

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.

Nickel's crown of sonnets—aptly titled “Corona” for both its subject matter and the sequence's form—interrogates both the length of the pandemic and its shifting restrictions, with our bodies in the balance of government debate, scientific discovery, and political mayhem. This crown of sonnets—there's thirteen of them here (call them a baker's dozen? a conscious reduction of a fifteen-sonnet heroic sequence?)—ponders the roles of repetition and change, loss and endurance, risk and shutdown, and always love behind the declaration “let nothing be the same.” The section “Body in a Mirror” plays with duality and reverse in beautifully wrought mirrored poems, the text scrolling out to both sides, each side readable/unreadable in their differences. An anatomized body appears again in Nickel's biblical palimpsest, a sequence that uses verses from the books of Luke and John to create consonant echoes of body parts of three historical anchoresses. Each in isolation with only a book and their living breathing bodies, the three anchoresses speak their bodies and their faith, making the section a devotion to belief and a declaration of their isolated selves: “me, awkward, / unlovely in my limbs.” My favourite of these poems is “Ear,” for its delicate examination of this mysterious and intricate human orifice via Luke's telling of the severed ear of the Roman guard. “Sever hammer. / Sever love,” writes Nickel.

The book's final two poems are elegies, one for a word that has been removed from the dictionary, and one for a friend, and they speak to each other and to us about what we gain in paying attention to the necessary—if only we were good at identifying the necessary before it slips away, or as Nickel writes in the rondel “Five Years”: “This grief, aging, hasn't grown old.”

Since 2008, Vici Johnstone at Caitlin Press has been quietly but boldly building a reputation for publishing authors whose styles and subject matters may not fit into the immediate commercial desires of other publishers: feminist and queer writing, ecocritical and political poetry, writing that bridges the urban and the rural, and now Barbara Nickel's contemplation of what it means to stay vulnerable to the tremors that move us, scare us, push us out into the world where nothing will be the same. *Essential Tremor* sinks into the immediacy of the contemporary moment and parses the long histories of faith, music, and the body to encapsulate the slow suddenness of life lived at the edge of grief. Brava to Nickel for bringing this work of delicate determination to our eyes and ears.

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