for and against
by Sharon McCartney

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

McCartney began her writing career in 1999 with the publication of Under the Abdominal Wall. This is her sixth book, following Karenin Sings the Blues, Switchgrass Stills, Against and The Love Song of Laura Ingalls Wilder, for which she won the 2008 Acorn-Plantos People’s Prize for Poetry. She lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where she is also the poetry editor for Fiddlehead magazine.

I must admit approaching this book with some trepidation, knowing that the subject of the book was McCartney’s divorce. I’m not a great fan of confessional poetry. The first poem I read upon opening the book was “Decaf,” which begins:

Like donning a tiara of nails, those days when I brewed
decaf by mistake, pain in my skull, something ungrasibly
awry, as if a child were suffocating in a van I couldn’t open
or I woke to blue paint peeling like burnt skin, curtains in
soggy heaps, the cat moaning. I thought the end was coming. (11)

After thinking “Been there, done that,” I recognized the convoluted nature of the opening sentence as the only way a sentence whose subject is a hangover, or drinking decaf coffee by mistake, or both, should be constructed. Following it with the short burst of recognition “I thought the end was coming.” is a stroke of poetic genius, demonstrating the recognition that poetic rhythm is much more than just scansion and meter.

The poems in this collection reach out beyond confession into something different. They cast a metaphysical shadow over the generality of life. Take “Lady Ashley,” which carves a relationship down to its essence:

I don’t regret anything,
ever. Remorse requires a future, investments, pay-offs just beyond reach. What I haven’t got. What they rifled away. Love’s no more than a split
of champagne twirled in ice, the cork popped –
hurrah! – and then the effervescence. (25)

It’s the attention to the little things that makes reading McCartney’s poetry exceed the restraints of its morose subject: the line break on that second line, the addendum of the final. These are the mark of a poet.

“Against Happy Stories” takes us, unfortunately, into Slyvia Plath territory, where the sarcasm, not great to begin with, descends rapidly into the maudlin:

A click, hang up, breathe in, and life
restarts, her fear a chimera now (phew). We join
to cheer, to toast her long life, her luck. I loathe
myself. (28)

that long line of I’s in the third line an indication that she has let her critical side descend along with her words into a poetic hinterland. The little things were lost in this one.

Fortunately, she recovers well, landing on all fours and baring her fangs “Against Coyotes”:

Bushrats, ambushing unaware housecats, snipers
reconnoitring their Leningrad of suburban sagebrush,
asphalt and gravel, their alto bagatelles infiltrating
late night TV. One worms into my sister’s skull,
scratches up a bed of ganglia and whelps a malign
brood there. Another screws me behind the house,
gets me stoned first, then lifts my shirt, lipsticks
my nipples with foam from the creases of his chops. (49)

Given to the dramatic monologue and convoluted sentences, McCartney weaves a tapestry of words that captures an incredible weave of rhythm. The phrase “alto bagatelles infiltrating” is just one example of the unique way in which she distils the essence of life into the brevity of a poem.

This is an enjoyable excursion into poetry. If only the publisher hadn’t decided to place the far too tiny page numbers along the side of the page.
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.

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