Is
by Anne Simpson

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Anne Simpson won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2004 for Loop (Brick Books) although, perhaps surprisingly, the Governor General’s Award that year went to Tim Lilburn for Kill-site. There was intense competition that year and so the Griffin win is an indication of how strong a poet Simpson is.

Her style of writing has changed considerably during the period between then and now. In Is, Simpson shows influences from Myong Mi Kim, Susan Howe and Erin Moure. In fact, Is just may be Simpson’s Furious – Erin Moure’s poetry collection that immediately preceded her WSW, which propelled her into a new era in her poetic career. Is Simpson announcing, with this new collection, that things are going to be different from here on?

A page, to Simpson, is merely a place on which to deposit words. And so, it is immaterial whether they appear at the top, the bottom or in-between. In “Book of Beginning,” some words – a few, many – appear on a page as if at random. But nothing Simpson does is random, not even abandoned punctuation – a revival of the sixties in a new guise. And so we encounter this on the bottom of a page:

before blue before blue deepening and unwinding inside blue before bluegrey before the envelope of morning before opening the crisp envelope of morning before afternoon and afternoon’s picked threads before evening before the scattering of evening’s fish scales . . . (2)

This Wallace Stevens–style repetition taking place through the use of the word “before” (Stevens did a similar thing in “The Snow Man” on the word “sound”) creates a feeling of the day slowly unfurling (reinforced through the repetition of the word “blue”). There has recently come into poetry, through the poetics of such poets as Karen Solie, almost a prohibition on word repetition. Simpson, as influenced by Stevens, demonstrates that repetition remains an effective weapon in a poet’s arsenal if used well.

Something emerges from this opening and that something is “Cell Division,” where sex is a run-on sentence, where

a woman untucking a cotton shirt a man undoing a belt it begins with a touch just a fingertip along a wrist a zipper unzipped clothes tossed on a chair and skin against sheets her body opening his body fine hairs on her arm and soft clefts in his skin puckers and creases of skin and skin of a wrist thin skin knuckle skin raw silk skin . . . (13)

The repetition of “skin” mimics the act of coition, the rise and fall of bodies moving together then apart then together then apart. Punctuation would do nothing but interrupt this flow captured in the soft movement of words. As Stein so adequately pointed out, we know where the commas go so why use them.

But Simpson is not averse to punctuation. In the rambling poem “At the Bottom of the World, a Tree of Gold” (21–29), we encounter such images as “When you return to the house, you bring the scent of the underworld with you.” (25) and “This is the most difficult work of all, allowing frost to cover the branches, cold dreaming itself into whiteness. Letting the dark come into it.” (27) This is an exquisite description, like a lace doily settling upon the earth.
“Life Magazine” (50–55) returns us to the bellows as the pages oscillate between the photograph and the photographer. In the first photograph, we find:

She closes the magazine, index finger marking the place.

Opens it. The monk, still burning.

Saigon, 1963. Someone had called the photographers the night before. (50)

The response is a *proème* in the manner of Francis Ponge, which can be distinguished from prose poetry in that the former predominates. Thus, in the first “Photographer,” we read:

It seared him after the fact. Six or eight rolls of 35-millimetre film. A sequence, from the beginning – shock in the monk’s eyes as his face caught fire – through to the blackened corpse at the end. (51)

“Easter” takes us into a new area, that of automatic writing as Simpson meditates on the idea of curvature:

A robin pecks, pecks; a birdhouse hangs, tilted, on the elm closest to the house. A man makes pancakes, sausages, puts them on a plate. Now he bends to brush and brush and brush a white cat. A winding curve between the man’s legs: the cat, released. A curve in Ella Fitzgerald’s voice.

One, two, three curves made by an oxbow river, meandering through the coulee . . . (74)

Finally, a “Double Helix,” as words wind and wrap around the page “—with the ending poised inside the beginning”(79). We watch as words move

into dense plots and subplots

of green. *My dear*

*one—*

Is it

a story at all

or a glimpse there

from the window of a train?

Here this story ends, leaving us to admire the artistry of Anne Simpson. ♬

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 *Is* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):

http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/product/isbn/9780771080517/bkm/true/anne-simpson