

My Grandmother's Hair by Ann Elizabeth Carson

How can we be transformed, yet still be miserable? In My Grandmother's Hair, Ann Elizabeth Carson, author of Shadows Light, uncovers the profoundly poignant story of how our culture makes our memories and shapes our lives. In telling her own story she explores the concept of sensory memory and layered experiences through a mixed genre approach combining narrative, poetry and art with myth, metaphor, conversations with older people and a brief survey of relevant research on memory. As she moved through successive stages of experience and self-doubt her growing awareness that power relationships are disclosed through memory held in the body led her to question the ways of accessing and learning about the stories that are told, and the stories that we hold. As Carson reached a broader understanding of herself and the context in which all women must struggle to overcome the damage caused by our patriarchal society she realized that while our stories can never leave our bodies, knowing them can make sense of our lives.

Outline

Beginning: questions of forgetting.

Chapter One, Underpinnings: a backdrop of families, people, places, social and political events; the sights, sounds and smells, and the joys and griefs that shaped my life and my remembering and forgetting.

Chapter Two, Groundwork: how my professional life as a psychotherapist and adult educator led to an interest in memory and aging and laid the foundation for understanding the importance of sensory memory and how memories are stored in the body.

Chapter Three, Strands of Memory: How my grandmother's story embodies a family and a social story, and is a metaphor for the cultural supremacy of mind over body, and the struggle to challenge that dominance.

Chapter Four, Living the Shadow: Working in drawing, water colour and clay I see the shadow side of illness and desire, how the splitting apart of body/mind is practiced, and how the older people I had talked with lived a similar kind of split between their efficient memory practices and the social pressure to accept the stereotypes of memory and aging.

Chapter Five, Whose Reality is on These Pages?: Ambivalence about my approach in academia opens up the theme of power and compels me to write my story as a sociopolitical exemplar of the uses and abuse of power.

Chapter Six, Frozen in Im/permanent Winter: The death of my son, five years of paralysis and the rebirth of myself as poet and writer.

Chapter Seven, Full Participation, how I can be transformed, yet still be miserable: practicing my resolve. The face-off between two equally legitimate voices: the crippling darkness of life long fears socially engendered by beliefs and memories embedded in body and mind, and the feared unknown of a creative surge I had not yet learned how to handle.

For The Time Being: I attempt to pull it all together.