Blue Wherever
by Barry Dempster

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Barry Dempster has published a novel, a couple of short-story collections, a children’s book and more than a dozen poetry volumes; he was the poetry editor for Poetry Canada for most of the ’90s and has discovered some of Canada’s most prominent young poets.

The poem “Woodpecker” appears early in the book. Written in three stanzas, this literary sonata is a tour de force. In the first movement – er, stanza – the protagonist encounters a woodpecker and, try as he might to distract it, the woodpecker retains its focus: “I shout, toss a stone, even wrap my arms around / the trunk and tug”(13). The second stanza moves into the protagonist’s search for that elusive thing – happiness – while forever placing impediments in his own way: “Decide to live on / love alone and I’d either starve or conjugate.” At least he is able to view his impotence with a sense of humour. But finally, there is the eureka moment where he realizes that what he has lacked is the persistence of the woodpecker: “Each of us, / alone together, losing track of bitterness, / tapping a simple not-so-secret code.” We may generally think of form as what goes on within a single stanza but, as Dempster demonstrates, that way of thinking is myopic. To him, poetry is music and we can resort to musical structures for the creation of new, exciting, multi-stanza forms.

In the requiem “Accident, With Warbler,” the poet attempts to redeem the cosmic moment when a bird flew into his windshield. However, he seems to lose sight of the emotion within the beautiful music of lines such as “viscera of a blossom, to the beige-bodied” (31) in subsequent lines such as “One warbler, / primo uomo, one dark flight. One voice slashed / on glass, a smear under a microscope.” with their almost sarcastic tone. The difficulty in this poem has to do with the nature of “appropriate emotion,” and with what the poem appear to be attempting to convey – something that could easily be misconstrued. If the poem is about the nature of cosmic circumstance – cold, indifferent – “A surge of wantonness, a splurge of air currents,” “I know I’m mere accompaniment,” it requires a drastic revision in reading. Perhaps including a line or two to transition between these emotions would have been more effective. “A few tears mixed with a feathered stew,” despite its beautiful use of vowel sounds, sends out a
mixed message. The fact that the driver has felt sad enough to shed a few tears is negated by the “feathered stew” immediately following. As it is, this poem is a flawed elegy.

“The Path” is an embodiment of the famous lines concluding T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” the last of the *Four Quartets*: “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” Dempster opens the poem with

There is a path. There is always
one path or another. This one
is sunk in sand, strewn with
rust pine needles and planets of acorns (73)

Beneath this persona lies an almost Taoist metaphysical rhapsody, which concludes with repetition: “There is a path. This path / is everywhere, the sand adding / our footprints to its map of trails.” This is an extremely well-constructed and well-written poem.

Many poets have attempted to capture the everyday experience of life. Dempster succeeds in an eminently satisfying way. Even the little vignettes captured in “House Poems” are poignant. “Bedroom Mirror,” which was probably written as a response to W.C. Williams’s “Dance Russe,” opens with “You wake up to God getting naked in the mirror” (88). Here, the poet turns his wit against himself: “Feel the softness of his skin – quick! – before it sheds.”

Barry Dempster flexes his poetic muscle in this enjoyable collection. He takes risks at times, tackling difficult emotional situations. The results are not always perfect. Yet, all poems demonstrate a level of poetic ability that others can only seek to emulate.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

Buy *Blue Wherever* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/searchresults?txtSearchSearchType=keyword&txtSearchFulltextCriteria=blue+wherever&txtSearchMode=sitewide