**Downriver: Poems with a Prose Memoir and a Story**
by M.T. Kelly

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

This small collection marks a welcome return of M.T. Kelly. *Downriver* includes mature work, not limited to discovering sex, raising babies, contemplating infidelity, topics so many young writers and editors seem to focus upon in the first half of their lives. The poems in this book reflect the realities of the second half, or is it the third act of a three-act play? There is pain, loss, grief, and change. Choosing to start over. Getting up out of bed and walking. Getting up on to the skiis and swooshing downhill. Getting into the canoe and padding, downriver towards that larger sea.

M.T. Kelly on CBC’s *The Next Chapter* (January 31, 2011) related how writing friends pulled him back into life after the slow death of his wife. So the elegiac feeling of *Downriver* springs from lived experience. All the pieces in the collection fit the mournful ambiance. The first half, consisting of poems, is followed by an autobiographical account of the first act of the writer’s life. On the writer’s website, this piece is longer and contains more confessional details. The third section, short fiction, “All That Wild Wounding” (previously published in 1991’s *Breath Dances Between Them*), is a story of regrets, of opportunities missed during adolescence, yet awareness that, even with his “hysterical cruelty,” he had been given “an inestimable gift” (94). “[T]here was his damaged life, his terrible regret. There was affection and love abiding” (95). Both non-fiction and fiction are stories about themes revealed, about returning to childhood pain, and about recognizing connections between pains experienced and those we inflict upon others. The little murders we commit in our youth; the little murders committed by those we loved. And the use we can make of the new awareness. “All that remained was the ability to mythologize” (94).

The grief-inspired poems are especially engaging. In “Downriver,” a photograph of his late wife evokes a literal and literary waving of good-bye, as does “Euridice” (33), in which the speaker is living “in a dream of loss.” In “Danse Macabre” the speaker looks at once-beloved landscapes through new dark glasses, at death introduced with technology – vehicles, guns, roads, mines (11). Here too is the first of too many typos. “Danse Macabre” is “Danse Macabre” in the table of contents. Other typos include “hymn” (12), “publised” and “swin” (27), “earings” (29), “Humus” and “lside” for “slide” (32), “places hasn’t changed” (37), “fenur” (44). One or two errors are acceptable; too many are distracting.

In the poems about the duty killing of wounded animals, there is an implied acceptance of the reality of death, and that some existences, some pains, are worse than dying. There is a lot of weather and wetness and waiting for winter – a renewal of love for an ancient beloved, the land, the landscape. My favourite is “All We Have” with its personal geography and its emphasis on the importance of place. There is comfort and reassurance: “here trains become great beasts; / indifferent, yet somehow comforting” (39); “just for a moment, I am not afraid” (40). There is haunting history – in “Ossossane,” beauty – in “Aurora Borealis” where “The sky receives its lover” (13), and finally, a return to a happy memory, in “Child and Petroglyph”: “There are all these things, / the ancient
darkness, this child, this radiance” (59). The poet’s passion for landscape and the natural world connects with something beyond the ego. The work in this book represents at once a diversion from pain, sadness, betrayal, and abandonment, and the writer’s act of empowering himself through choice and relationship.

M.T. Kelly’s novel *A Dream Like Mine* won the Governor-General’s Award in 1987 and was adapted into the movie *Clearcut* starring Graham Greene. You can listen to M.T. Kelly reading from *Downriver* through his website: mtkelly.ca.

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