FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Poetry

Complete Physical
Shane Neilson
The Porcupine's Quill
978-0-88984-325-7
(May 31, 2010)

Canadian physician and writer Shane Neilson immerses readers in the human struggles and surprising joys of being what some term “a healer” in his latest poetry collection, *Complete Physical*. Neilson, however, does not believe in such a glorified title for the work he does. In “Song of the Most Responsible Physician,” he lays out his job for all to see: “Actually, I’m an actuary, / an on-call oddsmaker, / the farmer who closes the barn door / after the horse thief makes a home visit.” He may see his place in his patients’ lives as common or mechanical, but nearly all of the poems in this collection look at the workings of the heart. They take readers into the torturous moment of delivering bad news; they find celebration too late in the life of a deceased patient; they worry at not having done enough; and they realize that love in all its forms—lost, found, hoped for, and shunned—is often the source of our ills.

Underneath all of the pain that Neilson sees and describes so originally, there is a quiet joy for simply being alive. In the poem “On Conducting Complete Physicals,” from which the title of the collection is taken, he says that love seems “a more pertinent question / than the latest burp or cough.” But, he implies, intrinsic in such a diagnosis is a treatment…and do we really want treatment for love, or for life itself?

Throughout *Complete Physical*, Neilson takes readers through a gamut of physician-related emotions and situations, from helplessness in trying to master the language of grief in “Campanology” when “all that comes out / is a sound like a tolling bell” to the whimsical nature of doodling on his prescriptions in the poem “Prescription Pad.” In addition to the sheer variety of subject matter in his poems, Neilson has a gift for working with forms that accentuate the range of emotion; straightforward narratives have their place alongside lyrics, sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas. Furthermore, Neilson has a masterful ear and uses sound in ways that draws readers into that very important part of the physician’s job: listening. A dicey trip down the throat is described as “jingly jangly” and a “gurgling drama.” The sound of grief, “one long

lowing moan," drags readers down with it.

As is typical with The Porcupine Quill's books, *Complete Physical* is strikingly designed with line drawings from nineteenth-century anatomy texts on its cover and throughout the book. The arresting language, sound, and subject matter of Neilson's poems, coupled with the design, make this book a difficult one to put down.

Jennifer Fandel