

Hearing Voices: The Mystery of Shared Grief in Tracey Lien's *All That's Left Unsaid*

Tracey Lien. *All That's Left Unsaid*. New York: William Morrow, 2022. Pp. 304. \$27.99. Hardcover.

Tracey Lien's story "Temblors" was published in SCR 53.2.

There is no sense to be made of the brutal death of this particular teenage boy in a restaurant in Cabramatta, Australia. There is only the latest family to be racked by grief. For a time, meaningful communication halts. Ceremonies of closure are observed prematurely. Polite gestures of comfort and consolation are offered and—too often—not offered. An air of avoidance regarding the teenage boy's fate moves through this Asian community, moves through its systemically white, systemically racist law enforcement. Trouble is everywhere. Heroin is everywhere. Gangs. Only speculation abounds about the newly dead boy's extracurricular activities. Witness statements are either suspiciously lacking in information or altogether absent. But he was a good boy—a studious and sensitive boy. *He was*. His name was Denny Tran. Still, no one wants any trouble. Which is why it is left to Denny's older sister, Ky, to investigate the unsolved, unprioritized killing. Which is to say, Ky is left with only the love of her brother and her skills as a journalist to make peace with all the ghosts hanging around her like an immovable fog. And that is just the beginning of *All That's Left Unsaid*. The world built inside Tracey Lien's first novel is as minute as it is sprawling, a world in which a shifting point of view makes characters' inner lives vivid and vehement enough to carry the weight of their uncertain actions.

From the novel's earliest moments, Ky Tran is fashioned beautifully by Lien as a heroine on the cusp of confronting her destiny. At the very least, she is on the cusp of confronting one of the darker parts of her destiny, one which imbues even her name with profound meaning. And the origin of that meaning is emblematic of all the false assumptions Ky

must subvert in order to succeed. A former teacher who attends her brother's funeral embodies the archetype of privileged whiteness: "He'd always called her Kai, even though she'd corrected him in year eight when she sat in his math class four times a week. 'Keeee' she'd said, her voice small, 'like a key that unlocks a door'" (1). This is a powerhouse example of Lien's tightly controlled prose working in mysterious ways. Because this critical revelation of character development comes within the opening paragraphs of *All That's Left Unsaid*—and despite the fact that next to nothing can really be known about the protagonist at this point—the person of Ky Tran now possesses a definitive call to greatness. She is in the tradition of bold literary sleuth(s) Nancy Drew, Lisbeth Salander, and Kishwar Desai's Simran Singh. She is an opener of doors. But it's the closeness of this tragedy that sets Ky apart. Every answer presented to her about Denny's death warps and reforms Ky's relationship to her deceased brother, her refugee parents, her childhood best friend, her own Vietnamese Australian identity. Truly, Lien gives her protagonist the space to contain multitudes. But the author also gracefully limits Ky Tran's reach. There are other voices here, other spaces to occupy.

Enter ten-year-old Lulu Woo. One of the only characters in the whole of the book to give a first-person account, Lulu has gumption and humor to spare. And the brightest aspects of her consciousness shine through in the gloomiest of times. She knows what it is to be bullied by white girls who don't want Lulu playing anything other than the yellow Power Ranger at recess. She perceives how this constant othering threatens to seriously wound one of her friends. Lulu thinks hard for a moment, then with conviction proclaims that she and her friend are "like the sun!" (57). Small acts of survival are Lulu's specialty. A small act of survival is even how she manages to live through the night Denny Tran is murdered at the Lucky 8 restaurant: "...and Mum was hunched over holding my head, and Dad was hunched over holding Mum, and we were a tight ball of Hugging Woos while people around us screamed, and once the screaming stopped, Mum wouldn't let go of my head, so everything stayed dark for me..." (67-68). Lien's spirited run-on sentences throughout this chapter exhibit a masterful approach to simulating the mind of a child. Within Lulu's narration are flashes of relief from the heavier notes struck elsewhere in the novel. But that seeming lull is actually the heartbeat of the journey each of Lien's characters takes toward reconciling the trauma of their formative years. In a certain light, Lulu Woo can be read as an evocation of the unresolved pain eating at Ky Tran. It makes sense for these two (both obsessed with Lip Smackers) to meet in the course of *All That's Left Unsaid*. It makes sense that the friendship between Lulu and her best friend Chao so closely resembles what Ky and her best friend Minnie shared years earlier. It's as if the very flow of the narrative surrounding Denny cannot exist without the inclusion of this dynamic. And, now, the ghost of a friendship long dead may well be Ky's best hope.

Minnie is there from the beginning of *All That's Left Unsaid*. But only because Minnie has become the voice in Ky's head, guiding her on to one clue after another. Minnie was once as good as family. She would want Ky to right this terrible wrong committed against Denny, who was a devoted little brother to both girls. But persistent as it is, Minnie's voice is rarely a source of undemanding praise. Rather, the voice comes with a lifetime of gnawing accusation: "*Tell her how I'm the best friend you ever had and you feel super bad for what you did—as you should—and the guilt eats away at you every time you're in Cabramatta, and, in fact you are now more guilty than you are person*" (84). What Lien has accomplished here, effectively placing this characterization of Minnie inside the characterization of Ky, is a wondrous thing to behold. These words (and others playing on Ky's thoughts) offer up invaluable insight into their relationship while simultaneously deepening the mystery of their fallout. That is, the hidden purpose of Ky's search for justice—though, yes, rightfully, continuously centering the trauma of Denny's death—is quite possibly already known to her. That is, Lien's heady configurations of loyalties lost elevate the plot of an eloquent and emotionally charged thriller to the realm of required reading.

Besides the three narrators discussed here, *All That's Left Unsaid* is host to several others. And they are each buckling under a private and distinct gravity. They fear the words they struggle to pronounce. They fear judgement. They are working hard to lead good lives—profitable Australian lives. Lien writes the burdens of this particular immigrant experience into every last sentence. But she leaves it up to the reader to settle whether or not this experience is ultimately an empowering one.