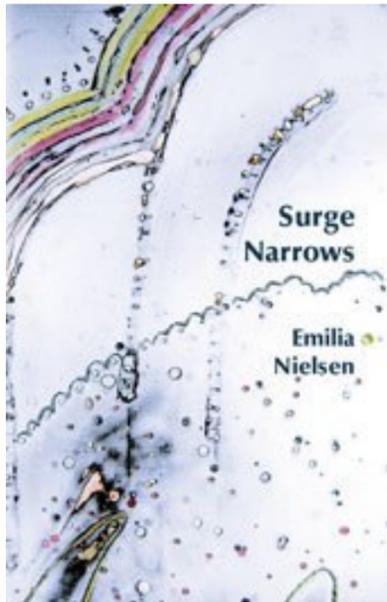


“The heart has never surfaced more queer”: A Review of Emilia Nielsen’s Poetry Collection *Surge Narrows*

Posted on [August 14, 2013](#)



I wish I had had queer poet [Emilia Nielsen](#)’s collection of poetry [Surge Narrows](#) when I was land-locked and stuck living in Onterrible (I say that with love, I promise). Maybe it would have been too painful, though, to be reminded of the ocean while riding on a boat, of “fac[ing] / forward eager for the sting on my skin.” The collection is such a rich evocation of the animals and plants and landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. If you’re looking for poetry that is people-focused, this probably isn’t the collection for you. It’s not that these poems aren’t peppered with people, but they often take a backseat to nature. When there are human beings, it’s still usually the environment that’s the main character. Human revelations are discovered through nature.

I would highly recommend this book for those who love or are native to the west coast. It’s so lovely to read a poem that compares “unruly hair” to old man’s beard (it’s a kind of moss that’s especially useful as nature’s toilet paper—you’re welcome). To me, reading these poems is like a trip home, to the woods behind the house where I grew up, to the landscapes I drove through on road trips, to the secluded beaches and forests I miss when I’m living in the big city. If you need another reason to pick up this book, let me tell you Emilia Nielsen has top-rate taste in fellow Canadian women poets; she quotes Roo Borson (“I think my heart is a sad device”) and Phyllis Webb (“My universe opens. I close. / And open, just to surprise you.”) Are not you convinced?

The first of a series of long poems, “Surge,” follows two friends (lovers? siblings? I couldn’t tell) who spend their whole lives on one island. They tell us that they would “know everything because [they]’d lived / on the same island [their] whole lives.” The salty, raw quality of ocean-side life is beautifully evoked in the poem, as in this passage:

Jigging from the rocky point, biting

at sea lettuce, bull kelp. The line reeled in

every few minutes. Beneath

the ocean’s foil sheen, rock cod:

eyes bulged, stingers mohawking their spines-

This part immediately reminded me of Gerald Manley Hopkins’s poem, “God’s Grandeur.” When I re-read the Hopkins poem I realized I had picked up on an echo of the world “foil.” Hopkins writes “The World is charged

with the grandeur of God. /It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;”. I think the two poets have more in common, though, sharing a deep, intense devotion to the natural world, whatever spiritual direction that might (have) lead them.

Even though they’re lengthy, the poems aren’t really narrative, but rather consist of series of images and sensations, which you might piece together as a narrative if you want. One poem, “Pass Creek,” which chronicles a woman’s time in a cabin in the interior, exemplifies this pattern. While the bulk of it describes the landscape and the everyday practicalities of—to quote Susanna Moodie—roughing it in the bush, the poem tells a different story in single italicized lines that sit below the main text. Speaking to herself, the lines say things like: “*Be present. Be tender. Stop running.*” Also: “*Be still. Acquiesce. Embrace fear.*” and “*Glean. Rewire. You can become whole.*” The last line simply says “*Go.*”



The last poem, “Vernacular Hearts,”—I love this title—deals more explicitly with human affairs. It’s also the only place in the collection where you see the word ‘queer,’ which jumped out at me off the page, a revelation. Each paragraph/stanza tells us about a different personified heart, mixing dirty, mundane qualities with the profound, painful sensations of love. This heart, I think, was my favourite:

The heart’s skinny dipping. It’s gone fishing Glib. Glee.

Its dancing shoes are on. It’ll never be a wallflower. It’s

kicking up dust. Wants to get this party started. The heart

blesses all who populate its corners. It’s on a camp-out.

It’s sleeping under the stars. The heart has never surfaced

more queer.

I’ll just let that speak for itself.

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About caseythecanadianlesbrarian

I'm a writer from Canada's west coast currently based in Vancouver. I have an honours BA in English and German from the University of Victoria and an MA in English from Dalhousie University in Halifax (yes, living near the ocean is a necessity for me). My love of literature is pretty inclusive, but I am especially partial to that which is queer, feminist, Canadian and/or written by women. Some of my favourite authors are: Dionne Brand, Octavia Butler, Anne Fleming, Nalo Hopkinson, Shani Mootoo, Eden Robinson, Zoe Whittall, Jeanette Winterson, and Virginia Woolf. When I'm not reading, I enjoy experimenting with creative cooking, doing ashtanga yoga, running, cruising around on my bike named Harriet the Spy, and going to see live music.
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Carla Braidek says:

September 12, 2013 at 1:24 pm

Surge Narrows sounds great. I'm looking for a copy right now.

[Reply](#)



caseythecanadianlesbrarian says:

September 12, 2013 at 7:47 pm

It should be available at some bookstores in Vancouver or through the publisher's website.
Glad to hear my review persuaded you to check it out!

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