by Karen Mac Cormack

Reviewed by rob mcclennan

Shockers and Struts

surrounded by that which is not pertaining
no seamless sigh to infracted
page count or asthma’s resident
outline of years ending in an even number
images wander as we do
amid a temporal movement’s Algodones Dunes
this infinity of forming releases
the tenses beyond grammar, furcation, connection
lift as ascent’s in visible verb
layers inform themselves of resonance
but “if speech then sound” resumes the problematical
distribution so unequal (not as in another “rainy day”)
this date that letter (multiples and date)
the Ides of March is where to
kiss again the hungry present
so meet my invention’s
“escape limited” as a-waking not just yet
line a Dark Lady might perceive for
cadence not visible’s music doesn’t remain
so still

(2005) (167)

Canadian poet and Buffalo resident Karen Mac Cormack’s Tale Light: New & Selected Poems 1984-2009 selects and revises some thirty years of published writing into a collection of nearly 200 pages, from Nothing by Mouth (Underwhich Editions, 1984; BookThug, 2003), Straw Cupid (Nightwood Editions, 1987), Quill Driver (Nightwood Editions, 1989), Quirks & Quillets (Chax Press, 1991), Marine Snow (ECW Press, 1995), The Tongue Moves Talk (Chax Press; Hay-on-Wye UK: West House Books, 1997), At Issue (Coach House Books, 2001) and Vanity Release (Zasterle Press, 2003), and includes a section of “previously uncollected & new poems” from 1990 to 2009. Given her range, depth and longevity, it’s frustrating that such a weighty collection would receive so little critical attention from her home country. One of the few Canadian pieces I could find on her work was by Vancouver poet and critic Jeff Derksen, responding to three of her first few collections in “Queued Up: Karen Mac Cormack’s Quirks & Quillets: Toward a General Economy of Criticism” in Open Letter: A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory (Eighth Series, Number 9: Summer 1994), a sequence of critical prose-poems-as-essay:
In the move from text to economy moment and momentum pushes through you knit the factors but there is still a past model moving out traces sentences up against one another so that even the single word is a sentence pleasure surfaces before desire's detail.

Karen Mac Cormack's poems work an exploration of language and how it is used, and even mis-used, through different kinds of language to embrace and alter their politics, reminiscent of more recent texts such as Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources* (Coach House Books, 2004) or even Lisa Robertson's *The Weather* (New Star Books, 2001). By changing the context of certain words and phrases, their meanings twist, and even collide. It is as though Mac Cormack specifically composes and crafts collisions, the results of which *become* the poems. A fine example of this is the piece “Some Miles Asunder” that (as her footnote reads) is “based on letters written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu on a journey to Constantinople 1716–18,” highlighting the complexities of the language she borrows to compose. A fragment of the poem reads:

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Last to first
surrounded order: the body
a raised outside I
for court with cloister vastly high
the gardens are to see
Persian toy-shops of lesser size
summer neck and turbans
notwithstanding heat, swelled with this
divorced their stiffness an Englishwoman and a place
occasions letters
Black Sea for equal balm
(extraordinary formality in that affair)
on top of it voluminous dictionary
up fifty steps. (161)
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Constructed linearly through her published works, Mac Cormack’s earlier poems show much of the same kinds of formal complexities as her later works, but include the occasional (deceptive) clarity and straightforwardness, as this small untitled fragment from “Nothing by Mouth” reads:

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there is a blue where what we form together
lives

the edges of this taste of nebulae, a pulse
accrete(d) beating

to sense exchange entering
female and male

it is
rapport
it does not rely on exits through
these open doors

distilled indigo
in(d) i go (18)
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Part of the appeal of such a collection is in how it really shows off not only Mac Cormack’s ongoing formal inventiveness and complexity, but her continued willingness and courage to push at the boundaries, exploring a variety of structural and theoretical directions for the sake of what might make a poem or series of poems possible. Dionne Brand wrote that “No language is neutral,” and Canadian poets such as Jeff Derksen, Steve Collis, nikki reimer and others have been working with the politics inherent in language itself, an exploration at the very heart of Mac Cormack’s œuvre. At the back of the collection, she includes “Forewords & Prefatory Material,” short texts that originally appeared to open her collections At Issue and Vanity Release, respectively. Her two paragraphs for At Issue read:

In At Issue I examine the format and contents of the magazine instead of those of the newspaper (as Alan Halsey and I did in our earlier collaboration Fit To Print). The interruptions and syntactical dis-arrangements in At Issue reflect the experience of reading that format (within what is certainly a critical agenda on my part).

At Issue is a series of poems most of which (but not all) utilize the vocabulary and spelling found in magazines of a diverse nature. (An interesting if frightening fact is that there are fewer typos in Vogue than in most scholarly books published in North America!) To counter Vogue (both British and American versions) I’ve written through issues of Self (a health/fitness magazine also geared to female readership) and Prevention (another “health” magazine). The non-magazine poems are included as a variant measure of linguistic origin, and an alternative to “mined” creativity.

rob mclennan is the author of some twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. His most recent titles are the poetry collections Songs for little sleep (Obvious Epiphanies, 2012), grief notes: (BlazeVOX [books], 2012), A (short) history of I (BuschekBooks, 2011), Glengarry (Talonbooks, 2011) and kate street (Moira, 2011), and a second novel, missing persons (2009). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), The Garneau Review (ottawater.com/garneaureview), seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics (ottawater.com/seventeenseconds) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual ottawater (ottawater.com), and he regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmclennan.blogspot.com.

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