The Scare in the Crow
by Tammy Armstrong

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Tammy Armstrong grew up in New Brunswick, moving to Vancouver to obtain a BFA and MFA at the University of British Columbia before returning to Fredericton. Partial to long distance travel, she has been to more than twenty countries, forays that have profoundly influenced her writing. In addition to three previous poetry collections, the first of which was nominated for a Governor General’s Award, she has also published two novels.

But she doesn’t have to leave home in order to write incredible poetry. Take “Charlo – Ski Trail,” for instance. Charlo is a village in New Brunswick. The poem is a simple description of a winter scene but in terms never before employed:

Out of the pine gloom
the fox pushed ahead of it all

into the sky’s domed blare,
the field’s fire opal.

White on white –
no colour wrapped the scrollwork of trees

along the Bay of Chaleur. (12)

One cannot help but detect the presence of Wallace Stevens in this poem. Its opening – “Out of the pine gloom” – is reminiscent of the opening of Stevens’s incredible “Snow Man”: “One must have a mind of winter.” A difficulty in the poem is the repetition of the line “the field’s fire opal,” which would appear to be a metaphor for the sun, with its slight variation “The field was fire opal” which initially doesn’t appear to work. However, if we take the position that the poet knows what she is about, clarity emerges after a little more work – the field has become the sun because the whiteness of its show cover reflects the sun.

Armstrong makes her ecopoetic mark with this collection. “Panther” opens with a quotation from the New York Times about sightings of mountain lion that turned out to be escaped panthers. The opening stanza is a soundscape:

Across the lake’s shallow,
coyotes yip elegies
for prey stolen, territory lost,
for the panther’s down-wind shush
across skidder trail dew-melt,
where trap sets trip open, empty out. (17)
The concluding line is so powerful it would blow the rest of the poem out of the water had it not been carefully prepared for. That is where Armstrong demonstrates her immense poetic talent. She creates a sonata in “p” together with motifs of “i” and “s” rendered in a jagged quality of line that leads to a triumphant conclusion.

As if to demonstrate that this was not a one-off fluke, Armstrong quickly follows with “Porcupine.” This tour-de-force opens with an aria:

Conspicuous fan-spray of spikes,
trudge of the self-conscious:
the anti-social rodent
happiest at sunset in the shadows – (23)

Rather than rest on her laurels after this sensational beginning, she follows up with “exquisite limb-fall along the forest’s funiculaires –.” She is not content to rely merely on the sonorous succession of “s”s so she adds a few “sp”s before adding an “i” to this symphony. Words come at you like bullets from a machine gun shattering your consciousness and opening it to new ways of seeing.

“Dunbar Falls,” from the third section, equates a canoe trip with a relationship that is made clear in the opening line: “We navigate by half sentences” (42). Just in case we missed this, Armstrong adds:

Our paddles snag duckweed,
bury our complaints in the plash,

in the forward push through
spatterdock surface-bloom. (42)

The State of Washington Department of Ecology describes spatterdock, a floral species of wide geographic spread, as “a rooted, floating-leaved plant with bright yellow flowers . . . Its scientific name is Nuphar polysepalum, and it is also commonly called the yellow pond or cow lily.” But here, Armstrong is denying the existence of roots via the term “surface-bloom.” Although Don McKay would probably take exception to this – his take on nature being that we must understand the species in its entirety and employ it as such – we cannot fault Armstrong for taking what is necessary for her conceit. The surface is what the eye sees. It is also what this relationship has been relegated to.

Armstrong’s canoe trip through relationships continues in the final section with “Lamprey,” which calls to mind the poetry of Sharon Olds as the lamprey wriggles into crevices we follow in the first sentence of the poem

They say this is the lampreys’ season
when females move slick-rock
into foundation –
a breeding ground

below the river boil. (84)

Armstrong employs sound the way a surgeon employs a scalpel. And her eye for imagery is that of a jeweller as she polishes the facets of her poetic craft.

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