I Do Not Think that I Could Love a Human Being
by Johanna Skibsrud

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Johanna Skibsrud has published two books of poetry, the present title and the 2008 Late Nights with Wild Cowboys, as well as a novel, The Sentimentalists, all with Gaspereau Press. Only 30 years of age, she is the youngest person ever to win the Scotiabank Giller Prize. Her novel was her M.A. thesis.

She is equally good, if not better, at writing poetry. When asked in a November, 2010 interview for Prism International which genre she preferred, she said that she wrote poetry and fiction concurrently, but that she could concentrate on only one major project at a time. For her there isn’t a clear distinction between them; “some things just work themselves out better in poetry and some things better in prose.” In an interview with Amelia Schonbek, she said that “what’s really lovely about fiction is its freedom – being able to take an idea and, especially in a longer format, just run with it. But I find that what’s hard about fiction is then taking what you’ve come up with and putting it in the shape that you eventually want it to be in. And it’s all those times that that sort of poetic sensibility comes in handy, in the editing stages.” As to poetry, this from her interview with Sina Queyras posted on the Lemon Hound blog: “A poem has to hinge on a particular idea, or problem; it has to move. Poetry does offer us a really valuable space for contemplation, for slowing down and paying close and particular attention to language and therefore to our manner of relating to the world around us, but this space of contemplation in a good poem is the farthest thing from a ‘still point’ – instead, it is a space of active, engaged participation in the very process of language and thinking. It is that ‘active’ quality that compels a reader, I think. A still poem, a poem that simply ruminates, would fall flat.” She goes on to state: “The editing process is the part that I most enjoy in some ways – because it’s the part that’s all about attention to language and detail – but it’s also, by far, the most difficult part.”

The lines in the opening poem in this collection, “Halfway Rock,” move like the mind in contemplation – an erratic rationality. Time and space move along with the flow, mixing present and past, yet each spoken from the present tense. This flow is evident right from the opening:

Just a mile from the rock,
which Ed points to and says,
I took my parents’ boat out there
when I was nine, we sit; our
sails as slack as sleeves.

Imagine.

Getting no nearer, no
farther away. (9)
The last line of the first stanza provides not only a great example of alliteration but the compact parallel constructions gives the impression of bobbing along on a wave. Then we have the imperative, "Imagine," taking us into the flow of memory. The language is simple, uncomplicated – the way a nine-year-old would speak. The poem concerns Ed at nine but is obviously written with hindsight, with a kind of metapoetics taking place in the midst of the poem, as can be seen in this section:

_Row, Ben says. Row, Ed. Row._

Which begs the question:
Why write this poem in present tense,
knowing what I know?

Leaning again into his oar, Ed says:
_It felt too good out there to turn back home._
_It’s friggin far, though – (10)_

In the first section, “Measuring Depth,” all the poems are connected, each one filling in gaps in the preceding ones. For example, in the poem titled “Measuring Depth: Lead Line in Fog,” we read:

_Ed, at bow. His yell quite_

_separate from his body –
_and that too –

_faint_

_(Ten feet, he’s yelled to stern, having_
_turned there from the bow). (15)_

_Skibsrud demonstrates her diversity in the other sections of this book. In “After Drinking too Much Gin,” we encounter subtle humour in the opening stanza:_

_When, after having shown you to the door, I sat_
_down at the table, I kept going_
_almost to the floor. (37)_

_There is the melancholy of “Visiting the Places of Early Childhood,” written as a prose poem with unusual formatting:_

_Visiting the places of early childhood years later when you are dying is a different sort of sadness than I’d thought that it would be. In the park, the rink is lit, though it is empty. Did I expect_

_a man and his small child to skate in circles forever there?_

_Not surprisingly, the park is not as large as I had thought . . . (49)
Skibsrud has chosen to follow the narrative path to poetry and, in doing so, has discovered a place that allows her to exploit her talents both as a poet and as a writer of prose. Hers is a meeting place where, as she states in the interviews cited earlier, she is able to move in either direction, depending on which one is more amenable to the task at hand. Being exceptionally gifted in both, she has found a place where both can not only be nourished but where both can nourish each other.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review, Arc, The Antigonish Review, The 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 *I Do Not Think That I Could Love A Human Being* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):