

Book Reviews JMI 2019

Passage

Mila Oshin,
UK: A Maze Records Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY MAYA BHAVE

Mila Oshin's *Passage* is a remarkably unique book of poetry, in that Oshin takes on the birth experience that is so often ignored, invisibilized and obfuscated: stillbirth. Her short ten poem collection is divided into three parts: Part 1 (adagio), Part 2 (andante), and finally Part 3 which is unnamed. It is fitting that her sections are marked by musical terms and nomenclature, as she couples her written words with a CD of music connecting the prose to sound. Ironic – given the global silence of stillbirth. Ironic – given the numbers of stillbirths occurring around the globe, that people still don't know the high incidences of stillbirth, or even speak about it. Rather, stillbirth is often relegated to hushed utterances and empty stares. Oshin, however, moves this hidden world into the open. I feel honored and deeply moved to review this small book of poetry, as I too know the gripping depth of stillbirth hell, as my first son, Andrew Anant Bhave was stillborn 22 years ago on March 17, 1997.

Immediately, before I had even cracked a page or listened to the first musical entry, I was struck by her compilation title. *Passage*—the name evoked a continuum, on the one end a nod to the process of birth, the medium for life to come spilling out. On the other, Oshin seems to use the title for another message, the dark, murky experience of stillbirth that has no definitive length or depth. Rather, it is ruptured open in our lives, pouring into every crevice without any clear manual, or true ending. The title name seems to conjure an image of a long, dark corridor that reveals both life and death simultaneously.

Her poems, like grief, do not follow a standard time continuum, but rather encompass the transformed birth experience, the foggy aftermath, and finally the ethereal, complexity of mothering a child that is no longer physically present within these varied poems. With each entry, each word on the page, Oshin brings us with a clamor into the detritus of her pain and confusion. Each poem beckons the reader to come down the dark hallway, and listen carefully between the words and notes, to what she has suffered. We are asked to join her as she attempts to process this shocking news and utterly confusing aftermath of stillbirth. Take for example her vivid descriptions of the first moment she sees her daughter's eyes in her poem "Endings"—she writes, *"Why did the first sight of my new-born's eyes, black as cleaned slate remind me of endings?... to bring life, you say, will not be a crime. You don't deal in ever after."* Or her analysis of the completely foreign birth experience she calls "Into the Blue." She writes *"No crisps, no chocolate bars, no straws. ... No whispers of encouragement. No, in the end, I have no clue. What spewed you out into the blue. I was there, in the dark of night. Like a witness, just out of sight."*

Other poems, such as "Sanctum" move beyond the initial shock, to how stillbirth transforms the normative birth experience of pregnancy, anticipatory birth, and resulting motherhood. Oshin writes *"There was bliss here, once. Tenderness so tempting... I held hope here, once."* She moves on to speak about a man of steel who changed all that, and now *"What is left there now. Is a gaping wound. A crying shame. Dead Silence. Cold Comfort. No nerve to visit yet. No way out of it. This Sanctum is no longer sacred."*

She continues her deconstruction of this ongoing experience—one that has no end—in her poem "Grow," with a similar line of thinking about how her motherhood will be forever transformed. *"You'll never learn how to fly... Things are not as they seem,"* yet it is her fifth poem "Words" that I resonate with most strongly. She writes *"the English dictionary no longer suffices. I'm out of fresh metaphors. No theory applies here... the words I cannot speak are brand new to me. The truths I can recall not much good at all."*

It is in this one short poem that Oshin speaks for so many women who have experienced stillbirth. There are no proper words, and in fact, most people don't want to even talk about it. Death and grief mingle often in life, but are not supposed to happen with little children, and infants. How do we speak about a child that did not physically breathe in this world? How do we speak of a baby that in some American states still isn't given a birth certificate due to the nature of her birth? Such findings are shocking and yet often not known to most people, even in 2019.

In another poem, "The Chamber" she so astutely writes *"They say to have a child. Fills a hole. You never knew existed. They are right. Yet, no one ever talks. Of the chamber. You never felt was there. Until it was empty."*

Oshin brings incredible depth, meaning and essence to an experience that no one ever expects will actually happen to them. Her work is a must read for any woman, as it will bring clarity and an invitation into an often hidden, silent world.

Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth

Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro, eds.
Bradford: Demeter Press, 2017

REVIEWED BY SIMONE BOHN

This meticulously-produced edited volume fills an important void in the knowledge regarding Indigenous birthing and mothering in Canada (as well as the United States and New Zealand). Although the general public may be somewhat familiar with some of First Nations' scars stemming from (Canadian) white settler colonialism, very little is known about the extent to which governmental interference still shapes Indigenous pregnancy-related and child-rearing practices. The problem is that, as several chapters illustrate, this interference remains having pernicious effects on Indigenous parents, especially mothers and their children.

The contributors to this volume authoritatively demonstrate that Indigenous mothers operate within an institutional framework which almost automatically associates indigeneity with risk (and from the official perspective, *self*-inflicted risk), and assumes a hierarchy of healthcare-related expertise, in which Indigenous knowledge and practices regarding pre-natal nurturing, birth, and post-natal care are not only devalued, but deemed dangerous in most circumstances. Accordingly, the removal of expecting mothers from their communities and their placement in distant maternity wards are justified as a form of governmental "protection" of the First Nation women.

In contrast to this official narrative and making extensive use of Indigenous women's voices and their first-hand experiences, this book shows the inadequacy and absurdity of this so-called "birthing evacuation policy" as it currently stands. Not only does this practice impose enormous financial costs on Indigenous pregnant women and their families and affect negatively their mental health (as they experience severe loneliness amidst an already stressful situation). Ultimately, this governmental-imposed evacuation individualizes

an essentially collective experience, which is the arrival of a new member of an Indigenous community. To illustrate this different perspective, the chapter on the Wasauksing First Nation, for instance, shows that when a wife is expecting, her husband is seen as being pregnant as well, and the community supports the couple in a variety of ways, so that the parents-to-be can lead a stress-free and spiritually positive life as they await the arrival of their new child.

Similarly, the narratives point to abundant virtuous practices and knowledge. For example, Indigenous mothers and grandmothers have developed a set of rather elaborate prescriptions regarding diet (foods to eat and to avoid) and levels and types of physical activity which contribute to maternal health, as well as fetus and infant health. Some communities, such as the Stó:lō First Nation, for time immemorial, have made use of birthing techniques that facilitate safe births and decrease women's hardship during the delivery.

Most importantly, the book's principle message pertains to the importance, as chapter 7 expounds, of "revitalizing traditional Indigenous birth knowledge." The acceptance of the legitimacy and safety of Indigenous birthing know-how and practices is paramount to advancing a better healthcare network in which professionals from the mainstream medical establishment can work in collaboration with Indigenous midwives and nurses, and in which more Indigenous individuals can be trained to become healthcare providers in their own communities while also maintaining and making use of their traditional knowledge. Furthermore, culture-sensitive practices, such as the delivery of the placenta to the Indigenous woman giving birth so that she can return it to the ground, can be easily adopted by hospitals and wards. As this edited volume shows, culture-sensitive, community-based healthcare is more successful at modifying behaviors. As it is founded upon important cultural signifiers, this type of communal collaborative approach is better received in the community and better absorbed, and contributes to improving trust in the overall healthcare system.