

# WITNESS 2017-2020

## Poems

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**Hilton Obenzinger**

Irene Weinberger Books (\$16.95)

Hilton Obenzinger is the kind of political poet who has, for decades, inspired praise from the likes of Diane DiPrima and Margaret Randall. He is very funny; he is in frequent spiritual pain; he watches the world around him go crazy and tries to stay sane but not too sane.

For some, reading Obenzinger may recall certain poems from Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*. As in that masterwork, the politics here do not need to sneak up on you; in these poems put the history of struggle right in front, where it won't be overlooked or forgotten:

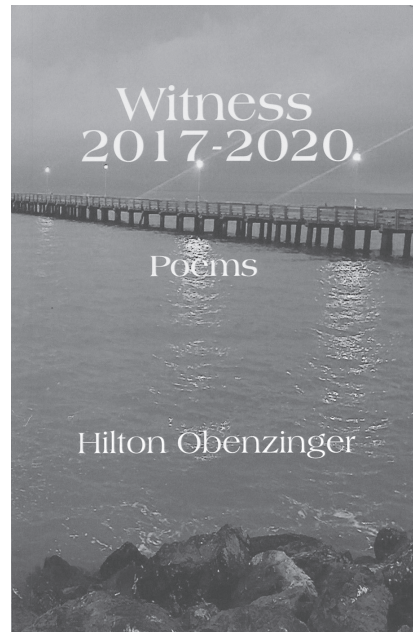
April 6, 2020

Why is this night different from all other nights?  
Anyone got a good answer?  
Maybe this night is different because  
We are not in the Warsaw Ghetto launching our revolt.

We are thus with the poet in body as much as spirit, even as he lives through the forest fires of 2020:

The plague chooses the Pharaoh  
But the Exodus has yet to begin  
Trump is in the hospital  
The smoke level is too high  
Day after day  
And my lungs flutter  
Bronchial butterflies

Having taught on the Yurok Indian Reservation and served until his retirement as an associate director of Stanford's Chinese Railroad



Workers in North America Project, Obenzinger has walked the walk of antiracism and real leftwing multiculturalism, not just rhetoric or grant proposals about what we should all do. This is made clear in "Zoom Thanksgiving," where we hear the poet intone, "Thank you, Native People, for surviving murder and theft / Thank you, Black Lives Matter, for surviving murder and theft."

The poems are also deeply personal, as he misses his dead friends and ponders (with good humor) getting old: "I'm trying to get my affairs in order / Even though the world is out of order." His closing thought is one that yokes the personal and the political together, and that bears much reflection:

It's always when the bombs are about to drop  
That you notice what the world can be  
And what you want to leave behind

—Paul Buhle