

hunger / exile" (74), are hints at what continues to remain silent within family stories: "Nazis through Zaporizhzhia advancing, now and again / a hushed word about our Jewish neighbours" (33); "we scarcely heard of the atrocities committed / against native Ukrainians or Jews" (87). Such stories have yet to be more fully integrated within European Mennonite and Russian Mennonite migration narratives.

Ens, two generations removed from the post-war Mennonite migration, is of the generation now interrogating migration/settler stories to Canada, and reflects on her own home and childhood in Treaty 1 Territory and the disappearing swaths of Manitoba's tallgrass, home to nesting birds, winged and human, each named with a birdwatcher's attention. In the introduction to *Flyway* Ens writes, "I am here to think about grass & birds. To ask & look & listen. I am here a descendent of Mennonite settlers in the land of the Anishinaabeg, Assiniboine, Dakota, & Cree, the homeland of the Métis" (3). Together, *The World is Mostly Sky* and *Flyway* tell stories of both settling and unsettling, the word *unsettling* here with all its multiple meanings. Together they map the tallgrass prairie, Manitoba, a coming of age in this place, as well as Ukraine of the 1930s and '40s, and the promising flight path of a young Canadian lyric poet.

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Robert Boschman, *White Coal City: A Memoir of Place and Family*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021. Pp. 328. Softcover, \$21.95.

One of the best scholars on memoir that I know of, Leigh Gilmore, remarks that this genre really asks a lot of the writer: one is to be both representative and individual. Places and sites of emergence need to come alive as much as the memoirist. Robert Boschman has written such a memoir, one that vividly delivers the smells, sights, sounds, and hurts of place and history. Set in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, predominantly in the 1960s and '70s, *White Coal City* not only captures the history of the Boschman family—a Mennonite family of modest means who live in and operate the King Koin laundry—but also that of settler colonialism in its past and ongoing forms of violence. Boschman's Prince Albert (PA) is punishingly rough, geographically trapped in "a circle of pain" that includes "a federal penitentiary, two provincial corrections units . . . , a former

tuberculosis sanitarium, [and] an old pulp and paper mill” that steadily depletes the once abundant forests and pollutes the waters (3–4). The favoured sport is hockey, particularly when it erupts into bloody, raw fights. In Boschman’s inimitable phrasing, “Aggression was in the PA air like the puke stink of pulp effluent on a forty-below morning in January” (6).

I know this territory. I spent my teenage years in a small town near Prince Albert and, like Boschman, I know the acrid, inescapable stench of the mill—the smell of trees being chipped, bleached, and drenched in sulfite—and the atmosphere of menace. Both are endemic to settler colonialism that destroys the earth and preys upon First Nations peoples, but that cannot escape the violence that ultimately rebounds upon the aggressors. There is no safety in PA, not for young Robbie with his tremors, crossed eyes, slight build, and weak ankles, nor even for his brash male cousins who are as likely to beat up one another as a family foe. They are children not only born into a brutal place, but who inherit as well a concealed family trauma, the death of their first paternal grandmother, Margaret, killed by a drunk driver while pregnant with her fourth child. Her husband, John, who witnesses the death, remarries, but remains a man haunted by guilt, fear, and loss, and is a violent father to his sons. As Boschman poignantly reveals, the family’s suppression of all references to Margaret, while placing everything of hers tucked away in a box, exacerbates rather than alleviates the Boschmans’ trauma. This inheritance takes up residence in the bodies and affects of several generations. Vaults cannot and do not keep grief at bay. The body, another repository, remembers what remains unspoken.

Readers are presented with a world worth aching about: relatives who died too young; the toxification of land and water; the robbery of First Nations’ sacred places; the disproportionate incarceration of First Peoples; and the Sixties Scoop of Indigenous children. Boschman speaks confessionally of his family’s adoption of Crystal, a First Nation baby removed from her biological family, and of the Boschmans’ love of her as an inadequate substitution for her culture and language. But he also concludes hopefully, noting that we can still learn another form of history and engagement. We can learn to identify and refuse violent forms of interaction, and we can heed other stories of peoples and places who were here before us, stories that do not depend on possession and domination. We need not keep building PAs with their carceral and death industries.

For all that Boschman writes of a world that is bleak with accumulating losses, the writing in *While Coal City* is beautiful. The style is associative, moving freely, like memory, among time periods and

capturing the repetitive nature of trauma by recurring to key symbols of hurt. Boschman possesses heightened skills of observation and of responsiveness to people and place, inviting readers, in turn, to become accountable to a history that has not ended.

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Barbara Nickel, *Essential Tremor: Poems*. Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2021. Pp. 80. Softcover, \$18.

A caveat: I approach the poetry of witness with caution. It's not that I don't believe in it, but the act of gazing at distress or pain or poverty comes with a set of obligations for the witness. Erín Moure's line in her poem "Seebe" that "the poetry of witness is a liberal bourgeois lie" has long served as a guide for me. I offer Moure's words here not as an indictment to poets who witness but rather as a warning to all of us to refuse the relative comfort of one's witness position, that one's position on the sidelines is political and that we should, as writers, always consider what we achieve for ourselves by adopting such a position.

Reading Barbara Nickel's new book of poems, *Essential Tremor*, I have a renewed admiration for Nickel's sense of ethics, the way she looks and writes with a rigorous and slow care for her subjects and an understanding that her gaze implicates her and problematizes her witnessing. The condition from which the collection takes its title is addressed in two poems of the same name early in the book, and becomes emblematic of Nickel's examination of the essential in the sense of "absolutely necessary," consideration of the body as the "essence" of humanity, and resistance to the easy essentializing of discrete (and sometimes simple) categories. The "essential tremor" of the book disrupts our lives as people who occupy bodies in precarity even as we think about art, faith, and love. It is no accident that Nickel's collection proposes essential tremor as a medical diagnosis and as a planetary, historical condition. Beginning with a description of a mother's illness as "momentous/ as aurora and nothing I can hold," the tremor spreads throughout this collection, and the paradoxical effect is not shakiness or uncertainty, but the poet's firm hand on the pulse of humanity, our love, and the small spaces we allow for both. The sequences in *Essential Tremor* challenge what can sometimes feel like the relentless speed of the world, and the thrill of their poetic deliberateness can't be overstated.