Precordial Thump
by Zoe Whittall

The Globe and Mail has described Ms Whittall as “the cockiest, brashest, funniest, toughest, most life-affirming, elegant, scruffy, no-holds-barred writer to emerge from Montreal since Mordecai Richler,” so who am I to argue. She is both a novelist – Holding Still For As Long As Possible (House of Anansi, 2009) and Bottle Rocket Hearts (Cormorant, 2007) – and a poet – The Best Ten Minutes of Your Life (McGilligan Books, 2001) and The Emily Valentine Poems (Snare, 2006), in addition to this one. Born in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, she now lives in Toronto, where she is employed as a journalist.

Whittall takes us on a road trip in Precordial Thump. Along the way, she introduces us to hotel and ER rooms in a language that is refreshing, giving a new sheen to the quotidian. It doesn’t take long to arrive at the title poem as it is the first one in the book. And it doesn’t take long to discern what we’re up against when we read:

there was a pig in Goa behind the hut who
ate our shit before it hit the ground.

conjure a single, carefully aimed blow.
I could put my coat on, I could just (1)

Guess what word comes next? You would be wrong but Whittall has set you up for that with the preceding stanza. Whittall prolongs the suspense by making you turn the page and come to “walk out of work.” You read on with disappointment and delight, a strange combination of emotions, each as poignant as if they had stood alone. This stanza form, with its indented second line, is one that Whittall delights in. You will come to discover that she also delights in enjambment.

But that isn’t the only structure that turns her crank. There is the list in “The truth is,” which reminds one of some of the strange lists Dennis Cooley has developed. In this case we learn that, in four similarly constructed stanzas, the truth is

a) soft and streamlined
b) circling itself
c) difficult to determine
d) pushed and prodded
e) a sonnet asserting itself
f) the truth is right on! The truth is hell yeah! (7)

We frequently arrive at Abell Street in this book. It is here, in “Abell Street, End of Days,” where we discover that itchy hands are a sign of syphilis and that, if you have it, you’ll be brain damaged in a year. We also learn that

Instead of Hello we say Get Out.

Get Out! Would You Like Another Drink?
Get Out! I Like the New Drapes. (25)

Thus are we given a lesson in the new vernacular and discover that we can use the retort as either question or statement.

Whittall has this thing for refrains. She also has a thing for lies, a word repeated numerous times throughout the book. These two things – refrains and lies – come together in “Save Me, Saskatoon” where, in a series of six triplets, she devises a new formal structure which appears to be a modified villanelle:

A Saskatoon fight bar, plastic pint and shot glasses.
Your lies went straight to voice mail while I flew over Thunder Bay.
Missing you is the most reliable character in the room.

Pomegranate red lip balm applied in a splinter of mirror.
The nights I sleep alone are a solid line of dreaming.
A Saskatoon fight bar, plastic pint and shot glasses. (44)

This excerpt provides some idea of where Whittall is going with this (as well as giving a good example of how she uses language). But because the repetition is not as consistent as you would find in a villanelle, you will have to read the full poem to get its overall effect. She uses this same structure in “In Spite of All the Damage” (80).
Speaking about how she uses language, part 2 of “Fernwood Hotel, Big Sur,” which is the sixth of a seven-part sequence titled “Hotel Series 2008,” has a unique ending:

and the farmers
in the fields didn’t
quite know what
the fuck (59)

That ending hits you like a sledgehammer, WHAM, completely unexpected.

As much as I enjoy the buffet that Whittall has spread before me, I am about to disagree with the *Globe and Mail*. There are some things here, “Consider James Frey” being an example, that leave me flat. I like the visual effect of the way she splays her stanzas across the page – although this has been done before. But the way the poem begins and ends doesn’t capture me.

Consider James Frey
Consider Margaret B. Jones / Seltzer
Consider J.T. LeRoy / Laura Albert
Consider George Bush (76)

Even the inclusion of George Bush doesn’t do it for me. If I weren’t reviewing this book, I might well have skipped this poem, offended at being ordered to consider something I have no interest in.

Not having had the opportunity as yet to read her first two books, I will be looking into them. The language Whittall uses, the forms she has created, the fresh subject matter she writes about, all speak of a poet who has discovered a unique niche and explores it exceptionally well.

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