Jennifer Still’s second poetry collection is a poetic game of hopscotch played along a set of train tracks. The poet, who grew up in Winnipeg in a tenement of townhouses called Girdwood – hence the title – built along CPR freight tracks, celebrates the highs and lows of girlhood as it unfolded there in the late seventies and eighties.

I admit I opened Girlwood with some trepidation. The territory of growing up/loss of innocence/mother-daughter relationship has been much explored by poets in the last few decades, and it is often fraught with angst. How dark were the secrets waiting to spring at me from between the covers? I need not have worried. It is true that the reader is taken on a ride through a terrain riddled with potholes, but the pace and seductive staccato rhythm of a train, which is sustained throughout the collection, the poet’s obvious emotional engagement in the material, combined with deft manipulation of concrete detail and abstraction, of language and form, kept me riveted.

The collection is composed of five parts, each beginning with a prose poem called “Track,” which delves into specific events and provides a context for them by a piling on of relevant detail. The poems that follow use the page boldly as they pluck specific emotions or events and put them through the poetic mill. Their length varies from two lines – “timing” (21) – to several pages. Image and metaphor drive the collection. In “built” (27), childhood is a block of “dandelions in Dixie cups, Cream of Wheat sputter, small lumps, bra bumps . . . Jell-O moulds . . . butterscotch, Jiffy Pops . . .” (27) The body, a snake forever changing its skin, is carried

... around in a cage.
But a cage can’t hold this.

What we want to but won’t
crawl through. The bars,

reptilian eyes. (34).

The cruel images of a bird caught in a 7-up bottle or with its head in a Coke bottle again intensify the feeling of being trapped. The owl and the humming bird are also important members of this aviary.

Following loss of innocence at twelve, adolescence is a “fevered, beer-buzzed // haze” (57), although wine and Father’s whisky also help move things along. It is a time of learning to camouflage oneself with make-up, of fragmentation of self: sleeping with strangers and pretending it doesn’t matter, of becoming addicted to beauty, and wanting to be swept off one’s feet (“The Gravitron,” “The Observation Wheel,” “Midway”). The garbage heap, which is an integral part of every small town symbolizes the girl’s growing collection of swear words. The sequence of poems in “Moth” is a potent exploration of desire and its “eight thousand shameful ecstasies.”(85)

Weaving through is the figure of Mother, a powerful and helpless being, who fails to see what is happening to her daughter and to protect her from the long list of things she fears (“Fear List,” 38), from the rapacious boys crowding about like birds at a feeder, from her own desires. “Divine me
mother” (103), and “Mother spare me, spare these slender bones” (107) are poignant pleas for recognition and for safety.

Hopscotch, which is played by hopping along a course drawn on the ground, requires a good sense of balance and spatial judgement. So does poetry, and Jennifer Still possesses both. I look forward to her next book.

Anna Mioduchowska’s poems, translations, stories, essays and book reviews have appeared in anthologies, journals, newspapers and on buses, and have aired on the radio. In-Between Season, a poetry collection, was published by Rowan Books. Eyeing the Magpie, a collection of poetry and art, was published in collaboration with four fellow poets.

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