Decompositions
by Ken Belford

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Ken Belford is enmeshed within the ecological paradigm. Born in Alberta and growing up in East Vancouver, he went on to operate, with his first wife, a guiding and outfitting ecotourism business in Smithers, BC for 35 years. He currently lives in Prince George, BC, along with Rob Budde and other literary refugees from the rat race. He began his publishing career with two books in 1967 and then fell silent, other than establishing a chapbook press, until 2000. Since then, he has published three poetry collections, including the present title.

Perhaps the reason for the hiatus was for him to ruminate upon his environment, giving it time to become part of his genetic structure. That would explain his long, musing meditation on nature and life and his position within that structure, encapsulated in this declaration:

Today I write poems that have high mutation rates.
I’m a new type that became more common,
an old sequence recopied upstream
in a new strand that follows flooding
and I’m good at attaching to surfaces. (9)

If he is “good at attaching to surfaces,” that is a result of his becoming a human lichen – part animal, part vegetable – capable of sinking deep roots into the rocky outcrop of his environment. And, if he is “a new type,” it is a type that respects the old, his poetic talent not eschewing the principles that carried poetry into this century, as evidenced by his contortionist rhyme on “generation” and “conjugation” in this excerpt: “from generation to generation / but by means of the conjugation of plasmids / into the occupation of the new” (9).

Impressively, as entwined as he is with ecological matters, Belford is not didactic and he does not preach about the parasitic nature of capitalism. Still, he makes his point:

. . . It’s called the exchange rate
in the news, but market forces dictate
the level of penetration. Trends go up
faster than they come down unless
the sustainable level of the price of gas falls
below the national baselines of poverty
and ecosystem degradation. (13)

There is no doubt that Belford intended the rhyme between “penetration” and “degradation,” thereby creating a grand narrative between the forces of nature and the economy, the former losing out to the latter, which usurps the concept of sustainability. Note how he begins this passage with an old-fashioned end rhyme on “rate” and “dictate,” that old-growth forest still creating a home for him.
A passage a few pages on brings us to an interesting impasse. The first two sentences of this poem sprawl over seven lines:

Primarily about the distribution of light, realism is a synthetic noise called grey that makes use of an orthodox theology, images forced to lie on slabs of light. Realistic images are filtered through grey levels before light leaves the apparent object on the way to bias. (18)

This repetition of words brings to mind two of Wallace Stevens’s great meditations – “The Snow Man” and “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The words here are repeated for a specific purpose. In “The Snow Man,” their repetition creates the stillness of winter. In “The Idea of Order at Key West” the repetition creates the sound and rhythm of waves crashing against a rocky shore. Is Belford’s concluding sentence effective?

... And if the resolution of the output image is the same as the input image, then the illumination of the generated image is grey, grey (Wong, Browne et al., 2008). (18)

The inclusion of the source at the end of the quote brings that reference into the poem, making it a part of the poem. Although it may be an interesting experiment, it doesn’t work, diminishing the strength of ending the poem on the shortened line “is grey, grey.” The question becomes what benefit Belford has achieved through repetition, one that continues even into this last sentence. The “orthodox theology” to which he refers must be Buddhism, as it is this theology from which the concept of reality as a synthetic noise arises and which paints the reality that Buddhism professes, the reality that lies behind the mask of maya, as a drab shade of grey. But if Belford is attempting to illuminate a doctrine, doesn’t that become doxology, didacticism? The repetition in this poem doesn’t create rhythm or rhyme, doesn’t create anything that would assist the poem in being just that – a poem.

Not wanting to leave this review on a negative note – something Belford doesn’t deserve – I will cite one more passage. This is from page 23:

Out on the patches I mean, pastures are prone to burn, ridge and valley are controlled by fern, and drying leads to abandonment, increasing fragmentation.

This sentence is an example of the concision of exceptional poetry – the way the “p”s play before “prone” passes the torch to the “r” sounds that play leapfrog with the “l”s; the rhyme on “burn” and “fern.” The way the “-ing” words at the end arise from two different parts of speech, with “drying” being a gerund and “increasing” a present participle.

Yes, Decompositions has flaws. But they are outshone by the many great parts, which form a précis on how poetry should be written.
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review, Arc, The Antigonish Review, The 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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