North End Love Songs
by Katherena Vermette

Reviewed by Tanis MacDonald

Katherena Vermette’s North End Love Songs is a debut collection from an emerging Winnipeg poet, a book that combines elegiac and fiercely ecstatic melodies to sing of a complicated love for a city, a river, and a neighbourhood. It is deeply rooted in its location, yet will reach out to readers everywhere with its harsh and beautiful tunings of growing up female in Winnipeg’s North End.

The multicultural mix of the North End has provided a backdrop for many works of literature set in Winnipeg, with Adele Wiseman’s examination of the Jewish community in Crackpot and John Marlyn’s Hungarian community in Under the Ribs of Death offering two prominent examples. The North End in those books, as in Vermette’s, presents young people who are nobody’s fools: tough when they need to be, tender when they can be. Vermette’s stripped-down lyrics draw on that tradition as they note the realities and dreams of the young female citizens who live and work there. North End Love Songs is aptly titled, and Vermette earns her street cred with clear-eyed poems about young women in love and in trouble, in motherhood and in mourning, girl children left alone and young women on the stroll on Selkirk Avenue. The latter are eyed by other young women who drive by determined to pretend that their car windows are “only tv screens / and the other girls / on the street / are only a show” (15).

This struggle for distance and search for a viable way of looking return through the poems as do the motifs of escape and entrapment. The opening section, “Poised for Flight,” notes the avian qualities of the young women who populate and repopulate North End Love Songs, and Vermette handily re-appropriates the metaphor of woman as bird to reconsider women as creatures of flight. Noting that birds are both delicate in their bones but enduring in their ability to weather storms and endure harsh conditions, Vermette’s women as birds are as strong-voiced as blackbirds, as small and watchful as finches, as daring as shrikes.

These woman-birds need all their wits and strength to weather the tragedy at the core of this book. Planted in the centre of the book like a beating heart, the collection’s title poem, “nortendluvson,” offers a scene of deceptive simplicity. A girl sitting on the roof of her house’s back veranda listens to her brother’s heavy metal music and discovers the importance of perspective:

   inside his loud music
   gets into everything
   but out here
   it is almost soundless
   soft
   as a love song. (59)

This moment of observation becomes the core of memory as the brother goes missing one night and the heavy metal music he loved becomes iconic to the brother’s position as a young Métis man whose
disappearance devastates the family but receives little police attention. In “heavy metal ballads 1,” the brother loves “screaming guitars / head banging music” while his sister “only likes the ballads / tough guys with long hair / and hard faces / singing / love / loss / tears” (77). The ballads become an ironic counterpoint to the brother’s disappearance, and the perspective the sister discovers by listening to the brother’s music muffled by the walls of the house becomes his legacy to her.

The book ends with a mixture of voices of young women declaring passionate allegiances for each other, their children, and their men, and Vermette notes that faith and grief require the same resilience:

I’ve never
not once
not for one second
looked away. (105)

This is a collection that offers the gift of looking closely and without pretension at beauty and grief in a community. Dare to read from its perspective; dare to not look away. ♦

Tanis MacDonald is the author of The Daughter’s Way: Canadian Women’s Paternal Elegies (WLU Press, 2012) and editor of Speaking of Power: The Poetry of Di Brandt (WLU Press, 2006). She has published three books of poetry, most recently Rue the Day (Turnstone Press, 2008), and is an associate professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo.

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