

Carolyn Dunn. *The Stains of Burden and Dumb Luck*. Mongrel Empire Press, 2017. 69 pp. ISBN: 978-0-9972517-7-7.

<http://mongrelempire.org/catalog/poetry/TheStainsOfBurden.html>

Carolyn Dunn, of Louisiana Creole, Tunica-Choctaw-Biloxi, Seminole, Creek, and Cherokee descent, is already known for her works *Echolocation* (2013), *Coyote Speaks* (2008), and *Through the Eyes of the Deer* (1999). Diane Glancy's summation states, "she covers the cartography of memory" in her newest collection of poetry. This cartography of memory, as Glancy terms it, is more than just a map of Dunn's memories, but is also representative of the senses that evoke and hold those memories in place. Place, space, sky, rain, and breath are all common themes throughout the brief collection that elicit a sense of being and emotion that a mere cartography could not contain. While all of these concepts are prevalent in the book, they are not overbearing, and the reader is allowed to take the journey through time, space, and place on their own terms.

Dunn begins her collection with a brief commentary—"Bloodline." She claims, "A place doesn't have to be idealized to still claim the comfort associated with being called home" (1). Home, according to Dunn's pieces, is not free from pain or sorrow, but it is where the heart lies, where memories are formed, and where the soul is at peace. This is evident in one of the first poems in the first section, "In Some Other World," where she writes

My mother's words
pass through my lips... beckons us home
with songs that bring corn
My grandmother's voice
passing my lips
escapes the veil
of some other world (7-8).

She makes no effort to hide the pain and sorrow of home in her work, yet she does not allow that pain to take over. Instead, Dunn uses these notions of pain to serve as a reminder of what once was, what is, and what will be in the future—pain becomes in her poem a means of understanding and home, whether painful or joyous, has the ability to map out that pain and remind us of who we are and where we come from, where our ancestors hope we will be. It is not an idea of loss, but an idea of hope and renewal, a belief that pain and the earth and the ancestors are all working together to make us who we are.

Dunn also writes in the prologue that "Woven in the bone and blood of the Ancestors, it is now a tapestry concerned with keeping of stories, vocalized in song, in whispers, in secret, from stages and from graveyards and birthing rooms around the long pathway of this world to where the next world awaits" (1). It is these stories, these songs and whispers, that are mapped out and transport us to the Ancestors, to home. The second section of the book is a great example of this. In "Words," Dunn writes

Words are our only weapons
as grief grows
swallowing knot
of feathers, bones
and the undigested bits

turning our steps
 into shards of glass
 bone fragments...We are glass, ever
 shattering
 at any moment
 I carry voices
 on my tongue
 a world where
 there can be no mercy, no joy
 no thought of ever catching
 the last train home (31-32).

While her words transport us to another world, to home, she speaks of being transported herself, and we make our journeys together.

One of the central themes in Dunn's collection is the idea of the self. Recognizing who we are, how we came to be, and our purpose: these are questions that many individuals strive to answer daily, and Dunn addresses them in her own way. In the third section of the book, "Baskets Filled with Burdens," her poem "Cardinal Directions" asserts that

In this foreign
 land, the love of
 place carries
 the love of space
 The difference is
 we love
 for what we know
 we are (53).

The idea that space and place are central in understanding who we are and how we came to be can often be forgotten when we are away from home; remembering that home is always with us, always informing and molding us into who we are supposed to be, is critical in our journey to understand ourselves.

As readers, we allow Dunn to give voice to these songs, to the past, present, and future, to grief and home, and to memories. But as readers we are also giving voice to these concepts as well, and in doing so we are the storyteller and the story. Dunn is not the first to approach this concept. N. Scott Momaday and Gus Palmer are but two other Indigenous writers and scholars who have voiced this idea, and Dunn provides us the opportunity, as readers, to practice and realize this notion of inclusivity and mutual sense of being. It is through Dunn's words and ideas that we are able to transport ourselves onto the page and transport the words on the page into our realities.

In her poem "World Renewal," found in the second section, Dunn writes, "We breathe life / into dying songs" (15). Dunn writes about memories and stories and pain and grief as we have and continue to experience them through time and space and place, but these simple lines remind us, ever so gently, that our breath offers the gift of life. By singing the songs of our ancestors, by offering up prayers and poems through our own breath, we are giving our memories and our ancestors life, which in turn nourishes and nurtures us further. We are not only giving the Ancestors life, we are giving ourselves life, too, and, as Dunn suggests, is there any greater gift?

The Stains of Burden and Dumb Luck provides us a map of the past, present, and future—a map home—in a way that is unique to Dunn and reflects one Indigenous perspective. Connections between poems and the stories they tell—of ashes and bones, rocks and stolen tongues—create a sort of scavenger hunt for readers. We all have stories that are woven throughout time, space, place, and memory, and Dunn not only tells her stories, but helps us give voice and power to our stories as well. Sometimes we get lost in the stories, and Dunn provides us a map to find our way back. Find the connections, understand the meaning, get lost in the stories, reconnect with the Ancestors, and you just might find yourself again.

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