

"Your turn is next": the spirit is willing but the flesh is uneven

Susan McCaslin, ed. *Poetry and Spiritual Practice: Selections from Contemporary Canadian Poets*. Toronto: The St Thomas Poetry Series, 2002. 154 pp.

The fact that this volume is edited by a woman with a mission is both its glory and its downfall. Susan McCaslin not only provides a Foreword and a substantial Afterword to this collection of intriguing and often delightful poems by fifteen contemporary Canadian poets, but also, in the centre of the book, gives her "artist's statement" in relation to the group of her own poems that is included. Thus her earnest voice is inescapable—but it is not always helpful.

McCaslin introduces the book as a collective response to the question "How does a longstanding spiritual discipline connect to the practice of writing poetry?" She defines "spiritual practice" as a cultivation of the interior life through prayer and meditation as well as through public forms of worship and community; it may, she says, include less traditional approaches such as dream-work, "mindful sitting," "attentiveness to the spiritual dimensions of the natural world," and political-social activism. Her definition, then, is nothing if not inclusive. Thus in her Afterword, McCaslin is able to assert that all the poets in this anthology see poetry as both a spiritual practice (135) and a form of spiritual engagement with the world (136). "In the end," she suggests, "this plunge into mystery, like the efficacy of prayer, benefits society as a whole" (9). I'm not sure whether this is a statement of faith, hope, or charity.

It is only in her Afterword that McCaslin talks about "establish[ing] a context for this discussion," by looking at the work on art and contemplation of the poet-monks Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Merton, and the analogies between writing and monasticism drawn by Kathleen Norris. As an approach to poetics, I found these connections a bit tenuous, honestly, seeming to do little more than suggest that others with better-known names have thought about the issues that concern McCaslin. She is also keen to remind the reader that "no religion has an exclusive claim to truth" [**Page 99**] (9), and that "[o]nly a spirituality of inclusiveness will survive" (57), though some of her contributors would probably disagree. And when she asserts that "[i]n many ways, these poems suggest that the spiritual path is a journey not of acquisition but of 'unlayering,' a stripping down

to one's core, which is also the divine core called God" (136-7), I could not help registering that this particular theological position too is one which McCaslin must impose with difficulty on some of the poets in her collection.

It is perhaps not surprising, given her views on poetry and spirituality, to discover in McCaslin's own artist's statement that she has a very high and neo-Romantic view of poetry: "The poem, like a divine word of guidance, exists there interiorly, other, alive, about to pronounce itself. . . . The words of poetry carry us back to our origins, to our deepest selves, to the beginnings of the cosmos out of which we came. . . . Poetry is for me the infallible heart, the radiant body, bread of heaven" (58). In her Afterword she further asserts that "the art of the sacred often proceeds from a yearning to give utterance to the ineffable" (137), and that "[p]oetry is a primary conduit of mystical experience drawn from the depths of silence" (139). Thus, "For the religious artist, there is often an acknowledgement of an infinite mystery that transcends art yet contains it as its creative source, constantly generating new life. Art is one mode of access to this divine matrix and a mode of its expression" (141). You get the general idea. And indeed I suppose all these things may be true, but the ponderousness and solemnity of McCaslin's prose left me gasping for air. Fortunately a good deal of the poetry is much better than this: showing really does have it over telling. I began to feel, as I read, that McCaslin's Foreword and Afterword create a sandwich that doesn't always contain the filling very well. One wonders in the end whether the sandwich was necessary, or whether we could not just have had a chip'n'dip instead.

Predictably, I had similar qualms about the artists' statements, some quite lengthy, presented before each group of poems. (Thirty-five pages of prose statement to ninety-one pages of poetry—that means more than a quarter of the book is prose statement.) If the various strata of postmodern literary theory have taught us anything, they have taught us that the relationship between the 'self' of an artist's statement and the 'voice' of his or her poems is not simple. It is an odd experience, then, and not a particularly rewarding or helpful one, to have authorial intention so very clearly in the forefront. Does the artist have a privileged voice in relation to his work? If he tells us he is doing one thing, but our reading suggests to us that he is doing another, how should we compute this? And if the artist makes a particular declaration about her relationship to poetry and the spiritual which **[Page 100]** is not enfolded in the poems (as for me happened with Sister Eileen Curteis's Reiki poetry, which seemed merely not very strong), does this mean the poetry failed, or just that we are not the intended authorial audience? Does the 'truth' of this volume, in fact, lie somewhere in the gaps between the poems and their authors' prose statements? These questions are nowhere consciously raised; the relationship between artist's statement and artist's work seems in general to be understood as curiously transparent. Curiously, at any rate, for a volume produced in 2002, and not two hundred years earlier.

But to turn (and with some relief) to the poetry. Though the poets collected here come mainly from Ontario and the west coast—six out of fifteen live in Ontario,

and another six in Vancouver, Victoria, or environs—, the spiritual base is wider: everything from Zen Catholicism (Sister Eileen Curteis) to Mennonite mysticism (David Waltner-Toews) to Anglican-Jewish feminism (Marianne Bluger) to modern Druidry (Beryl Baigent). The collection opens promisingly with the poems of Hannah Main-Van Der Kamp, who is interested in both spiritual practices and poems that are "focused out from the self towards others and the world" (15). Her allowing of the reader to know about her interest in "the dream path" is generous, though I wasn't sure what difference it made to my reading of the poetry, beautiful as this often is. Her first poem, "Contemplative," begins thus:

It is as simple as this.
Each morning I set out,
leave the house, cast off from shore
in a white vessel,
depart the bay.

(18)

The poem ends with the poet aware of being "Wordless. / Hampered only by this: my urge / to turn back and comment on it / here." What a fine opening page this poem would have provided for the book, all commentary aside. Main-Van der Kamp also has a nice line in humour, a quality to be treasured all the more for its rarity in this volume: in "Soul Wants to Dress Like the Sea," she writes,

So what's the word for medium choppy evening gray
sea
As opposed to a calm grey morning one? Obviously,
The latter is long sleeved moiré, the other
Chiffon, halter. How about plaid? **[Page 101]**
Nope, too staid.
What do you call those shifting colours? Shot silk.
I'll take it. Any more mood diversities
Looking for an outfit, extension of selves?
No thanks, just surfing.

(22)

This delightful tone is just the kind of thing that McCaslin's Foreword and Afterword make no allowance for at all.

Alice Major's "Model Lives" are similarly quirky and strong. "Saint Anne Teaches Her Daughter to Read" has Anne telling the story of Mary's childhood, "Her hair under my hand straight and smooth / as the fine cloth of a torah cover":

She grew up my heart's delight—a solid girl
like me, with a square, sweet face and a gravity
about her, as though she pulled the planet
a little way towards her when she walked.

But after Mary's son is born, "as he learned to talk, she / seemed to fall more silent," this child who has loved language and been skilled with words. Anne says,

I wanted *her* words written down. I wanted
 her to remain real, to pull the parchment earth
 towards her and inscribe it with her alphabet
 of illuminated letters....
 I wanted it to be my daughter,
 not her son.

(28)

I found this perspective fascinating and alive; the character of Anne remains real for me, and Mary has a gravity that is new. Again, I am unsure what relation these things bear to McCaslin's quest for poetry as spiritual practice, but it does not seem relevant.

And then there are poems by John Terpstra. His artist's statement, "Falling, Not Far from the Tree," is one of the few that I enjoyed, largely because it is crafted as a piece about worship and spiritual inheritance, rather than as a comment, in any prosaic way, about his poetic practice. He writes of his presence "beneath a tree" in church every Sunday morning: "It is not possible here to forget by what cross purposes, and violence, life [**Page 102**] on planet earth is led....I stare into the lines, vertical and horizontal, and am held suspended in that tension of opposite directions. Where they intersect is the still point where bow touches string. The window blows open, the leaves rattle, and the unbearable, beautiful music of the spirit plays. And I say thank-you" (49). The piece "A Prayer To Be in Paradise with the Children" (50) was written for a baptism: it is a poignant invocation of the significance of children for adult life:

And let it be
 that angels guide our thousand feet upon the stair
 to lead us into hidden access of the secret lair
 of your delights: the preparations, boxes, reels,
 the paper, crayons, the fountains of water, ferris
 wheels.
 Pamper us there, for whom the faith is one, waking
 up
 on this morning or that. O Lord God, fill the cup.

(50)

"The Little Towns of Bethlehem" is a poem that has met with significant public notice already: during the last two Christmas seasons it has been read by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson on CBC Radio, and it has also been anthologized in the United Church Book of Worship. It is a name-entranced poem about the holiness

of every child's birth across Canada:

And the future of the whole earth
is placed upon the shoulders of the daughter of
Tuktoyaktuk

Tignish

Swan Lake.

And the place of their birth is called

Vermillion

Temiskaming

Nain.

Picture Butte

(52)

The poem ends, "For unto us / For into all / this night / is born a child, this night / bearing each / and the places of their birth, / and nativity is given / every name" (53).

A similar extension of the biblical narrative into the social concerns of the present-day is found in Joy Kogawa's extracts included here from *A Song of Lilith* (Polestar 2000). Lilith was, Kogawa tells us, Adam's first [**Page 103**] wife, but refused his domination and flew away. Where pliant Eve is the mother of all those women "Enduring the days of humiliation / Under the long reign / Of the brotherhood of man," in the end it is Lilith, addressed by God in "[a] leaping of light," who is "Woman alive // Incandescent / Merging the stars / Shouting the light" (69).

Inevitably, not all the poetry included in this volume is successful. One contributor offers some poems about her Celtic heritage that do not rise above a self-indulgent romantic narcissism; others seem pretentious, or stilted, or take themselves a whole lot too seriously. In fact there are a good many poems here that badly need the red pen of a more hardnosed and, dare I say it, worldly editor. On the other hand, there are some lovely, unpretentious, honest pieces to catch the breath over. Poems that feed the spirit. Here is George Whipple, watching a sparrow beginning to build a nest: "but what I'm here for I / don't know – unless / it is to build / Him whose son I am / a nest – of broken vows / and twigs of faith, a word- / house where his Word / may come and sing" (108). Or, in his piece called "Good Friday," thinking of the tricks the sun can play streaming through dead trees: "I know all the tricks / yet have no faith in doubt, / walking the back lanes / of time on look out for / a certain face – a face / I shall have seen before" (110). I enjoyed, too, Richard Greene's no-nonsense portraits of what he calls "gritty urban life," even though I was unsure what made them poetry rather than prose, so flat is the tone, so unembellished the writing: "The old sisters next door recall / when this was a desirable address: / the doorman wore a kind of livery then / and helped with parcels" (92).

And David Waltner-Toews, who says that "through this day job as a veterinary epidemiologist and ecosystem health specialist, poetry keeps me going" (71), contributes the most sensual contemporary poem I have ever come across about the earth as lover:

He seems disconcertingly traditional.
He brings roses, for instance, red ones.
You are bemused.
You look past him, sheepishly,
to the shapes of clouds,
to the paling blue sky.
When your eyes return from flight
you see your hand is bleeding,
you are clutching a sprig of thorns,
and he is gone.

He returns with fat red tomatoes, **[Page 104]**
waxy green peppers, a peach pressed firmly,
gently, from his palm to yours.
You can still feel the scars
from his roses. Your hand retreats.
Your fingers brush.

(73)

The wooing continues until finally "the light will break through / and the darkness, together, / and you will understand, finally, / who it is who has loved you / all this time, so well" (74). In "The Time of Our Lives" Waltner-Toews makes the digging up of an old pine-stump into a witty meditation about "everything I need to know about life / and death" (75). In the second half of the poem, having noted the mushrooms, the woodlice, the earthworms, the beetles, the slugs, the bacilli, and the carbon and nitrogen cycles beneath the tree-stump, he turns the experience into an earthy parable:

as the roots lift free, I am dug in,
rooted,
earthworms, beetles, fungi,
bacilli all around me,
skittling up the spade handle toward me, singing:

Welcome home.
Your turn is next.

(76)

I laughed out loud. These fine, strong, witty poems make me look twice at the world.

Which is what poems, surely, ought to do. Even, nay especially, if they are being touted as a spiritual practice. And therein appears the bias of my own worldview. Perhaps ecstatic poetry as what McCaslin calls "the radiant body, bread of heaven" is remarkably close to wry poetry about fungi and earthworms and death, after all. For my money, the poems that work best in this volume are the ones least in love with the sound of their own spirituality and most aware of the incarnated glory and pain of the world around them. Fortunately, there are enough and to spare of these strong poems to make the book well worth the price of the blind eye one must turn to the others and to their earnest editorial frame.

Deborah Bowen
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