

Solstice: A Magazine of Diverse Voices

Winter 2019

Review by Alison Stone

Three Hands None

by Denise Bergman

Black Lawrence Press,
2019, 67 pages,
\$16.95

TRIGGER WARNING—*Three Hands None* deals with assault and its aftermath, an attacker whose hands “stuttered filth in the eloquent language of power,” leaving the speaker, even forty years later, trying to reclaim her self, her body, and a sense of safety in a world where the innocent desire for “an inch of May breeze” can allow violence to enter.

The book is divided into nine long poems, each prefaced with a long dash inside brackets; though they read as one story rather than separate works. Bergman’s lack of capitalization, sparse use of punctuation, and long lines help propel the reader forward, creating a momentum in tension with the stuckness and circling backward the speaker depicts.

The book’s title comes from the opening line, “he had three hands I had none,” a strong image for the powerlessness and confusion experienced by someone woken up by an assailant in her room. “he held me down. The heft of his hand the precise edge of his/blade squeezed me pierced me emptied me of substance.” “Precise” is a crucial word here. For many survivors, the time after involves an obsessive replaying, trying to get shock-blurred details right. An attempt to render the exact experience, thus robbing it of some of its power. On the flip side, such precision is one tool that Bergman uses to give power to her work. Poetry, after all (whatever its topic), is really “about” the art and craft of language.

Bergman’s speaker gives the reader access to both the acute trauma following the attack—“my home my skin locked me out/breakfast was a sip of juice/supper was bread and water. the week after, a fruit” and to the effects forty years later where, still, “home is the coat that can’t keep me warm or dry/buttons and holes I can’t align.”

One result of trauma is that it holds energy to itself, and therefore away from the rest of the world. The speaker acknowledges that without the attack, she would be writing about beauty or political injustice. Toward the end of the book she does turn her gaze

outward, connecting what happened to her with other abuses. This is the weakest part of the book, with Bergman's language becoming less compelling and original:

materials are every woman and everywoman
 a fist is raised. a roar is born a rumble in the distance
 material is the eclipsed sun behind a sudden drone
 look at aggression's lustful desire

She addresses this theme more effectively in a later section:

forget containment confinement. the pause hobbles its bent
 hobo stick about to snap from the unwieldy bag of bones. bones
 on the border nettled with Arizona cactus thorns. bones in
 an alley pierced with hypodermic needles. bones of a famine
 bones of a sanction bones of blockaded antibiotics bones of
 withheld vaccine. bones of the Disappeared...

Many books have a "wow" poem or stanza, something a reviewer can quote to convey the work's achievement. *Three Hands None* is a different type of poetry. Lines, images, and questions circle back—a chorus rather than a series of solos. A tapestry. A palimpsest. A whole greater than the sum of its parts.

We are a society in love with the happy ending, the "stronger at the broken places" fable. As a psychotherapist with decades working with trauma survivors, I agree with Bergman—even though healing is possible, the wound is neither erased nor necessarily transformed into asset. Her speaker can "parent" and defend her injured twenty-year-old self, but this amounts to working around the damage: "I say tell every lover you scream in your sleep they mustn't/touch you when you scream in your sleep."

While viruses such as chicken pox or measles bestow lifelong immunity, the virus of gender-based violence does not. Some time after the attack, the speaker finds a stranger at her door, penis exposed. Another assailant could be watching her. Another assault could happen any time. Someone seeking a solution to all this in Bergman's poems will be disappointed. Poets can bear witness, but the horrors of our world, the abuses of power, continue. So does the seeming randomness of luck. Bergman's narrator had adopted a puppy; during the attack, the dog barks, interrupting what would clearly have been a rape (and possible murder.) Bergman acknowledges this by ending the book with the line "but for the dog." Lacking answers and false optimism, what then, does Bergman give the

reader? Honesty. Courage. Equally important, company with whom to face what can't be given a tidy resolution and must simply be confronted and exposed.