

Reviews

POETRY

David W. McFadden, *Why Are You So Long and Sweet?*, Insomniac Press, 2010

Johanna Skibsrud, *I Do Not Think I Could Love Another Human Being*, Gaspereau Press, 2010

Why Are You So Long and Sweet?, the companion volume to the Griffin short-listed *Why Are You So Sad?*, brings together David McFadden's collected long poems. The first poem included was published in 1961; the final one in 2003. These long poems, then, represent a major portion of McFadden's life work and, like any life, are (rightly) resistant to summary statements. I felt therefore some degree of anxiety at the prospect of writing this review even before I had read the book—an anxiety that was subsequently heightened when I emerged from these poems bewildered and lost and exhilarated. *Perhaps it's time to write a poem and not worry about how perfect it is*, says the ideal McFadden reader. *Or maybe it would be better if I just went outside and fell in love*. I get the sense McFadden would be happy with either response. His one warning (from the depths of 'Nevada Standstill'): 'Don't ever try to write about this.' Good advice, McFadden. Excuse me if I'm forced to ignore it.

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It seems to me an essential feature of these poems that they overstep most notions of constraint or unity or closure that the reader (or writer) might be inclined to impose. For the most part, McFadden's poetry here is a poetry of process, written with an ear to the experimental tradition of serial poetry vis à vis the work of Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer and, in a different way, Kenneth Koch (probably the closest American counterpart to McFadden). Stuart Ross notes in his introduction that McFadden writes as if he is shocked into a celebration that 'poetry exists, that we all exist, that language exists.' Another way of stating the issue is that McFadden will begin a poem in such a way that the poem itself, especially the act of composition—moment to moment and line after line—becomes the subject of the poem. The long form, for McFadden, is like one of those rare days when it's late spring and you wake up early with nothing else to do but wander around the city or the countryside, where anything that you see or hear or think or remember or doubt is (you think)

interesting and worth considering. The poem, like those walks, ends when you (or the writer) get tired and return home and go to sleep.

This brings to mind more general questions about unity and form in long poems. It is an especially interesting question to put to these poems, and one to which I'll briefly return later. The more specific question is where they begin, and why, and what it is the poems reach for at such lengths and over so many pages. The most useful observation I can summon here is that McFadden is a Romantic, unabashedly so; he writes these poems out of the deep conviction that if poetry is in some sense redemptive, then that's because the writing of poems and the attention of the mind that poetry both solicits and provokes is in some sense redemptive. The instances throughout where this conviction is announced are too numerous to cite exhaustively. It underlies the very project of most of the poems in this book ('The Poem Poem,' 'The Poet's Progress,' 'I Don't Know,' 'A New Romance'). In each case the speaker is the poet caught in the flux of the act of creation: he is pregnant ('...my affair/my pregnancy//the growing/so deep inside me'); he is like Dante beginning his journey ('I don't know where I am/or how I got here, lost'), and it is through poetry that he will 'fall awake' and through 'lines composed...in [his] head/...express the moment's essence,' thereby emerging into Paradise; he begins in ignorance in order to take on the poem as a journey and not as a means for perfection; but the journey itself is the goal or romance, since by way of it the world and the poet achieve a kind of ecstatic stance toward one another:

the paper is as white
as a window into heaven

and the words I write on it
are full of eternal significance.

I could go on. Romanticism is of course not new; nor is it, in the right poetic hands, old. That said, my sense is that the reader is either with McFadden or not, with not much middle ground to occupy. Because these poems begin with the assumption of radical openness toward the world and the freedom of the imagination, there is no limit on where they go—that is, on what association is made, what piece of the world or thought of the writer is included. This formal stance allows for some lovely (and redemptive) writing. For example, addressing blossoms (yes, blossoms), McFadden writes: 'I have to admire/the tree that gave you your brief lives/in exchange for your brief lives'; and, elsewhere:

The old millpond reflected the flowering
horse chestnuts on a blue spring day
like an eye, a watery, slightly scum-covered
eye....

Lines like these emerge into focus through the course of a long poem with a clarity that seems, in context, possible only because of the open-hearted attitude with which McFadden begins the poem. Along the way, however, there are leaps and side-turns that few readers, I suspect, will follow entirely, as well as the inclusion of inept metaphors—for example, ‘The Great Lakes are dimples full of incorrect tears’—that exist in the poem only because there is no sufficient principle at work that would exclude anything.

I’ve missed a lot. Due to space limitations, I’ll say nothing of the very experimental early work *Ova Yogas*. I have hinted at the allusion to Dante but pass over the satisfying and wildly playful inclusion of other poets—Rilke, Homer, Christ, Frost. I could list enough puns to make Ron MacLean wince. Finally, I mentioned earlier a question about unity in long poems. Robert Hass, in his great essay on Tomas Tranströmer’s *Baltics*, cites Charles Olsen’s citation of Alfred Whitehead: ‘The process of creation is the form of unity.’ Hass comments:

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This has been, more or less, the justification for most poems of any length since *The Cantos*, and it has always seemed to me to be a question-begging formulation. Because, by not saying how the process of creation comes to a closure, it tells us nothing about either form or unity.

I suspect McFadden’s poetics agree with Olsen’s, and so is also subject to Hass’s criticism. In one sense I’m not troubled: the commitment to an open form is justified insofar as we’re thankful for the poems, or at least moments in the poems, where it bears fruit. But in another sense, Hass’s concern is right on the mark. Without an achieved closure these long poems give too much ground to time—the poem, like a life, goes on and on with no stay against exhaustion.

I Do Not Think I Could Love Another Human Being is to my mind the best title for a book of Canadian poetry since, well, Johanna Skibsrud’s first book of poetry, *Late Nights for Wild Cowboys*. Both are published by Gaspereau Press, which ensures that the books are also nice to hold and look at. Besides, *I Do Not Think I Could Love Another Human Being* is a fine collection of poems. The best poems display an admirable and peculiar emotional intelligence married to a wonderful (and peculiar) sense of form. The effect is poems of remarkable clarity. Skibsrud never tries to be clever; she aims for the big themes that

come along with being human: loss and love. Like McFadden, she is not afraid to include her own reflections within the poems themselves. Unlike McFadden, though, what she's after goes way beyond Romanticism. While she wishes at times for the poem to redeem what is lost, to return 'it was' to 'it is,' there's not a bone in her body that really believes that's possible. She wonders if it is; she tries to make it so. But in the end Skibsrud finds herself on the 'life' side of the old 'life versus art' question. If McFadden is a Romantic despite age and loss, Skibsrud is a reformed Romantic because of them.

The opening sequence of the collection exhibits a good deal of what I think is excellent about this book. On the surface 'Measuring Depth' recounts a sailing trip with a few friends, one of whom (a former lover?) has recently died in a car accident. It's unclear how long ago the trip took place, but there's a feeling of late teenage years or the early 20s about it. The sequence begins like a typical narrative poem, setting both scene and character in plain view. But the poem quickly turns on itself and opens (both conceptually and by way of the expansive lineation on the page) to include an additional voice, the speaker's own, that comments on and questions the events the poem recreates. The first is set in the present tense of the narrative (for example, 'We unlash the oars to raise them, and when we/stand them up, they're tall'). The second voice is set in the present tense of the writer who wonders about the meaning of those past events, and the general existential issues they provoke:

And what determines that a man survives,
when there's no good reason that he should?

Saved, finally, by a woman hanging laundry out to dry.

...

Or that a man dies, when there's
no reason on this earth he should.

What emerges is a counterpoint that provokes a very moving and intelligent reflection on time and loss:

It was, then, the way I like it best:
made, as I was, by weather, so aware....

...

Looking back, it's just, there always seems to be more
room within each moment than, originally, I'd thought....

I love the tentative texture of this voice. The use of commas and sub-clauses is striking and effective. More than that, I love what she aims

for: nostalgia displayed under the aspect of grief; the heightened discrepancy between the moment as lived (Life) and the moment as re-collected (Art):

(Quite certainly it's fog,
I should make that point quite clearly.

Remember that—remember *this*—
in just this way—

this present moment, as if it were already in the past,
so that later I can retrieve it just 'as it was' just
as it is).

Can she? I doubt she believes that such a retrieval will really be possible or effective: 'Is this, then, the best of things? Just: the idea of it?' Wallace Stevens says yes. Plato says yes. Skibsrud cannot bring herself to do so, at least without acknowledging the incredible sadness that such an admission entails. What is at stake is the real power of poetry to heal, a power the romantic propagandists of poetry have long stated to be real. Yet Skibsrud cannot quite cross over into the land of true belief.

There are so many good poems in this book. The best—my favourite, at least—is the title poem. It is a tour de force that that reminds me of Ondaatje's 'The Cinnamon Peeler'—with the main difference being that Skibsrud's poem is better. Here, again, she flirts with an impossible desire and an impossible assertion. The poem feels as if it were written in a single breath, a single stroke:

I do not think that I could love a human being; I would not
know it if I squeezed too hard. I would be a great bear. I would
go rumbling through

...

I would get so
stuck on things. The small
flaws in you, like
the way that you will die...

In the context of both the book and the poem the identification of mortality as that 'small flaw' the speaker cannot bring herself to accept is an electric moment, the kind Emily Dickinson was said to look for as the sole criterion of a poem's worth. It's what we crave in poems and what poems worth their while achieve. And right there, for a moment, Skibsrud hits it.

—Darren Bifford