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Poetry Review: Narrow Bridge by Robbi Nester

Scott Ferry · Wednesday, April 8th, 2020

In Robbi Nester's third full-length collection of poems, *Narrow Bridge (*Main Street Rag, 2019), she spins a world at once as delicate and weightless as a Chagall painting, but also as stark, skeletal, and precise as a black and white photograph of a Philadelphia street. What is as thrilling as her imagery and "the electrical hum of moon jellies" ("The Making") is the poems' clarity and economy of language. She knows that "Trafficking with immensities is dangerous" ("Conversation"), yet she embraces them, allows them just enough space to fill in all the corners. In "Postcard from the Future," the ocean swells as it swallows up our past cities: "tiny streets and buildings, the sea, perfected by distance" ("Postcard from the Future"). Although she captures exact tableaus, Nestor herself is not distant in these poems. Hers is not a cold stare at the world, but one full of mystery and humor and texture, where we are bonded more closely by the very separation we all feel. We see that in "A Moment," where Nester emphasizes the common human condition: "But if all human beings were alone, were we/ together in our isolation, a kind of/ joint surrender." Yet Nester's book expresses much more than our hollow places because, as she states in "Blue Wings," "these hands have their own agenda," and we are richer for the weaving. Nester braids together magical realism, autobiographical narrative, and deft political commentary into a cohesive and satisfying work.

The book begins with a type of origin myth in "The Making," where a whale, a sort of cetacean Beethoven, begins "singing the world into being." Although "deaf," like his human counterpart, this whale is also "full of music." In writing her paradoxical world into this flat plane, Nestor has "to find portals to an underworld" and maintain "faith in the invisible" ("Tunnels in Black and White"). But she anchors myth and duality firmly in our everyday world by portraying the pains and delights of childhood. In "The Truth about Rules," Nester describes a scenario many of us have experienced as children, not being allowed to go to the restroom in school and urinating shamefully in front of the class. Or again, in "Musical Chairs," she recalls the moment she "bit the birthday girl,/ making a deep red crescent/ in her arm, surprising everyone,/ especially myself." But we are not alarmed, because we are the ones clamping down, and also the ones being bitten. The violence of our present reality is not spared here, as in her poem "Sandy Hook," where we look through the eyes of a student who witnesses her teacher die shielding her, and "Now she won't/ wake up, no matter how/ I shake her. No crayon/ could ever be that red." In another persona poem, "The Other Shore," the poet places us in the ocean among refugees "adrift—no food or water, no/ radio," paying pirates who strand the helpless migrants, keeping "the guns,/ the maps," leaving them only with "[their] hopes."

Besides being courageous enough to show us the blood in the water and on our hands, Nester also

soothes us with nostalgia and hope. In “Under the Ironing Machine,” the poet portrays herself as a small child crouching under her mother’s industrial-size pressing machine with sheets covering her: the “warm cotton billows, becomes a tent where [the poet sits] /with [her] books and sketch pad,/ singing to [herself].” Nester is able to encapsulate these moments which draw out time into an endless fabric where “the sun finds [her]/ and [she] feel[s] all this will last forever.” Similarly, we can feel the flush of shame in “Trick or Treat,” as the poet’s mother fashions her eleven-year-old daughter a slinky black cat outfit, prompting a neighbor woman to admonish her to “’Get a bra!’” In “Past the Breakers,” the poet’s father abandons her in the same ocean where the poet finds so much comfort and power in other poems. Here she is utterly powerless, writing “I sank, cold water covering my mouth/ and nose, an airless prison.”

In “Her Death,” the natural world becomes elegiac as Nester listens to the breeze, “heavy with jasmine./ A thrush trilled in the sycamore./ […] a vase full of poppies/ the color of old amber burned to ash.” Through these poems, we find the links between binaries, between life and death, between the blatant and the masked, between dream and the dreamer, as the poet sings herself into being. As Nester notes in “Ties,” “We’ve grown so skilled at linking the invisible,/ and yet connections in the larger world/ elude us.” She wishes to heal these rifts, to begin again, to “apologize/ for everything I said or didn’t” (“Season of Mending”), to find that singular song inside herself that is also so universal, the whale’s low hum under the moonlit sky, to “dance naked in the wild light,/ raise my hands, light leaking/ between my fingers” (“Two Moons”).

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