

# In an L.A. state of mind, even way up in New York

## Frantic Transmissions to and From Los Angeles

An Accidental Memoir

By Kate Braverman

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Reviewed by Carolyn Juris

Poet, essayist, hallucinatory novelist and short-story writer Kate Braverman has an artistic portfolio as varied as the diverse life she has led: teen runaway and single mom, Berkeley radical and literary mentor, feminist outlaw and university wife.

Such a history would animate even the most conventionally plotted autobiography, but readers of Braverman, who today lives in San Francisco, are primed to expect no such thing. Her new collection, "Frantic Transmissions to and From Los Angeles," is a collage of fiction, flashback and philosophy that finds the quintessential L.A. woman in a 150-year-old farmhouse in western New York state. At the heart of the book, six "Transmission" essays draw heavily upon dispatches Braverman wrote for the L.A. Times Magazine in 1996 and 1997, early into what she calls her six-year "exile" in the Allegheny Mountains.

In "Transmission to Los Angeles #1," Braverman and her family flee riot- and earthquake-ravaged L.A. when her husband accepts a faculty position at Alfred University. Previously most at home surrounded by concrete and asphalt, Braverman embraces rural life with a convert's zeal: She cans handpicked apples, learns the names of local birds and reacquaints herself with her teenage daughter over cups of kitchen-brewed coffee. Humbled by the vividness of a Northeastern autumn, the gifted wordsmith finds her vocabulary inadequate to describe the orgy of color outside her window.

The essay hews closely to Braverman's first dispatch to the Times, but hindsight prompts her to edit a bit, adding a kicker that foreshadows her eventual departure from this idyll: "Falling in love with landscapes is what L.A. women do. It doesn't necessarily imply betrothal or marriage." The original piece, by contrast, ends in a sentiment shining with the optimistic burnish of a still-new adventure: "This is the house where I have always lived. In this town, they speak a dialect in which I am fluent. And I have at last and finally come home."

It's a significant change in tone, but because Braverman's eye is turned inward, the questions of authenticity that have been very much on readers' minds of late (see James Frey and JT LeRoy) are beside the point. All memoir is, at base, memory: subjective and fallible. By altering these public diary entries to suit her narrative, Braverman benefits from an immediacy that

would have been absent had she tried to recreate her experiences out of whole cloth, yet she stays true to their emotional core.

As a memoirist, Braverman is one hell of a poet. She caresses ideas like an enraptured lover, lulling herself and the reader with language so bewitching as to be almost druglike. Critics often cite Braverman's tendency to revisit the same themes and phrases, and this collection is no exception. She tells us several times that the L.A. she grew up in was a city not of dreams but of last resort, a squalid refuge for society's castoffs. But repetition, when wielded by a linguistic alchemist of Braverman's skill, has a hypnotic, almost mythic resonance. In "Escaping Los Angeles: Incantations and Magic," Braverman writes at length of disappeared or vanished women, who inhabit society's fringes like cosmopolitan specters: "Van-

ished women have affection for the way autumn is punctured and lays at their feet like the cloak of the blue fox. Shadows collect in rooms where they are quietly reading poetry out loud in Spanish or Italian."

The passage echoes one from her 2002 novel "The Incantation of Frida K," an imagining of Mexican artist and icon Frida Kahlo's last, morphine-soaked days. Like Kahlo, who translated physical and psychological pain into paint and canvas, Braverman the writer strips herself naked, mining her personal history for her art even as she assumes other personas.

A champion of the invisible woman, Braverman here channels one of the 20th century's most conspicuous: Marilyn Monroe. Her mock interview of the screen goddess delves beneath the familiar facade — which, the world-weary Monroe points out, is "not platinum, which suggests constellations and redemption. It's another yellow entirely. Asthma yellow. It comes from rotting petals and camera flashes that permanently scar your face." Who wouldn't want to hide when confronted with such brutality?

Although not an archetypal vanished woman herself — Braverman leaves L.A., after all, with her husband and daughter — the writer too longs for escape while acknowledging its difficulty: "You don't just leave Los Angeles. Such a departure requires magical intervention. You can't simply purchase a ticket to another destination. You must disappear." But even 3,000 miles away from her native city, she still is firmly entrenched in the City of Angels. The distance afforded by her Eastern vantage only sharpens her focus. Stranded in her 150-year-old farmhouse by a blizzard, Braverman contemplates not her present location but her hometown. Except for certain details — brutal winters, flame-hued autumns — the transmissions to Los Angeles needn't have been broadcast from the Alleghenies. The view from Austin or Ankara would have been the same. ■

Carolyn Juris is a New York writer.

