Origami Dove
by Susan Musgrave

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

Origami Dove, Susan Musgrave’s first major poetry book in ten years, features themes of loneliness and levity, suffering and absurdity. In Part One, “Madagascar Vanilla,” the speaker is separated from her husband and lover who has committed a crime, while in Part Two, “Obituary of Light,” her good friend and neighbour Paul is dying of cancer. (This last section first appeared in chapbook form with Leaf Press). As if to alleviate the tension and modulate the tone, Musgrave in Part Three, “Random Acts of Poetry” (this title may be a bit worn in view of the League of Canadian Poets’ annual event with the same name) looks at related subject matter, but from an increased sense of the comedic and absurdist. Finally, in Part Four, “Heroines” (commissioned as footage for a film that won the National Film Board’s Katherine Shannon Award and first published in chapbook form as Mother’s Day behind the West Hotel by Poetgoat Press), Musgrave dramatizes with colloquial verve and impressionism the stories of heroin-addicted and abused women.

In the title poem, a child suffering from AIDS is run over by a bus “in Ontario” while she pursues a snowflake (the origami dove of the title, with its paper snowflake appearance?), epitomizing the absurdity of small desires that make us human against the backdrop of a larger injustice. By extension of this principle, we see how the speaker herself might have suffered and been shaped by her father’s inadequacies, his quirks and personal contradictions:

Every year my father took the one
trustworthy ladder we owned and climbed high
onto our flat roof and sat drinking
whiskey and ringing bells so we would go on
being deceived as long as it was possible
to go on being children; he knew love
and treachery were part of the same

bargain. . . . (13)

Rather than blame her father’s hypocrisy while he wastes gas to avoid driving through the affluent neighbourhood’s ostentatious Christmas lights, she with sacrilegious levity chooses to forgive “God.”

The two opening poems are among the most lyrical and evocative in the collection: “Magnolia” and “The Room Where They Found You.” In “Magnolia,” the speaker, with lyrical beauty and intensity, reminds her husband in prison of the good times early in their marriage:

Another Valentine’s Day behind bars
and I bring you light from the stars
that you might find your way back to us
out of darkness. I bring you memories
of me – naked, happy, nine months’ pregnant
tasting applesauce in the kitchen. (3)
She goes on to talk about their daughter, who may not have thrived in such a household – the line “I bring you a handful of rain” alluding to the speaker’s tears – and about the magnolia he planted on their daughter’s birth. The question “Did it live?” echoes his implied question from behind bars and his regret. This poem captures a love fraught with pain and guilt that climaxes in the closing couplet emphasizing the purity of that love and its fruit in their daughter: “When I kiss your eyes, your sudden cry / startles the magnolia to a deeper white.”

In “The Room Where They Found You,” Musgrave employs the sensual image of Madagascar vanilla that, like the magnolia, represents the wife and mother’s sexual fascination with her husband, speaking with the complexity of her feelings and the unsentimental truth. Clearly, there is a pragmatic side that complements the speaker’s romanticism. After her husband’s arrest, the speaker says that she washes the scent from her hands and remarks how she tried later to remember what the water felt like, but “it was like trying to remember / thirst when you are drowning” (4) and “the vast sky / does not stop wild clouds / from flying” (5). Musgrave is adept with the poetically turned phrase that embodies emotions in ways no ordinary arrangement of words can.

In “The Sangan River Meditations” in the elegiac Part Two, Musgrave picks up the themes of love and loss, in this case death attended by her suffering. “Suffering is the way / we measure love, you say,” (34) the speaker says, but she finds that she keeps “looking out my window” for a direction to go in after the loss of such a friend. With pithy economy, the speaker later asks, “when life stops, does death stop, too?” The paradox’s truth is aptly embodied in the following image:

There’s just enough light left
on the river tonight to turn
the water black. You see it flare up
behind my eyes, the obituary of light. (38)

Musgrave is expert at sketching characters in a few deft strokes, as witness the speaker’s assessment of Paul, whom “pain has never stopped” (43). These lines carry an ironic contrariety and the opposite suggestion that pain will not stop Paul from facing up to death. As with blaming God or something like environmental circumstances and fate, not her father, for his personal inadequacies, Musgrave once again wittily turns the moral tables.

To lighten and vary the tone, Musgrave in Part Three, “Random Acts,” becomes something of the stand-up comic. In “No Hablo Ingles,” the speaker from Part One is judged by the visiting parole officer to be a “minimizer” of her husband’s crimes. Compared to such figures as Attila the Hun, who raped and killed, she says, her husband who robbed “honest money” from an ATM (not a food bank) and has never shot anyone is, in her eyes, not so bad after all. With its reversals of reader expectation and its dramatic presentation of the confrontation between the humourless parole officer and the flighty, libertarian speaker whose values are her own, this poem is lively read. Some of the more prose-like poems in this section are less successful, entertaining as they are.

The fourth section, “Heroines,” about ‘heroines’ from the street, with their addictions and damage, is tersely poetic and eminently well put together, though it perhaps lacks the immediate personal engagement and literary complexity of the first and second sections, “Madagascar Vanilla” and “Obituaries of Light.” In one poem, an adolescent prostitute carries around a headless doll from a garbage disposal and, in joking about her own headless state, has to remind the person to whom she is speaking (implied customer as well as reader) that this is a joke. The pathos is underlined with ironic naivety by her listener’s reaction: “You don’t get it? Neither did he.” (108)

*Origami Dove* is a strong and engaging collection with many voices and moods by a major Canadian poet who has not yet found sufficient recognition. Many of these lyrical and elegiac poems should soon find their way into anthologies and become part of literary posterity. ✤
Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown, 2007). She has a chapbook *Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav Press) appearing later this year. Poems are forthcoming in *Carousel, Windsor Review, The Antigonish Review* and *The Literary Review of Canada*. She lives in Regina.

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