

The dust of just beginning

by Don Kerr

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Reviewed by Joanne Epp

Don Kerr, recently named Saskatchewan's Poet Laureate for 2011 and 2012, is a writer of poetry, drama, fiction, and non-fiction. This collection, his ninth poetry book, was shortlisted for the 2010 Saskatchewan Book Award for Poetry. Like all books from Athabasca University's AU Press, it's offered both in a print version – a handsome paperback, with a cover painting of the prairie landscape that underlies so much of Don Kerr's writing – and as an e-book available from the publisher's website for free.

The opening section links beginning and ending. Here, Kerr reflects on mortality, change and loss. He speaks of losing friends and losing one's younger self, but also of memory as a means of holding onto what's gone, so that "every/ sundown is a replay/ of that evening" (37).

Many of these poems have an elegiac tone; they are among the best in the book. "the lady gardener, Anne Szum" has some of the feel of Anne Szumigalski's own poetry in its rhythm and its wealth of garden images:

the bluebells happy in the
sweet breeze the lilies
pointing skyward the raspberries
in spiky bud all wait oh they all wait
for their first love the lady
gardener but she is unavoidably
detained... (14)

"the body poems," in the same section, are reflective and slow-paced. They display the perspective of a writer who's lived a good while, a keen consciousness of the body's frailty, capriciousness, and inevitable decline, but also a strong sense of the body's beauty. That beauty shows itself especially in touch and movement: "a soft-shoe body/ dancing body/ blues body" (25) and

in the swing-walk of the waitress
in the hug of greeting, in the
amazing summer legs of the
server girl, in this
light touch and that...(28) .

There's movement in "journey man," the third section, too. These poems are full of endless roads, clouds, and sky. They exude a love of motion; there's a destination in mind, but the pleasure lies in being on the road. Kerr has previously explored this territory in his collections *Autodidactic* and *Going Places*.

Some of these poems feel rather slight on first reading, but gain heft in the company of other poems in the section. “my road” is one of these. Toward the end the lines suddenly shorten, the poem picks up speed:

the signs sparse
life thin
cars fast

the high sun
in passing gear (59)

Unfortunately, others – notably in the last two sections – don’t interact with other poems in the same way, and do remain feeling slight. Reading poems like “body idling over” and “hunting rabbits,” I wanted more. I wanted the poem to probe its observation or anecdote a bit further, to give the reader a stronger clue as to why the poet considered it important.

Kerr favors direct speech without linguistic cleverness or a great deal of imagery. This simple language can be powerful when combined with a sure sense of rhythm and line, in poems like “Billy”:

look, Billy dead, the city empties,
the city of London empties,
if we don’t enter we needn’t
remember, nor see others
in his room, his things
scattered, his ghost thin
in my belly what is there to say
without the listening man? (12)

Yet that sense of line is not always present. Elsewhere the line breaks can feel arbitrary, especially when a line ends with “the,” as happens several times. And when several enjambed lines follow each other, as in “a height of prairies,” it can feel affected or self-consciously poetic.

A couple of other irritations surface as you move through the book. Titles usually repeat a phrase from the poems, which is all right when it’s from the middle or end, but too much when every poem in a series uses the first line as a title (as in “love poems”). And absence of punctuation leads, on one or two occasions, to lines that are merely odd rather than constructively ambiguous.

In the end *The dust of just beginning* leaves a mixed impression. A number of poems here – most of the first section, much of the third, and a few others – are in themselves worth the price of the book. Of the remainder, some are tantalizing, some puzzling, and a good many leave the reader asking, “and then what?” 🍷

Joanne Epp is a Winnipeg writer.

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