Deepwater Vee  
by Melanie Siebert  

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham 

Melanie Siebert’s is a new voice in Canadian poetry but it echoes from a unique background onto the ecopoetic landscape. Having been a wilderness guide on northern rivers from Alaska to Baffin Island, she recently completed an MFA at the University of Victoria, where she teaches graduate students and is current artist-in-residence at the university’s Centre for the Study of Religion and Society. Deepwater Vee opens with the prose poem “Current”:

On your knees in a boat with sweet rocker and no keel, water pillows up against the red hull with its silt hiss. You sight the drops between boulders, gear and your yeah-buts, your okay-maybes lashed tight, and you heel the canoe on its side for the swift eddy-in, the river’s leggy colt-gleam. Spruce reel by, the limestone peaks, skids of outwash. The river sticks a coin behind its ear, pulls two from its wrist. (3)

You realize immediately that this is a voice to be reckoned with. You are dazzled by the freshness of the imagery: “pillows” used as a verb, “silt hiss,” the river as magician; the language incorporating the raspy hard consonants of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It’s as if Hopkins were standing on a cliff and screaming in the title poem:

Water slants its root into your gill-surfaced ride and you steal the inside of the Devil’s Elbow, miss the ledges, narrowly, take the downstream tongue, deepwater vee funnelled to a wavetrain piling around the bend. (5)

Siebert brings reality home to this land with this untitled poem:

Overburden, Athabasca muskeg, stripped back.  
400-ton heavy-haulers dump-trucking the boreal forest.  
The oil-slick mirrors of the tar ponds, seen from space,  
blown pupils, looking/ not-looking,ragging  
down, slugback  
seep into porewater. (10)
We are set up for this invasion by the preceding poems – set up and sandbagged as we drive our SUVs and Hummers to the local shopping malls.

Siebert has created a symphony dedicated to the history of Canada’s north, where wild rivers, now heavily polluted, plunge over steep embankments in revenge for this defilement. Several melodies weave their way through this tapestry, periodically reappearing. One is labelled “Grandmother”; another, the “Busker” poems, dedicated to her brother. Then there are those dedicated to the exploits of Alexander MacKenzie, such as “MacKenzie’s Dream”:

He has tromped the grease trail with two pistols under his belt, hacked a road for commerce through the hot flank of the fleeing deer, been warned to go no farther and carried on. All this time he has travelled unwounded. But when the dream comes, it comes pounding in the hydraulic drowning machine of his hip. (23)

There is a series of poems, each titled “Letter to Kitty, Never Written,” one of which, like a farewell, whispers

Athabasca, your dark hair, dark hair of your sexual breathing, your oisweet hills, still burning. In my hands, your smell, the knifehandle of your smell. (61)

before ending on a series of river crescendos – each opening with the geographic coordinates of a campsite, each ending with the name of the river to which it is dedicated. The final one is called “The Splits” and is dedicated to the South Nahanni River:

Last camp before the mountains fall behind. Figure on the river’s shifty nature, slipshod delta weave, dragonfly, but with the big shoulders and a janitor’s jangling keys. (80)

And a new voice emerges in the distant north, bringing a warm breeze to the poetic landscape of the frozen south.
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*.

Buy this book at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the link below):