Karen Enns’s new book of poetry, *That Other Beauty*, is attracting lots of buzz now that it’s been nominated for the Gerald Lampert Award for the best first book of poetry. These poems are exquisite in their ability to capture the small things in life – gestures, fleeting beauty, intricate “[g]rains of remembering” (61), all that it means to be human. It is this sense of beauty captured that makes her work almost Blakean – one can hold it in one’s palm, trickles it like sand between the crooks of one’s fingers, & find the world. Perhaps it is this quality that has thus far attracted readers & critics to her book, but it is not what attracts me. Although she offers a wide array of subjects – character sketches of individuals, memories of her rural Mennonite background, workers at foreign markets, “people on the street, the children skipping,” (44) – it is her fine musical ear and lyricism I find most striking & refreshing when so much poetry these days seems vernacular or inclined towards spoken word.

Enns’s background as a concert pianist is abundantly evident in these poems, which strike me as celebratory songs of the common, where “[e]very day [is] a gathering, [a] journey / . . . [e]very day a life” (67) & our return home to the world and to ourselves. One moment, then another free – I love how the wind breathes through her lines “lift[s] off the drifts / and sett[les] back. And lift[s].” (35) The woods cry, an “absence, days of listening for a breath, / a voice come home to sing” (31). These moments, delicate and intense, heavy & weightless with “[n]eedles, thread of bone,” (40) exist in poems like “arms conducting sound in gestures / larger than shadow or light” (24). They are the “stones that [press] / their stories deep into the riverbed / lean hard on silence” (40), or

... Thin screams.
A cough. Everywhere
this closing in—
a gathering of ghosts,
the curtain’s folly,
voices in the walls. (29)

Where “bird tracks [are] like remembered songs, / scattered, without end” (35), Enns “put[s] [her] ear to the world” (57) to hear the angel descent, “[b]lue dragonflies and hummingbirds explode” (57), “[t]he mind’s wilderness. / Enormous silence smashed against collage.” (50)

Other times Enns leans into her classical training more heavily, as in “Unaccompanied Bach,” or “Listening to Mozetich in the Parking Lot,” “Early Morning,” “Tuning,” or “Poverty,” where the cello becomes an “interrupted light,” a “low ravishment / [leaving] a play of shadow-palms, a sifting / close and thin.” (51) Yet, read as a whole, sometimes her poems begin to feel repetitive or predictable, not so much for what they have to say, but for the “varieties of light” she casts upon them. At times I yearned for more sound, or the touch of her hands on snow, holding crumbs, feeding birds, gathering
berries, painting, or caressing a beloved’s back. In her hands I understand what it means to prune an apple tree, to love, to gesture madly & with meaning, to point to a moment & call it life, to move on wildly fingering to the texture of the next note.

Turning the light on & off, colouring it apricot or orange, brilliant & hopeful, or dark as shadows, souls, horses, shade, the heavy branches of trees, dark hearts, darkness: I grow weary listing these changing moments & instead, find myself listening more to the song or the silence in the poems. I want that turning towards the “central pitch” (59), the moment of poetic climax that follows after so much lifting, gesturing, rising, poking about the high & low notes of life with the skilled hands of a musician. Yet, for this repetition in image & word, which may speak more favourably to other readers than it does to me, the book is a remarkable achievement for a novice poet. In “Solitude,” the final poem in the collection, Enns sums up my feelings about reading this book: I will indeed be watching, waiting to see what she writes next:

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Everything you can and cannot have is here.
You see it spread in front of you, flat and sensible
and huge, and watch the light divide things

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It’s the best you can do, this watching,
and putting your hands out now and then
through charged blue air as if your fingers,
to remember what’s been claimed, what not,
need only graze the edge. (72) "

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Kath MacLean’s recent work includes Kat Among the Tigers (University of Alberta Press, 2011), poetry based on the journals and correspondence of modernist Katherine Mansfield; Seed Bone & Hammer, a CD of performance poetry with Lane Arndt (2009), and There Was A Young Man (2009/10), a videopoem with Oops Design. Her award-winning collection For a Cappuccino on Bloor was published by Broken Jaw Press in 1997.

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