Daedalus Had a Daughter
by Wanda Campbell

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

So what does this traveller from the Carnatic region of India bring to the reader in this her third book? Is it the spice and spirituality of that ancient civilization or, considering that her family emigrated to Canada when she was ten, the spice and spirituality of ours? There’s only one way to find out, and that is to plunge into the pages and discover what this high flyer has to offer.

This is Wanda Campbell’s fourth collection. It consists of four sections: Group of Seven, HAW[THORN], Graduated to Glass and Women and Men. The second section was issued separately as a chapbook by Gaspereau.

Group of Seven is an interesting section. It contains seven poems, each of which opens with an epigraph from a different female artist, including Emily Carr, Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo. Is this Campbell’s feminist response to the male dominance of Canada’s pictorial landscape? These ekphrastic poems are united by a common form – two triplets interrupted by a tabbed single line. “Self-Portrait with Monkeys,” bearing an inscription from Kahlo, demonstrates this form:

she has taken flight from a frame
injured beyond imagining
dark wings of her brows like the crows

we drew before details devoured us

she is the bird of paradise
that flies from her ear
as perfect as a peasant prayer (16)

At first, one’s focus is on the alliteration that seems to dominate. But then, the two internal rhymes of the third line come into perspective – the first throwing the ending of the prior line onto the spondee that begins the third and giving a lilt to the two anapests that follow, the anapests ending in an interesting sight rhyme between “brows” and “crows.” There is also a subtle half rhyme at the start of the third stanza between “bird” and the first syllable of “paradise.” This demonstrates a mastery of word painting.

The second section, “HAW[THORN],” creates a new dynamic. Each poem is fourteen lines long structured in three quatrains with an ending couplet. At sight, the first thing that comes to mind is the sonnet. But then you notice that the couplet is often written in the shape of an epitaph. This section is divided into two: in the first, there is an inscription of one part of the definition of “Haw”; in the second, of “Thorn.” This creates an interesting structure. However, there are times when the cleverness of the structure overpowers the poem. Occasionally Campbell’s poetic sensibility runs amok. For example, there is an overabundance of alliteration in the second stanza of “Hush Money”: 
a summer field furrowed
for a February harvest
says his family paid
to keep the whole thing quiet (26)

But then you come across some amazingly apt metaphorical narrative, such as the opening stanza of “Cabinet of Curiosities,” part of the “Thorn” subsection:

you say the lump in your breast
felt like a pea under a mattress
they cut it from your flesh but already the crab
had scuttled away, mutations flowing through your body (32)

“Graduated to Glass” is again bound by a common structure. Each stanza is a quatrain, the last two lines of which are indented. “Snake on Display,” the poem that opens this section, provides a definite statement. Take these two quatrains which must be examined together in order to get their essence in its entirety:

now I don't have to drag these diamonds
all over kingdom come
    but I keep bumping into the shed bits
old skins that are and are not me

white and shimmery like silk wedding stockings
crumpled by the bed or cloudy and sad
    like used condoms
in the grass (39)

Could these stanzas have been written in the aftermath of a divorce? Certainly, the first two lines can give rise to that image. The second line is definitely a critique of patriarchy reflected in the “snake” changing her “skin” into that which is desired by that ideology. There is a disdain for herself for having gone along with allowing herself to be placed on display. Now that she is liberated, she no longer has to be the diamond placed on display. She is free to be herself – almost – for those old bits keep rising up to remind her of the station for which she was bred.

The poems in “Women and Men” begins with the same form as those in “Graduated to Glass” but, midway through, change into a potpourri without any discernible reason. “Nueés Ardentes” is an interesting poem with an interesting title. One definition of “nueés ardentes” is “a French term applied to a highly heated mass of gas-charged ash which is expelled with explosive force and moves with hurricane speed down the mountainside,” generally associated with a volcanic explosion. The last stanza creates a host of images:

a startling record
of the molten moment
    when flight became
impossible (54)
The primary image is that of Icarus’s plunge into the sea, his wings having melted when he came too close to the sun. A secondary is the trap sprung by the moment of passionate release during which one becomes ensnared.

Wanda Campbell is an amazing poet writing out of the foment of feminism – a necessary rebellion still.

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 US for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

Buy *Daedalus Had a Daughter* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781897109533/wanda-campbell/daedalus-had-daughter?binBKM=1#.T8Ulke2Ql0A