

Forge

by Jan Zwicky

Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55447-097-6, 74 pp., \$19.95 paper.

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Gaspereau Press publishes some of the most distinctive books in Canada. So it is fitting that they publish a book by one of Canada's most distinctive poets, Jan Zwicky. Zwicky is one of the grande dames of our literature, occupying a space that I consider to be shared by only one other – Anne Carson. Well, perhaps Lisa Robertson and Erin Moure would come close. I believe that few would dispute this ranking.

The anticipation of a new book by Zwicky is exquisite. Even before opening the book and turning the first page, you know you're in for a treat. This one is no disappointment. Listen to the passion exuded by the first poem you encounter, one untitled and on an unnumbered page:

*Take me to the place where I can climb no further.
Leave me barefoot in the snow and maples:
I will come to you. Marry someone else, raise children:
I will sleep each night, my shoulder
to the weather-stripping of your basement door.*

This is rhythmically about as complex as you're ever likely to get. The first line verges on iambic pentameter – but that is the only one that comes anywhere close. The second line begins to make a pretence at it, starting as it does with two iambs. But then it jumps into an anapest and ends on a bacchus. What is interesting about this and demonstrates the depth of Zwicky's poetic sensibility is that many poets would have been tempted to end that line with "in the snow." After all, both the second and the fourth lines contain only seven syllables each. As such, the truncation of the second line could have been considered a good balance to that fourth. However, that fourth contains a caesura dividing the line into two parts which, following the third with its three short sections, would have sounded like someone with hiccups and far too staccato. The addition of the bacchus balances the anapest, each having three syllables but bearing a reversal of the strength. The longer line created by that addition places the divisible lines to follow between two longer continuous lines, making both the sound and the rhythm that much more pleasing. Notice how the 'p' in "sleep" mimes that in "maples," the maples themselves becoming somnambulists in winter.

Perhaps because Zwicky is also a musician, several of her poems contain musical references. "Late Schubert" is one of several in this collection. Not only does she capture musical references in her titles, she captures the music itself in her lines. Take these, for instance:

*. . . Isn't love
always like this? – A spider's thread, spindrift
with the tensile strength of steel. The light must fall (14)*

The play of ‘s’s and ‘t’s, the way the spider’s thread reaches out beyond love to reel that love in, these are what bring poetry alive.

I mentioned earlier Anne Carson as the second grand dame of Canadian poetry. It is in ancient Greece that Carson and Zwicky meet. More particularly, it is in the ancient Greece contained in Zwicky’s “Practising Bach,” in the personage of Pythagoras. But there is a great deal more that joins them in this poem. Here, Zwicky unleashes her philosophical bent combining it with her musical sensibility. We can see this in the opening stanza of “Prelude,” which begins this poetic sequence:

There is, said Pythagoras, a sound
the planet makes: a kind of music
just outside our hearing, the proportion
and the resonance of things (24)

This connection is even more explicit, and even more musical, in the second stanza:

. . . Is the cosmos
laughing at us? No. It’s saying
improvise. Everywhere you look
there’s beauty, and it’s rimed
with death.

This lyrical exposition on Pythagoras’s philosophy transforms into pure philosophy in the second part of the sequence “Loure”:

Let us think of music as a geometry of the emotions. Bach’s practice, then, resembles that of the Egyptians: earth’s measure as a way of charting the bottomlands of the Nile, the floodwaters of the heart, as a way of charting life. (26)

I think Carson would love this poem, seeing herself reflected in it.

“If There Were Two Rivers” is a psalm to love. Opening with a repetition of the title, it gathers momentum like a stream cascading down a mountain:

If there were two rivers.
If their water was clear gold.
If it were a flood, a homecoming, and where they joined,
a standing wave, its crest of white.
If you climbed the hill alone, returning,
and the grass was golden in the evening light. (39)

Zwicky employs a variety of poetic strategies and styles in her poetry. In “From Distant Lands,” she creates a dramatic monologue, launching into it as if at the end:

Or was it a gust of wind? I had been walking
as I always walked, along that hallway, a place
I’d passed each day for years and never noticed,
thinking about summer, thinking
about sunlight, the anonymity of love: and then
you touched me – did you touch me? – (41)

That last quoted line is sheer poetic brilliance, capturing the suddenness of this gesture of touching but in a manner so soft that it raises the question of whether it indeed occurred or was merely the fantasy of the person touched, the person desiring the touch in order to render anonymity tangible.

Many have wondered what it is that makes something a poem. Jan Zwicky in *Forge* provides the answer. Or is it “answers.” 🙄

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