

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Bearing Ourselves

by Dawn Potter

Denise Bergman, *Three Hands None* (New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2019, 67 pp, \$16.95 paper)

Stacy R. Nigliazzo, *Sky the Oar* (Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2018, 82 pp, \$14.95 paper)

In her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich pondered the history of trauma in women’s poetry. “Much of [it],” she wrote, “has been of the nature of the blues song: a cry of pain, of victimization.” By the early 1970s, women’s poetry was “charged with anger.” But “the awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier—one step and you are in another country.” Rich urged poets to remember that “both the victimization and the anger . . . are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets. . . . We can neither deny them, nor can we rest there. They are our birth-pains, and we are bearing ourselves.”

In Rich’s view, “to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.” Our palette of “traditional female functions” has changed, to a degree, since the early 1970s. Nonetheless, almost five decades later, women poets still “grope in and out among these dark webs.” What remains unsaid, unplumbed? For poets, framing trauma, whether experienced or witnessed, has become a commonplace endeavor, yet such pain remains supremely difficult to relive creatively, in part because these moments thrust us into conversation with an autobiography of silence.

Two recent collections take disparate approaches to this challenge. Poets Denise Bergman and Stacy R. Nigliazzo both write from direct experience of trauma—one as a survivor of assault, the other as a witness and caregiver. Their choices and responses are a reminder that language is flexible in its ability to shape memory and emotion; a reminder, also, that the way in which individuals experience terror has consequential bearing on our collective humanity.

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Denise Bergman’s *Three Hands None* offers a harrowing exploration of the thorns of memory. Constructed as a series of linked, untitled poems, the collection is a swirling narrative of sexual assault, an enactment of the way in which a survivor, even years later, remains entangled with violence. Much of the power of this tale lies in Bergman’s deft handling of sonic repetition. The book’s title, which reappears within the opening line, eventually comes to function as a refrain that, in turn,

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births other repetitions that become refrains: “his three hands one crushing my mouth one holding a knife at my throat one whose flashlight seared my eyes.” Such repetitions, of both language and subject, rise and fall throughout the collection: “materials for this story haunt the margins. pores of skin. molecules of metal. crack of stone.”

Though the collection is narrative, Bergman takes an idiosyncratic approach to structure. Some sections are stacks of dense, unlineated stanzas:

in skin I can't live in tattered wallpaper of pinto-riding cowboys
and rose-colored *fleurs-de-lis*. crumbled bathtub grout. broken
kitchen tiles in the sink. maple floorboards gouged by a wild
rhino's tusk.

Others are narrow fragments:

why now a friend asks

I say to sleep

find me back then

The poet links these variations through her placement of white space and punctuation:

naked and when the spinning slowed a toe stepped
tentatively out. a scout

on a bike with broken brakes you skip skip skip your foot to
stop. risk a twisted ankle

As a result, the punctuated/nonpunctuated phrases within lines wrestle against the open gates of the white space, becoming a visual-syntactic evocation of repression and wildness that reinforces the circling tale.

The collection's speaker, referred to as both “I” and “she,” wrestles with her fractured voice, struggling to frame a crime that is both long past and eternally present. The assaulter, whom she never clearly sees, is portrayed as watcher, stalker, thief: “he trails my patter *he he he* trails me until the morsels and paces I talk and walk are sounded and shaped for his gleanings.” Yet even he, the violator, despite the damage he wreaks, ultimately fails: “he shapes a whole he assumes is the whole,” but the speaker's tragedy—her loss of self—is also her weapon against him: “I was there but

nowhere to be found.”

One of the most poignant characters in this collection is the speaker’s dog, who is present during the attack and whose barking eventually forces the man to flee. But the dog, too, is damaged by the event. Once, “the dog was my dog.” Afterward, “the dog that saved my life wanted only to hide from me.” Bergman writes, “if an animal can wish this one wished it had never met me.” In the poet’s telling, the dog’s emotions and reactions have a clarity that is not available to either the speaker or her attacker. It may not know why it feels and reacts, but it knows that what it does is right and necessary; this purity of sensation functions as a counterweight to the narrative’s tangle of human emotions. Yet there is no resolution in that purity. The collection ends with these stanzas:

how long in the far-flung bottom of the well I had just fallen
in not even chasing a coin just fallen in just happened to be
there and failed to not fall in

but for the dog

Three Hands None offers no solution, no uplift. Neither speaker nor dog will ever rest or trust again. What the collection does, and does beautifully, is to honor the instincts of survival. In Bergman’s words: “I thought I was nothing after nothing was left then tripped on the miniscule kernel that was left of me.”

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In *Sky the Oar*, Stacy R. Nigliazzo also propels her readers into a world that most of us inhabit only in extremis. Nigliazzo is an emergency room nurse, and many of the poems in this collection are vignettes of death—the moment before; the act of dying; the aftermath. They are set in hospitals, along roadsides. A mother watches her child fade. A man tells police about finding his wife’s body. A surgeon harvests a heart.

The emotional weight of Nigliazzo’s subject matter is so close to unbearable that one might expect her poems to be dense expositions, thick with language and line and detail. Instead, she takes the opposite approach. The poems in this collection are airy scatters of words, collations of image and silence. Some, as in these lines from “White Window,” feel like the caption of a photograph:

He was found along the highway,

thrown

from his motorcycle

into the mouth of a culvert.

Others, such as the title poem, evoke the scant words on a headstone:

She was

and will again be

the coxswain at stern;

whitewater

the climbing curve of her collarbone.

In poem after poem, Nigliazzo constructs these fragile clusters, and they accumulate into a kind of memory garden dedicated to the vanished and the vanishing. Her use of imagery is reminiscent of classical Chinese poets such as Li Po or Tu Fu: she draws on the metaphorical precisions of the natural world to heighten emotion, yet retains an ambiguity of purpose, as if she is opening a window rather than framing a vision. In “Penumbrae” she writes:

I draped my palm over her chest,

her father wept—

Did she die?

Thrum of light,

her little brother on the family room floor,

folding cranes.

The collection abounds with such poems—sparse and vibrating, weaving beauty into agony—and among the most moving, and most risky, are the three versions of “Triptych.” Each is a blackout-style poem superimposed over a *New York Daily News* article about a domestic murder-suicide, and each focuses on a different character in the drama: the murdered woman (“she // . // she / ‘where is she’”), her murdering partner (“a firefighter — / her boyfriend, / . / he , he”), and finally the outsiders, the watchers: “W e / know // but w / e //

don't // k / n o w."

By so quietly revealing each blinkered point of view, the "Triptych" poems serve as a reminder of the way in which assumptions both reveal and conceal moral entanglement. But they also helped me pinpoint the particular power of Nigliazzo's speaking persona. *Sky the Oar* is a deeply painful book, yet its voice is a gift and a solace. Throughout this collection, the speaker, like Dante's Virgil, guides us into an underworld of damage and terror. She requires us to look at horror, yet she holds our hands, she cares for us, just as the nurse in "Nocturne" cares for a dead child:

I wash his hands and face with castile soap,

bear up

my greenstick heart.

Wait for his parents

who don't know yet

his new moon stare—

small boy,

a dim road,

■
In these two collections, Nigliazzo and Bergman unearth their own language, invent their own formulae, as they strive to comprehend and articulate the complexities of pain. As Rich urged, they "bear" themselves, and in so doing, they force us to reckon with, in the words of Dante's Virgil, "the river of our blood." Virgil reminds us that our task—in such straits, with such guides—is to "look down now and pay attention."