

Unspeakable: The Things We Cannot Say

Harriet Shawcross

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“The conversation hobbles on,” Harriet Shawcross observes at a camp for children with selective mutism. “Without daily practice, they grasp at topics like leaves in a stream, exchanging information, but never quite conversing.” These children represent one kind of silence among many in Shawcross’s *Unspeakable*, a musing and sensitive work that endeavors to give voice to the things that so many of us are unable to say.

Shawcross herself experienced a period of something like selective mutism in her youth, brought on by her discomfort with reconciling her boarding school life with the challenges she faced at home. The awful period in which she found herself unable to speak birthed later curiosity in silence as a phenomenon. She explores it across disaster zones and accounts of sexual trauma, internal snags, and the work of her favorite poet, George Oppen.

Silence emerges in a distressing but thoughtful array. Selective mutism is shown growing or dissipating as children struggle to articulate their internal commotion. Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* becomes a vehicle for addressing women’s sexuality, as well as the aftermath of assault.

Methods of healing others just by letting them speak are explored—but so are their cultural limitations. Just outside of Kathmandu, Shawcross witnesses populations grappling with post-earthquake trauma in a place where mere words are not medicinal. Across each situation, Shawcross also untangles the second instance of extended silence her life—this time, around her evolving understanding of her sexual orientation. What’s hard to say is written down anyway, and Shawcross’s refusal to go mum again—even regarding her own situational clumsiness—is part of what makes the book so compelling.

Incisive when it comes to airing often inexpressible burdens—including surviving assault, death and disaster, depression and loneliness—*Unspeakable* is a keen and important literary investigation.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May/June 2019)

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