

THE MILES BETWEEN ME

Toni Nealie. *Curbside Splendor*, 2016. 200 pp. \$16.95.

In the essay “On the Rights and Privileges of Being an Alien,” Toni Nealie details her experience of racial profiling in America, writing “I have been obliged to offer up pieces of myself—my eyeballs, my thumbprints, my history, my blood, some of my freedoms, here in the land of the free.” Now, with this powerful collection of essays, reminiscent of William Hazlitt and James Baldwin, Nealie offers up one more piece of herself to the reader—her voice. Using her experience as a “trailing spouse,” moving from New Zealand to America in 2001, Nealie deftly maps out her shifting sense of self as she meditates on migration, racism, family, heritage, and belonging. The collection is at its best in its opening section, “Unraveling,” in which Nealie reflects upon the different facets of her identity or “self” made visible by the destabilizing move away from her home, her job, and her family. Each essay approaches the question of how people make sense of themselves in new contexts from a different angle: balancing career and family in “Trailing,” the racialized immigrant experience in “On the Rights and Privileges of Being an Alien,” family history and heritage in “The Dark-Skinned Dispenser of Remedies,” and more.

With each essay, Nealie weaves together threads of thought, feeling, and identity, paying special attention to the spaces in between.

As this collection’s title suggests, Nealie is interested less in internal coherence than she is in how we can understand the gaps—or distances—within our own lives. The disconnected meandering of the second section of this collection “Bequeathed” best mirrors these concerns on the page. This section covers more distance than any other in the collection, moving from Nealie’s yearning for a relationship with her deceased, mentally disabled brother in “Rupturing” to her childhood foray into petty theft and grief in “On Theft” to a critique and fear of mass-produced food in “The Displeasure of the Table.” While this section drives home the multiplicity of selves and experiences in each person, at times it feels too disjointed, like it is stretching itself thin trying to cover too much distance.

In the final section *The Miles Between Me*, Nealie describes moments of connection as she locates her roots in Pakistan and India, in New Zealand, and finally in her connection to her son. One of Nealie’s most poignant moments appears in “The Roar of Distance,” in which she describes how she’s come to find home within herself. She says, “Lesser, today, is the distance to home, which I recognize as the space fashioned inside of me.” In the end,

Nealie's debut collection of essays is a thought-provoking, intimate, and expertly written exploration of identity, family, and connection.

—*Abigail Burns*