Traumatology
by Priscila Uppal

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Traumatology is a clever and often irreverent collection of poems demonstrating freshness of vision and humour about the aging middle-aged self. With its uniquely extended metaphors drawn from such diverse disciplines as physical training, law, sociology and politics, the subject matter is often wrenched through some metaphysical point of similarity into the unexpected, where humour in its tenuous somersaulting connection becomes oddly sardonic. Taking its categories of body, mind and spirit from Greek and medieval philosophy, Traumatology adds an extra final section, “[to hide],” which carries an almost Jungian suggestion and, like the joker in the card pack, makes a clean break from the closed expectations set up by this ancient classification. The cover design, with Hermes’s staff and twining serpents topped by wings, is suggestive of both the mercurial messenger god so influential in the arts and of medicine, while Hermes is supposed to be the first informant to visit those doomed to pass into the world of shades. The added contemporary-seeming detail of a missing puzzle piece to this classical cover design perhaps pertains to a post-postmodern open-endedness as well as to the conundrum of the unsolved middle-aged self.

In “Training,” Uppal inverts the expectations of the “training” metaphor so that the speaker trains for death rather than for physical aptitude. Details are supplied whereby the metaphor is extended with mock seriousness to the furthest extent of its application:

   Once my metabolism slowed and I realized
   I could no longer digest green peppers,
   I started training for death. (12)

Although at first “it was just an occasional thing, / a brief flirtation,” “the crow’s feet landed / and [the speaker’s] hangover recovery hours doubled,” so she became “serious.” With sardonic humour, the speaker, like a succubus that preys on blood to restore its own physical identity, claims to want “your body,” referring to the reader’s body and/or everyman’s body in his or her prime. Using car
repair imagery of “jack[ing] up” the addressed’s “ribcage and suck[ing] the air right out of you,” she
extends that figurative-seeming wish into the realm of physical-seeming world by closing with the
ambiguously absurd, “In the end, it’ll be worth it” and “You’ll be the one who won’t know what
hit you.”

Problems with personal relationships associated with middle age emerge in “Intimacy.”
With elegant paradox, the speaker writes: “Intimacy leads to familiarity. / Familiarity leads to
contempt.” and employs more sinister imagery: “Home is where the heart is, / where the knives
are sharpened” (18). Consider the balance of conflicting needs of men and women juxtaposed to
black comic effect in the following stanza:

Penises respond to ledges and elevators.
Breasts to anger and adultery.
The second a body is known,
second nature kicks in. (18)

The phrase “Come closer” precedes the unexpected “I want to hit you,” and “move farther” is
perversely followed by “I want to see you.” In the short, but poignant poem, “Divorce,” the knife
image also enters the home as the location “where knives are sharpened.”

In “The Old Debate of Don Quixote vs Sancho Panza,” Uppal wittily aligns intelligence
(in association with Don Quixote’s idealism) with the women in her family and practicality (in
association with Sancho Panza ) with the men in her family.

The women in this family
are never happy. Always thinking, thinking, thinking
about this and that, that and this,
they know only thoughts running in circles, circles,
until exhausted and dizzy.
The women are too smart for their own good.
The books worm out holes in their brains. (37)

In an ironic turn at the end of the poem, however, the speaker concludes that these women in the
family “are unhappy in every language they learn” and so perhaps the men may be more intelligent
than the women after all.

Legal metaphors shape poems such as “Life Sentence” and “Restraining Order.” In the
former, the speaker adopts a male persona in order to gain perspective on the supposed female line

madness that runs in her family: “I will die of cancer. But I won’t go crazy,” the speaker avers, “I am a man.” However, turning the pros and cons over in his mind, the speaker admits to feeling somewhat “jealous” of the “crazy but intelligent” women in the family:

... It might be inspiring
to drift into a long, incomprehensible mess of memory, where roots
cling falsely to bits of brains or snap like shanties under heavy rain. (52)

In the darkly comic “Restraining Order,” Uppal’s speaker reveals her resource of humour as a safeguard against frailty while she employs this legal metaphor in application to a so-called “restraining order” and “severance” (an implied divorce) between “mind” and “soul”:

My soul is forbidden to be
within 50 metres of my brain,
so it has purchased powerful
binoculars and hides
in bushes;
    sends email spam
and candygrams. (77)

Going beyond light-hearted humour to reveal a deeper underlying paranoia and anti-social behaviour, the speaker talks about being “afraid to cross / in front of windows” and “rarely picks up / the phone” but the poem ends on a more whimsical note, with the speaker on a walk with a white poodle, remarking that the “restraining order pertains // to the soul // not the body.”

Applying another unusual conceit, this one drawn from politics and marketing, Uppal in “Interview” satirizes social-political expectations about men and women, nationality, and their consumer mentality.

– Who are you?
– ?
– Who do you identify with?
– My mother?
– What nationality is your mother?
– Consumerist.
– Then your father?
– My father?
– What nationality is your father?
– Utilitarian. (88)

In a reversal at the end of the interview, the interviewee turns out to be the one with “the clipboard,” and in answer to the question, “Shall I count you?” the speaker’s existential quip is, “It’s the only reason I answer” (89). The poem is clever in an absurdist vein even as it is fun.

_Traumatology_ makes for an engaging read, its heterogeneous analogies and cleverly extended metaphors at once banal and revealing and blackly humorous. For me Uppal’s technique represents as application of something resembling Donne’s metaphysical conceit to Absurdist effect while the impassive logic of her structures veil an underlying passion with irony and darkest of humour.

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is _I forgot to tell you_ (Thistledown Press, 2007).

Buy _Traumatology_ at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/product/isbn/9781550961393/bkm/true/priscila-uppal-traumatology