New Times (LA)