

Gaits

by Paulette Dubé

Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 2010, ISBN 978-1-897235-74-4, 73 pp., \$17.95 paper.

John Herbert Cunningham

To say that Paulette Dubé has a sense of humour is to understate the case. After all, who else would say, “I was born in Westlock, Alberta, because my parents made it to the hospital on time.” This may not be too far off the mark, however, considering that “two years later, home in my village of Legal, I watched my third sister come into the world via the kitchen table.” She has been hooked on magic, creation, and miracles ever since. In this her fifth book of poetry, she takes us on a journey through the seasons accompanied by the animals that form part of her environment in Jasper, Alberta.

The poems in this collection, whose only titles are their numbers within their sequence, are short, simple meditations on life and the connections between animal and human. The first poem sets the pace for what follows:

loon calls
from the lake face, that voice shapes
my form coming through the trees (9)

Contained within the simple is a world of resonance. Here is another poet who has been influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins. It seems that those who write of nature and spirituality find a natural affinity with him. (Other examples of this Hopkins revival are Melanie Siebert, Joe Denham and Sally Ito.) That second line containing four stresses, two on either side of the caesura, derives initially from the Anglo-Saxon verse of *Beowulf*, which was revived by Hopkins and formed the basis of his “sprung rhythm.” But it is more than that. In its short span it plays with consonance – the ‘c’s in ‘face’ and ‘voice’ – and with assonance – the long ‘a’ sounds in ‘lake,’ ‘face’ and ‘shapes.’ This is a softening of Hopkins, who can sometimes appear harsh. But Dubé isn’t finished yet. The ‘f’ of ‘form’ reflects off the ‘face’ like light off the surface of the lake. And the form is defined by the voice of the loon as if wo/man could not exist other than within nature’s cloak.

This collection follows the seasons of Dubé’s world beginning with “Spring.” In her poetry, Earth is Gaia, a thing alive, sentient, a place where magic is born. We read in poem 20:

now River winds
under the earth, has to be convinced to play
her deep song, has to be
entreated to show herself (18)

In poem 21, she doesn’t appear to have decided whether to write prose or poetry. It starts off as verse:

Coyote pulls his toque down over his eyes
draws on his cigarette and rolls the ash off.

*You should be more aggressive, Tree.
A being of your stature could indeed
inspire. (19)*

but then goes into longer lines:

*Ha! brays Coyote. You speak of momentum! I was caught in the river the other day. I clawed
and screamed . . .*

However, even what is structured as poetry reads like prose, so that there is little point to this experiment. Some poets, such as Jan Zwicky, can pull this off. Dubé doesn't.

When "Summer" comes, her homespun philosophy heats up. And so in poem 31, we read that "just as humans give each other the strangest gifts / it is often like that in the forest, what you see / depends on when" (25).

Dubé's poetry is an observation of the life around her. Words surrender to austerity. Only the important ones survive. What would be more emblematic of "Autumn" than:

bull elk all
antlers, big head and chest
beside him the cow, quiet
legs folded beneath her
breathing
absolute autumn (42)

And, of course, "Winter" comes and

a quiet snow
becomes all it touches
miracles don't need to divide or multiply
some days it is enough to be covered in snow (56)

This soft quietness is shared by all, including

Raven skims treetops without calling
Marten silks away between trunks
Grouse, still as stone
Deer tunes ear, stot
flashing signal tail white then dark (63)

This latter, as much as I enjoy it, raises a question: Why does the deer deserve a second line? Another is why use the word 'stot,' which sounds out of place given the language used not just here but in the rest of the collection?

Dubé invites us into her world with this collection, painting a panorama of life in the mountains around Jasper National Park. It is an enjoyable read despite the occasional unevenness. ♡

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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