Watermelon Kindness
by David Donnell

Reviewed by rob mclennan

Drunken Horses

I still haven’t seen Drunken Horses, and now it’s gone. Naturally. Everything passes, even as we walk down Yonge
to get in on the opening night of this little Waldorf Café on Charles,
something is always passing, something is being lost,
but the seared scallops with a mustard mayo were good, some
satisfaction. Did Otis Redding write “Satisfaction”? I think
Mick & horse-faced Keith Richards wrote it way back in the late ’60s sitting
out on the front steps of the American Hotel in Barcelona
waiting for the roadies & the gear & the equipment van.
The desire to keep up with everything
I fall in love with everything, I bounce,
I’ve got india rubber balls, I don’t look like Fred Astaire,
not really, not this morning, but it’s summer & you’re ready to go.
We need some chicken Café Brussel & a bottle of cheap Georges Duboeuf.
This sounds totally doable. Baby, I can get my head around you.
Baby, sweet potato, I can get my head around you.

As the back cover blurb to Watermelon Kindness states, Toronto writer David Donnell is certainly
“a master of the conversational intellectual poem.” It’s something he’s been working for years,
from the Governor General’s Award–winning Settlements (McClelland & Stewart, 1983) to the
breathtaking Dancing in the Dark (M&S, 1996) to the most recent Sometimes A Great Notion
(M&S, 2004). But what happened to the writer of prose, author of the folio Hemingway in
Toronto: A Post-Modern Tribute (Black Moss, 1982) or The Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Race: A Great Lakes Fiction (Coach House, 1985)? Still, there is a part of Donnell that seems to hold strong onto a part of the previous century, with repeated references to and commentaries on jazz, Jackson Pollock, American film, St. Mary’s, Ontario, John Coltrane, blue and moons and oranges and Lake Ontario and Ernest Hemingway. Added to the usual subjects are poems on the war in Iraq, Scarlett Johansson and even a suite for new American president Barack Obama. As a poet, Donnell is a commentator, presenting information reworked and reformed, giving his readers an ease and a pause for essential breath, on just what his immediate and the world around us is doing: “Use your reasoning powers Barack, we don’t want a world war, we don’t want a pre-emptive strike on Tehran” (“Pre-emptive Strike,” 92).

Is there such a thing as making a poem too referential to a particular point in time? American poet Rachel Zucker probably wouldn’t think so either, having recently co-edited the poetry anthology Starting Today: 100 Poems for Obama’s First 100 Days (University of Iowa Press, 2010), and mentioning this to talk about Donnell’s “Did Blavatsky Even Meet Edward VII,” “North of 60” or his pieces for the current American president, “Obama’s iPod,” and the poems that make up his “Obama Poems” quintet. Will someone years from now recognize the television reference of North of 60? Will his Obama poems appear dated, placing Donnell back in that previous time, or will this become an ongoing part of his strength, after Gertrude Stein warned artists of all stripes to “live in their times”?

When you meet someone & you feel immediate love
a delicious shock of recognition
you look into their face & say, I love your eyes
& your mouth, whatever you’ve got under those clothes
I want it.

(“Some Shocks Are Delicious,” 74)

There is a looseness in this collection; something in Donnell’s poems has shifted over the years. The best poems here are unquestionably great, and it’s good to see this, possibly the largest of Donnell’s poetry collections in some time. Where has he been all this time? And this, his first non–McClelland & Stewart trade book out in, what, decades? Donnell’s poems are conversational koans, sometimes meaning nothing, meandering from meaning to meaning, topic to idea, bouncing off, sometimes. The differences throughout Donnell’s ouevre over the years seem
painstakingly subtle, with some collections strong, and others ordinary, writing out a similar flavour of conversational voice, and sometimes, it’s enough to want Donnell to break out of his comfort zone, break out of the structures of his form for the sake of seeing what else he’s capable of.

rob mclennan is the author of some twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, an editor and a publisher. He regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmclennan.blogspot.com.

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