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Otolith by Emily Nilsen

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none.

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Otolith by EMILY NILSEN

icehouse poetry, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by CHRISTINE LOWTHER

Otolith is quiet, “*shhh, shhh*— hemlock needles drop // in soft trillions” (“Otolith” 29-31), careful and clear. Even its cover is hushed: white space except for the humble image of a small, low horsepower, peeling old boat motor. The word means each of three small oval calcareous bodies in the inner ear of vertebrates, involved in sensing gravity and movement, or “a tiny, bonelike particle or stony, platelike structure in the internal ear of lower vertebrates” or “a similar calcareous concretion in the statocyst of many invertebrates” (“otolith” *Webster’s*), according to my dictionary. Or, as in the title-poem, “Ear Stone. Annuli within vestibule” (1): instrumental in balance and equilibrium.

At the top of each page, the title is set in a spacious font, larger than that of the body of each poem. Shorter poems are set close to the bottom of the page (except in the “Meanwhile” sections), the gap between title and text adding to the sense of space and silence. How fitting, then, to start with a poem called “Pre-dawn Walk” (one of three in the book). Just remember that not all silences are peaceful ones.

Beautiful descriptions of the natural world are dropped casually with deft skill. Immediately we are in a marsh with a river otter “as morning mist lifts / the drowned night / onto shore” (“Pre-dawn Walk” 12-14). The second poem places us in a forest, contemplating an organ-like fungus that causes Nilsen to reflect on mortality as “Lifelong deflation” (“In the Forest I Found an Organ” 13):

I distrust spring: the showy

promises. Some things just end.

[...]

I prefer a fall-time forest
when the aspen thin, their heart-
shaped leaves

in smithereens. (8-10, 16-19)

Here are eleven fog poems, ten of which are titled “And What of the Fog?”; four Float House poems, all of which end with “*Have you seen the ghost?* Billy asks”; and three addresses to dusk: “Alone in the alpine meadow / beneath a ridge. Moon rises bent / like the rib of a deer” (1-3). A list-poem is an ode to fog that “wets moth wings to / uselessness” (“Fog” 14-15) and “smells / of a logger’s boot” (19-20). Nilsen also attends to pre-dawn mornings, dusks, tree planting, meanwhiles, and fragilities.

A found poem of directions reads like Al Purdy’s “Say the Names.” A later found poem, also of directions, is a welcome and timely de-colonizer: every place-name is crossed out, with the footnote explaining that [crossed out] text = Musgamagw Dzawada’enuxw Traditional Territory.

Poetry can and does explore estrangement, aging, mystery, grief, nature, relationship, environmental concerns, the everyday. What makes a poet special is how she sees and expresses. Original, strange, accurate, perceptive, profound, and surprising are all fitting descriptors for Nilsen’s work. I happen to live in a floathome and recognize her truth:

This house contains both
land and sea, its floorboards tickled

by stickleback and herring, chirp of an
otter

beneath the bed. (“Float House” 10-
14)

I've seen the fog she describes as it "arrives with evening / rainfall like an eclipse / of hungry moths" ("And What of the Fog?" 1-3). I can imagine that "Before a storm, its stench / was as though a wet mammoth / had shaken itself at the door" ("And What of the Fog?" 1-3). I've known cabin fever as "Every sound from our mouths / the shape of a different sorrow" ("Cabin Fever" 8-9). Nilsen brings to light these experiences with precision and wit.

"Screef" is a long poem about tree planting, with its "Tree-burl calves" (34) carrying "Bundles of fifteen, swaddled / in Saran Wrap: spring-tipped, greener / than youth" (82-84). The planter is so thirsty she'll "drink any lake / under the table and scare bucks out the creek / with my dirty shins" (92-94). Perhaps, in the best opening line ever, Nilsen writes, "By noon I had opened the ground a thousand times" (1). Sweaty, bug bitten tree planting poetry and prose have been written before now. But few works have portrayed the cost of clearcutting in such heartbreaking yet elegant understatement.

As for the outboard motor on the book's cover, it speaks to mode of transportation to and from the floathouse—so much depends upon it: (trust me). The image has the motor out of water, in white space with a slight shadow below. Floating, or hauled out for repair work? As for the fog, it can keep us trapped with cabin fever or stalled away from home. Some west coasters dread it so much they will not utter the word, but only spell out F-O-G. If an otolith is a series of bones that helps to orient us in space, how does it work when that space is floating, and the horizon obliterated?

Works Cited

"otolith." *Webster's New World College Dictionary*. Fifth Edition. Webster's New World, 2014. Print.

CHRISTINE LOWTHER is the author of *Born Out of This* as well as *My Nature*.