

continued to wriggle and squirm after they were freshly killed and chopped into little pieces. [. . .] ‘You almost Korean,’ people would often say to him, astonished to see him wolf down food doused in red pepper paste, regardless of the sweat beading on his forehead and dripping down his nose. (15)

That one word, “almost,” quickly becomes the bane of Barry’s existence, making him feel alienated as a visible minority even after a decade of living in Korea. Indeed, this collection of stories shows the most poignancy when zeroing in on nuggets of problematic or untranslatable language. *Interpreters* moves towards the hermeneutic gap between words of two different languages, incommunicable because of their intrinsic link to lived experience and culture. The catalytic moment in Barry’s story occurs when he calls the salt peddler by a derogatory name, refusing to endure the peddler’s infuriating early-morning speakerphone:

It was a word frequently used in the movies, a word that people tended to shout at one another or mumble in a breathy, gritted teeth sort of way. Usually the subtitles read ‘Bastard’ or ‘Son-of-a-bitch,’ yet both expressions fell short somehow: neither captured the filthiness of its pitch, its glint of malice. Barry had never used this word before, at least not seriously. (20)

Barry’s name-calling leaves him with the taste of something new and unfamiliar on his tongue as he begins to feel a complicated mix of guilt and desire for self-justification. In “Youth-in-Asia,” a misunderstanding becomes a more apt cue for the story’s sub-themes: while the narrator discusses assisted termination of life with his student, Mrs. Choi, the latter asks “How about you? [. . .] Do you want youth-in-Asia?” (42). In other stories, the terms requiring translation are simply beyond the interpreter’s knowledge, for example, as the narrator in “Interpreter” wrestles with percentages and acronyms on a medical report that amounts to bad news for his landlord’s ailing health. In “Refugees,” a different kind of interpretation is required, one which examines the story of a North Korean refugee family that might be modifying facts to preserve their status and safety in Canada.

The collection falls short in some stories that resort too quickly to summarization, taking readers out of the immediate action. “Don’t You Know Me Yet?” begins with Barry’s life in Canada, at the point when he makes a desperate, split-second decision to teach English in Korea. Because the narrator describes the actions preceding and following this decision in less than two pages, the sentences end up sounding perfunctory and clichéd: “Barry had hardly ever travelled [. . .] and had often wondered what it must be like to venture to such faraway places” (14). Although the phrasing of “faraway places” captures Barry’s naïvety, it does little to captivate the reader’s interest

in Barry’s story. Other stories handle the issue of back-story more successfully. In “The Boy from Ireland,” Miller’s precarious relationship with his employer comes through loud and clear in one written sentence in a letter from the director: “I know you will want to reply to this, but please bear in mind that this is a busy time for everyone involved, and it would be best for you to focus on your immediate responsibilities” (84). Here, Miller’s apparent failings in his job subtly mirror the difficulties he experiences in trying to connect intimately with others.

Regardless of shortcomings, the book is an engaging and worthwhile read. Schafrick’s prose style embodies storytelling at its simplest, where the characters and situations they wind through occupy the foreground of the stories. Though using conventional linear narrative, Schafrick’s stories are strikingly contemporary, dealing with online dating culture, individuals trying to keep up with an increasingly globalized world, acquaintances that travel and reappear in unexpected places, and challenging job markets. Loss also figures strongly in the collection: the characters’ relocations across great spaces deepen their sense of nostalgia and longing, both for the past and for a different place and community. Overall, *Interpreters* is a promising first collection.

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Outrunning Ghazals (and other difficult things)

Surge Narrows, Emilia Nielsen. Leaf Press, 2013.

If it’s true that the oracle said Socrates was the wisest of all the Greeks because he alone knew that he knew nothing, then count me quite clever when it comes to classical Arabic poetry. Though while Socrates had the ancient oracle, I am gifted with the all-seeing sight of Wikipedia.

Wikipedia defines classical Arabic poetry in the following:

“(Arabic) poetry falls within fifteen different meters. [. . .] The meters [. . .] are known in Arabic as ‘seas.’ The measuring unit of seas is known as ‘tafīlah,’ and every sea contains a certain number of tafīlas which the poet has to observe in every verse (or bayt). [. . .] Adding or removing a consonant or a vowel can shift the bayt from one meter to another. Also [. . .] every bayt has to end with the same rhyme throughout.”

Needless to say, that definition leaves me a bit “up the creek” — or “up the sea” as it were. My trepidation towards classical Arabic poetry culminates in

the genre's form of the ghazal: a poem with a rigid structure, an unflinching adherence to rhyme and meter, and a microscopic attention to the auditory quality of words. In attempting to write ghazals, I always felt pre-genetically determined to fail; I am, after all, a proud descendant of the culture that created the limerick.

Even surpassing the form's high stress on repetition and line length, what is most remarkable about a ghazal is that each couplet operates independently of the others, an isolated image or thought that functions autonomously. Despite this autonomy, however, each stanza must still perpetuate the poem's themes, its central argument. The form's aversion to a narrative thread often makes it seem that the ghazal is the poem preferred by The Riddler.

In seeking the wisdom of a more seasoned poet (i.e., "old"), I was told to reimagine the ghazal as a scattering of boulders dotting the coast. In moving along the shoreline, the demand comes not from the boulders but rather from leaping between them; the boulders, or the two-line stanzas, offer momentary sanctuary before your next jump.

It was with this metaphor in mind that I read Emilia Nielsen's *Surge Narrows*, a collection that features two entire sections composed of ghazals, "Indifferent Season" and "Disquiet, Sensorial." Reading these sections is the equivalent of watching those tidal boulders stoic in the relentless flood, those small things that, because of the depth and strength of their footing, can channel and surge an unfathomable amount of energy — an entire ocean's worth.

While Nielsen's ghazals do not adhere to a rhyme scheme, each poem does consist of four two-line stanzas, each with a length of a similar breath. Most importantly, each stanza is written with enough stability to stand by itself, a miniature poem within a larger one.

Take, for example, the second poem within the section "Indifferent Season":

Fire, water, a stainless kettle. Pungent tea:
blessed thistle, passionflower, angelica.

Give me a moment to Ophelia, to float —
summer's too much in love with its own heat.

Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith. *Artemisia
absinthium*: aphrodisiac, bitter stimulant?

Kiss my collarbone, my someday tattoo:
blue water lily. Offer me one breast.

The first line establishes the poem's central theme of clairvoyance; the words "fire, water, a stainless kettle" function as a mathematical equation to which

the reader can infer the answer will be "tea," a blend which Nielsen goes on to specify, ensuring the intensely imagistic quality of the poem.

Moving to the second stanza, not only is there the ghazal's characteristic sudden shift in gears but also Nielsen's marvellous use of the verb "to Ophelia," which she soon defines as "to float." The nod to Shakespeare's drowned lover provides the audience with two overlapping images. We see Ophelia on the river, but we see her beneath the river as well; through our knowledge of the watery gravity that will soon pull her under, Ophelia exists in two states at once: Schrödinger's doomed damsel.

The third stanza is composed of eight words, five of which I would have no idea what they meant if I had not consulted my oracle (thank you, once again, Wikipedia). The first sentence references Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, a painting that depicts the Old Testament's apocryphal Judith decapitating the general Holofernes; a painting noteworthy not only because the artist depicts herself as Judith and her rapist as Holofernes, but also because the painting focuses so much on the physical struggle, the body's primal and innate urges to live and to kill.

The second sentence references the Latin name for the tree that is an ingredient in the psychoactive alcohol absinthe, the notorious green fairy that releases the body from itself. Within the link between the historically suspicious Judith myth and the transcendental powers of absinthe, the boundaries of time are being pulled apart before our eyes while reality begins to fray at the edges.

Finally, the fourth stanza brings the poem's clairvoyant themes to the forefront; they are made tangible. The speaker's "someday tattoo" sits on her skin invisible but still present — the lily has just not been inked in yet. Nielsen then draws from the collarbone to the chest with the poem's final declarative. The offering of the breast transports the speaker back to the infant age of breast-feeding. The image concludes the poem by drawing the reader's gaze so far into the future that it threads back into the past. As all the first-year history teachers stand on their desks and exclaim, we learn the past to see the future and, transitively, by seeing the future we therefore return to the past.

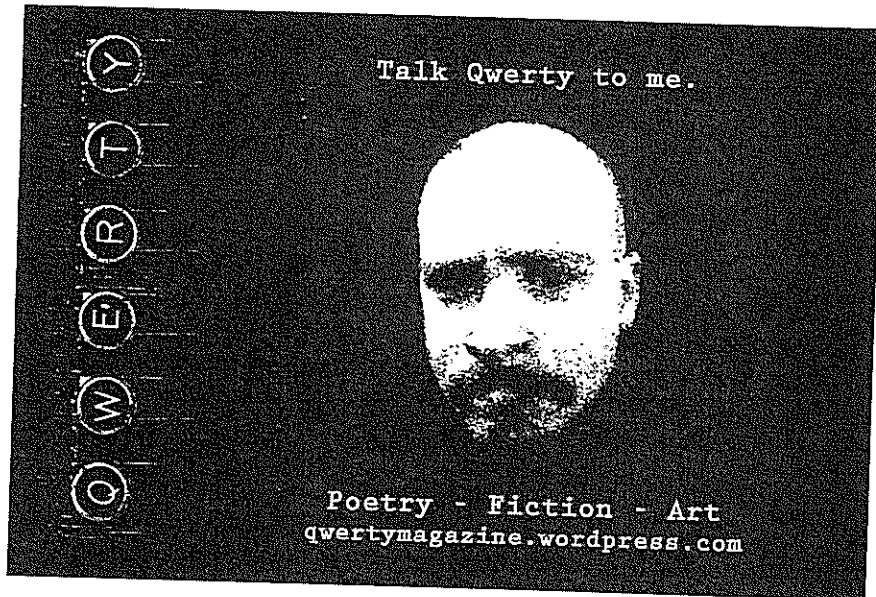
Each stanza of the above ghazal works rigorously to perpetuate the poem's questioning of how well we can see the future and in what ways does this haze trouble our understandings of our history.

There are many more examples of successful, engaging ghazals within *Surge Narrows*, far more than there is space for here. While they all vary in length and theme, each one shares the commonality of the collection's characteristic strict discipline of language, letting each image, metaphor, and every other stylistic choice to speak for itself. Because of this economy of language,

Surge Narrows demonstrates to its readers the power of the ghazal's sparseness, the tough beauty of it.

For me personally (a young writer from Nantucket who has had particularly bad luck buying buckets), *Surge Narrows* is a demonstration of a talented poet's ability to inhabit a form, making its structural and thematic demands to be what allows the poem to thrive rather than inhibit it. In her debut collection, Nielsen is leaping along the craggy coastlines. Her ghazals boast stanzas of poignancy and specificity, contributing to an overall piece of stunning thematic adhesion.

— Richard Kelly Kernick's debut collection of poetry is *Caribou Run* (Goose Lane Editions, Spring 2016).



A Fiddlehead Reader

Shane Neilson

 70
years

In 2013, my mother became seriously ill and spent many months in hospital. I visited her every day for six weeks, four of those by her bed in the ICU. She was near death and, I thought, didn't see, hear, or know much of anything. For much of it she wasn't even responsive to pain. One day, after a particularly awful few hours, and fearing that she would die, I wrote the poem "Angelic Salutation" right by that ICU bed.

In time, she got somewhat better and left the hospital. She recovered enough to see me read as Presiding Spirit at Poetry Weekend in October of 2013. I read "Angelic Salutation" at that event. That she was in the audience isn't a surprise — my mother attended every poetry weekend I've ever been to, and I've only missed the event twice in its eleven year history. My mother was also a keen reader of *The Fiddlehead*. Near her desk in the basement is a bookshelf where she kept the things I've written. She's kept every *Fiddlehead* issue I've ever appeared in on the top shelf.

Perhaps the best feedback I've yet received on a poem of mine was when, this past summer, my mother received the 2014 Poetry issue of *The Fiddlehead* with "Angelic Salutation" printed inside. The poem is partly about me sitting by her bedside every day as I prayed, desperately, that she not die. After reading the poem, Liz wrote me to say "Those first weeks were horrible but when my brain focused at times I saw you there at my bedside working away at your computer . . . I felt safe." Just as I felt when, over twelve years ago, I had no one to speak to or visit unless she came to see me on a locked psychiatric ward. When I woke from a chemically-induced sleep, she was there, waiting. She would put her book down and smile. This is one of the reasons I am alive.

During Poetry Weekend 2014, my mother was back in the ICU at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital. She died Nov. 9, 2014. She missed my reading that year, but I visited her. I lost my mother, but I, the *Fiddlehead*, and a host of Canadian writers lost a reader. We are poor passing facts, yes, but not too poor to retain a living name: Elizabeth Margaret Neilson.