

Could Be

by Heather Cadsby

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Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In *Could Be*, Heather Cadsby writes about particular moments drawn from various situations in real life as a kind of pivot on consciousness so that we become aware of how thought and language and the moment turn on themselves in all their contrariety and paradox. Hers is a verse that demonstrates wit and levity as well as a seriousness at its heart. Often employing self-irony, the speaker becomes every-woman, capable of blasphemy and prepared to challenge the formalities and to be disliked, but, foremost, to continue resolutely herself. Using snippets of conversation and colloquial turns of phrase, Cadsby writes deceptively light-hearted verse that serves as an honest inquiry into life and the inherent duality of the moment.

In a way reminiscent of the down-to-earth anti-romanticism in Shakespeare's famous sonnet #130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," the poem "Aubade" is written in the following feisty style:

Praise be to the angels of morning breath.
A waft of nasty odour is a sign of life.
Praise a stretch, a crusty eyelid,
stars in the skylight and light in the sky. (14)

Here is an almost Hopkins-like delight in the particularity of nature that, in Cadsby's case, at first glance seems to have little to do with God's worship or spiritual concerns. In the last lines of the poem, however, we see that this remove is not so far distant, and that a certain meditateness permeates and sculpts Cadsby's way of regarding the world: "Praise sudden fear at daybreak,/ the body returned to thought" (14), and all that in this way makes us human.

In "Bridge over Mimico Creek," the speaker presents herself in ironic terms after she informs a boy that he should not feed the ducks, and her suggestion makes him angry. The poem plays with this point of disagreement and with the nuances associated with "fooled" and "fooling" by making the moment of reckoning dynamic as well as dramatic. After the speaker explains that feeding the ducks "upsets" the birds' way of life and survival, the boy's reaction certainly exceeds her expectation:

"If I had a gun," he said. I could see how
I could be fooled. "You look pretty angry,"
I said. "Whadaya want from me," he said.
I could see I was fooling myself
and making a fool of myself. (22)

When the speaker "lets out a yelp" and takes off "in a huff," we see that the point of the poem is not about preserving wildlife, but more about human relations and perhaps about the speaker's own motive in trying to persuade a stranger.

A similar duality in motivation becomes clear in “Single woman on the death of her mother,” in which the speaker’s divided feelings about her dying mother are dramatized. The speaker, “impatient with waiting,” leaves the hospital room, presumably for personal respite, but also so that the mother can “pull off the oxygen mask,” then returns to “[snap] the thing back on.” The question, “Who did I think I guarded” (28) is of course loaded.

She wasn’t answering, seemed to be sleeping.
I looked for stale-dating on the IV bag,
I banged my leg into her bed,
forced bad breath out of my mouth.
I grabbed her thumb
and was just about to yell mommy
when she opened her eyes and was gone. (28)

The quandary arising from this experience of losing her mother is suggested in the following knotty lines: she awakes with the feeling that “something was lifting from [her] chest”; however, a levity or a “lightness was lifting me” (28). The poem perversely ends on a cryptic note that cries out for psychological unscrambling: “Now I need someone else to die/ so I can deserve all this grief” (31).

For formal clarity and dramatic qualities, consider the repeating lines in “September 11, 2001” which, in evoking that world-shocking tragedy, inflate the personal situation in the direction of bathos. The rhythm and tempo and the way the language weaves in and out of itself, the phrasing repeating itself in turns of thought, successfully elicit the dissonant nature of the speaker’s relations with a partner to whom she has been “cruel” and who has been “cruel” back:

earlier that morning
was a wild and terrible passion
and I was cruel I was cruel
though it seemed to be you
and I was wild and you were true
and I was wild and it seemed to be
a cold and terrible passion (36)

The speaker allows for the duality of the situation, with both parties having something to complain about (and neither’s side presented in enough detail to arouse sympathy), to unfold.

In “Eau de parfum,” Cadby deftly sets the dramatic scene with a comic touch. In a scenario familiar to many of us, a salesgirl approaches the speaker, trying to “give away smells” and in this way encourage sales. On the speaker’s expressed dislike for perfume, the salesgirl first suggests the distinction of “eau de” from perfume, that you “don’t spray your body” but instead “shoot a whiff into the air/ and walk through it” (42).

“No no, “I said. “No blotters. No bottles
of whatever. I’m a grandmother.”
I felt compelled to tell her that. My voice was getting
stern and pompous and righteous and prissy. (42–3)

Of course, the turning point for humour, that the speaker doesn’t necessarily want to attract the “old gentlemen” but would prefer the younger variety, provides this poem with a punch line. Nevertheless, the poem is not just comic but also sophisticated in the way it is so perfectly tuned to the accumulation of self-ironies.

With its playful banter and tongue-in-cheek, *Could Be* makes for an entertaining read while it employs self-irony to showcase human fallibility. On a technical level, the poetry demonstrates a skilful handling of language, with words turning on themselves as the speaker's mind works within its circuitry to see the world from its changing angles. ♡

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown, 2007). A chapbook, *Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and a "holm," *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav) will appear in 2011 and 2012. Poems are forthcoming in two anthologies, one with the theme "Poets on Poets" (Guernica Press) and the other "The Not Forgotten North" (Hidden Brook Press), both to be published in spring 2012.

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