The Secret Signature of Things
by Eve Joseph

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Eve Joseph’s first book, The Startled Heart, was published by Oolichan Books in 2004. Joseph takes her place amongst that illustrious entourage of late-blooming poets such as Al Purdy, Wallace Stevens and Ruth Roach Pierson. She is also a writer of creative non-fiction and she has racked up a number of BC book award prizes, as well as a couple of awards from the Malahat Review. In a 2010 interview with Corinna Chong, Joseph had this to say about her experience as a hospice worker:

I worked at hospice for twenty years during which time I wasn’t writing; when I came back to poetry I was amazed at the similarities between working with the dying and the process of writing poetry. Both things required my full presence; whatever I thought I knew about dying or poetry needed to be put aside in order to simply be there: to be open and responsive to whatever presented itself. Stanley Kunitz writes: “the poet doesn’t so much disappear into the poem as become the poem. It is a concentration of faculties, of everything you are or hope to be.” For me, the moments when I feel I am a vehicle for something are true gifts. Moments when it feels as if poetry comes through me and not from me.
(http://www.malahatreview.ca/announcements/evejoseph_interview.html)

There are several ways in which a poetry manuscript can be put together. One is to write a book-length poem, and then there is the assemblage of individual poems. Joseph has opted to break her collection into four sections: “Menagerie,” “Amongst Strangers,” “A Few Provisions” and “Tracking.” Each section is marked by its own style.

In “Menagerie,” many of the poems are titled with the names of animals. They are tightly constructed, often in the form of short, unrhymed couplets. A good example is “Green Frog,” whose first two couplets read:

Throat singer
of the pond –

I am a soloist
in the night choir (20)

This is a beautiful imagistic poem, highly evocative in its brevity. The first line, “throat singer,” immediately grabs the reader’s attention. The second stanza creates an ambiguity. Who is the lyrical “I”? Is it the frog or the poet? Can we read into the poem what is outside it (something Wimsatt and other New Critics would deny us) or do we take a New Historicist approach and recognize that the poet cannot escape her/his poem? The former approach will deny us the ability to transcend the poem and so the “I” must be the frog. The latter approach permits us to recognize Joseph’s
employment in the palliative care environment and look to her (or a patient she is tending to) as the source of the “I.” She creates a beautiful ending to this poem – “sly as absinthe, a green army / slides in among the rushes.” Absinthe, also known as wormwood, was the drink of choice for Symbolist poets such as Rimbaud and pre-Symbolists such as Baudelaire. It was also a drink associated with death since, taken in significant quantities, it was poisonous. Which makes the “green army” those who have passed away (absinthe is also green). Returning to the “I,” is the poet recognizing her own mortality?

“Old Age,” the first poem in the section “Amongst Strangers,” makes question Joseph’s wisdom in her choice of line breaks – always a major and difficult decision upon which “so much depends,” whether it be chickens or wheelbarrows. The problem I have is with the first three lines: “It surprises me each time / I see a horse lie / down in a field” (27). This death poem delivers confusion with that line break on “lie.” As this is not syllabic verse, there is no reason to select that word with its (at least) dual meaning. This is not a rhetorical break. A simple correction would be to break the line after “down” and avoid raising the unwarranted meaning of “not tell the truth,” which adds nothing to the poem. Joseph is capable of so much better, as she demonstrates in “Fog”:

This morning I felt the fog
before I saw it
hanging itself like gauze over the arbutus

and making what is close
unattainable. (29)

I enjoy the lilt of “felt the fog,” which alliterates into “before I saw it,” the evocativeness of “hanging itself like gauze,” which makes what is intangible (fog) tangible, and the spirituality of the ending, which is translatable into a variety of religious experiences, from Christianity to Buddhism to Pagan to none.

The writing style that characterizes the section “A Few Provisions” is a density of words, as in “Questions”:

I want to ask poetry where it was for all those years. Where was it when I chain-smoked my way through Vancouver bingo parlours and where was it when I traded my Penguin classics for True Crime stories? (64)

The speaker wonders whether poetry had deserted her after all those years of neglect. In this apparently autobiographical section, Joseph explores her past as a Jew who was married to a Coast Salish man for over twenty-five years. In “Thief,” recognizing how much her involvement with the his community has influenced her, she writes, “It walks thirty miles through the night carrying a baby in its arms, glancing over its shoulder to see who’s following. It knows there are stragglers at risk of getting lost. Thieves who will steal its history and turn it into poetry.” (72)

The remaining section, “Tracking,” will be left to the perseverance of the reader, who will, hopefully, enjoy reading this collection as much as this reviewer has. ♦

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