The Horse Knows the Way
by Dave Margoshes

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Dave Margoshes is one of those good Saskatchewan poets that seem to exist in abundance, possibly due to the great job the Saskatchewan Writers Guild has done in supporting its writers. A journalist by trade who spent time in various cities, such as New York, San Francisco, Calgary, and Vancouver, he’s published over a dozen books, including novels, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction. His work has been anthologized, broadcast on CBC and published throughout Canada and the U.S., and he has been writer-in-residence in Winnipeg and in Saskatoon.

The first poem in this new collection, “A Tinfoil Mobile,” takes us into a Freudian dream with its concluding lines:

How strange, I thought, these blind urges of men
and women, and like my mother I slept and dreamt,
dreamt of the man I would some day be. (11)

In this book Margoshes’s approach is primarily through the narrative, which would be reflective of a fiction writer.

The grand narrative of The Horse is autobiography. The poems are reminiscences, or so he claims; the first poem opening with the lines “I remember so well the first time / my parents made love after I was born.” We become a bit sceptical after this, but don’t stop enjoying them. The poem “Sisters from Space” is dedicated to his sisters (Eb & J):

When I was a boy my older sisters
were Martians, tall graceful creatures
from a distant planet who had learned
our language, learned to pass, fooling
even my father and mother but not me. (15)

Interesting how the enjambment of the first line, particularly following the title we just finished reading, hangs us in suspense. Yet, “were Martians” strikes us as humorous even though we were expecting something along those lines. This is the mark of a good writer. Unfortunately, the
phrase “could kill with a look” still stands out as cliché, embedded within the narrative structure as it is, in an apparent attempt to remove this stigma.

Margoshes’s narrative is conservative, eschewing the post-modernist ethic of foregoing closure. Often highly moralistic, he goes so far as to telegraph this in “Becoming a Writer”:

What could be easier than learning to write?
Novels, poems, fables with and without morals,
they’re all within you, in the heart, the head,
the bowel, the tip of the pen a diviner’s rod. (17)

Here, a list makes the pen part of a writer’s bodily organs as important to him, to his life, as the heart or the bowel. But, as with many of his poems, it ends with a moral: “the writer, / neither practitioner nor artisan but miner, digging / within himself for riches unimagined, for salt.” This latter echoes the Old Testament and Saul’s wife.

“The Hunter” brings to mind W.O. Mitchell, a writer probably important to a great many Saskatchewan writers. In this case, Jake and the Kid is recalled from the words:

We lived when I was a boy not in the woods
but near enough that I could walk in them
at my will, and Saturdays I would take
the dogs and go, the dogs leading the way
like a flashlight’s beam braving the first edge
of darkness, (19)

So far, the poetry has left the reader feeling satisfied, as if there has been a completeness to Margoshes’s excursions. This feeling does not exist in the title poem. Riffing on one of Robert Frost’s signature poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” a poem concerning death, Margoshes attempts to interpret that poem from the horse’s perspective. He frames these lines between similar opening and closing sentences – with slight variations between them. In the middle is this:

. . . There is fear ahead
of us, behind us, below and above
but sense only in the way ahead, sense
and hope, that last refuge. The horse,
like Frost’s, shakes his head, but
it is a dispassionate shake, a quiver
of faith. (42)
He is attempting here to reach for more than the mere pleasantness of the preceding poems. Unfortunately, he telegraphs his intention by referring directly to Frost. If he leads us appropriately, we will follow him to Frost without his invoking the name. The main problem, however, is that this section smacks of didacticism. Perhaps this is supposed to be a “dispassionate shake” at death and the concept of faith, although the question “Why?” looms large. The attempt doesn’t work and the reader becomes a mere observer of this silent procession away from the “city of light.”

Margoshes shows himself to be a gifted poet, however, in poems like “A Winter of Discontent.” The opening sentence is one any poet would wish they could have written. Its verbs are powerful and, where one does not suffice, Margoshes makes one up that will leave the reader breathless. Here is the sentence:

Snow confettis the crystal air, it fills
the open arms of the sidewalk, powders
the blue hair of the dowager tree, sugars
the channels and grooves of the car, fisting
the lock shut. (100)

There is so much in this tiny snippet of sound. The image of a sidewalk with open arms welcoming the snow is beautiful. What could be a more appropriate word than “fisting” to describe the freezing of the car door? The analogy is apt for the disjoint lovers seeking reconciliation.

This collection is an enjoyable and worthwhile read.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, 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.

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