

BRANCH IN HIS HAND by Sharon Charde. The Backwaters Press, 3502 North 52nd Street, Omaha, Nebraska, 68104-3506, 2008, 100 Pages, \$16 paper

Review by Jody Kordana

In *Branch in His Hand*, Sharon Charde is not simply tackling a topic through a woman's eyes. The word tackled indicates utilizing her poetic talents to represent a subject outside her emotional home, from a decidedly female perspective.

No, that has not happened here. What she has done is open a door to the uniquely feminine reality of a woman who has endured the death of her child. Charde has selected a collection of her poetry predominantly encompassing the two decades after the accidental death of her 21-year-old son, Geoffrey.

As the blunt exposition of a surviving mother's inner emotional sanctum, one almost feels a twinge of guilt at peering in so deeply at another's anguish. But that invitation is one of Charde's grand achievements. Communicating intensely private contemplations while at the same time reaching out in a way that prompts a reader's understanding of the subject appears not even a challenge for Charde. Despite the enormous prevalence of introspection apparent in her work, there is an accessible shared humanity to what she writes.

It would be trite to call this a journey, for that supposes a conclusive resting place next to the deceased providing a point of healing. This is no journey because for survivors, as Charde is so adept at demonstrating, there is ironically no end in death. This is seen, for

example, in the poem “I Drag His Death After Me,” where there is a co-mingled ubiquity of life and death:

*We
stood over our boy like Mary and Joseph
in the manger, as if he were a new baby
blessedly fresh to the world. But it was his
death that was new, that we crooned to,
his death a presence in the room like some
terrible gift, that would be opened again
and again, that never stopped giving, only
we didn't know that then, we didn't know
how we would bring it home, where we
would put it, how we would live with this
present, how we continue to. (13-24)*

Also notable is Charde's courageous admission of her fragility as she seeks refuge on an emotional island and gazes at the sea of life around her each day. But rather than express only hopelessness in her grief, Charde masterfully etches in glimmers of coping. In “Long Marriage” for instance, she occasionally allows the solace of spousal interactions and the murmurings of emotional awakening, much the way one pulls their slumbering eyes open and then shut against the stinging glare of the first morning sun.

*I tried leaving you once, moved
to our summer place. (1-2)*

*We slept in the big log bed, a double white
line down the middle, but I could smell you.*

*Even though the garden was not yet aroused
from winter, you went to it the next morning—(14-17)*

*But when it was time for you
to board the ferry, I had not said I was
coming back. You had not asked. (26-28)*

Continued, the relevance of marriage in weathering the tragedy and conversely the weathering of the marriage against the tragedy is seen in “First –Aid Kit.” With Italy as the setting of years of the family’s joy and the location of Geoffrey’s death, we are immersed throughout the collection with the rich vitality of the region. And we see how its memories and subsequent visits serve as a point of emotional restoration.

In the end, we went to the beach. It was your fault, of course, that the ruins were chiuso and that I had no towel. Sullen, I walked ahead of you to the dark Italian sand. All the houses were shuttered, after all it was mid-October.

When our dead son was ten, he’d wanted a first-aid kit for Christmas—imagine! I didn’t know you’d put it in your backpack again, pulled it out now, one of its tools a tiny rectangle of folded foil, opened like origami for our beach blanket. I stripped off my clothes, ran into the cool sea. You went to find our lunch—gamberini on rugula, pannini, tiny glasses of white wine, big ones of aqua minerale. What else was in that kit?

Repair patches, the gauze bandage you’d put on my arm when I fell on the path to Manorola, matches. (24-39)

Also exceptionally touching are her reflexive tendencies to redirect Geoffrey’s share of her motherly instincts into her living son, Matthew. In “For the Son Who Lives” we witness this desperation. It is a piece that is so relevant it is almost an injustice to pull it into individual, unattached statements of example, but it is a must to display a touch of its flavor:

*When I laugh at your jokes I do it double time,
make you twice alive. I am so grateful (14-15)*

*You made me a mother. He came and went in the middle,
your brother. You made me mother still. I want more of you (21-22)*

But remarkably, even this sentiment is self-refuted with Charde's own eventual revelation of its illogicality, as demonstrated in "Come Back":

Does that mean you're twice gone? (13)

Charde poses this question when realizing the initial comfort in finding Geoffrey's life represented in other forms is negated when their loss results in the inevitable reminder of his death.

And that feeds into the insecurities of a surviving mother's struggles. While on a most basic level death can only be accepted, the actual complexity of intense grief is understood thanks to Charde's beautifully uncomfortable candidness of dueling sentiments.

Even the title *Branch in His Hand* serves more than one purpose. Those words are stated on Geoffrey's accident report, planting in his parents' bewildered minds obsessive ruminations of circumstances. But it also becomes subtly clear that Charde's artistic expression is a branch in her own hand, as she instinctively grasps at withered and fragile memories, just as Geoffrey grabbed the vegetation of the earth in his last moments among the physical living.

In exalting the impressiveness of Charde's lyrical styling and exquisite symbolism, it almost feels a must to fully display every poem. The rebuilding of a family's shattered foundation is reflected, the permanent change of a woman's complete sense of self is exposed. Following the ebbs and flows of sorrow, there is still a delicate balance of long-term timeline in the collection. It seems the epitome of understatement to confine analysis to sporadic selections.

Therefore, *Branch in His Hand* is only justly served by a complete reading. And in doing so, be prepared to immerse into the delicate soul of motherhood, the stubborn love of which becomes so ingrained within a woman that its energy cannot, or will not, dissipate by the physical loss of the child.

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