

POETRY

Maleea Acker, *The Reflecting Pool*, Pedlar Press, 2009

Heather Cadsby, *Could be*, Brick Books, 2009

Carmine Starnino, *This Way Out*, Gaspereau Press, 2009

The poems in Maleea Acker's debut, *The Reflecting Pool*, appear to set their sights on the condition described in the Zbigniew Herbert epigraph that opens the book: 'At last the fidelity of things opens our eyes.' That is, a thing entirely absorbed in its own being gives us an awareness of the thing as other than us; in this way it provides the clearest reflection of the human being as witness, language user, and actively conscious mind. A yearning to see things clearly permeates this book—to see how, as in 'Spring Migration, in the Field,' the birds 'rise up' but also 'how not to coax them down.' Concepts of yielding, placating and letting go are common themes, usually appearing in the service of moments of clarity that continue to perfect themselves upon further reading. In 'Letter to Luke...':

...his child gathering water,
her hair loose and feet bare

....

She carries it perfectly
and does not spill a drop.

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In 'Kaleidoscope, How it Discloses':

The interlocking pieces drift
and fuse, the turning

most apparent when it's not,

the mechanism most itself
when it is still.

Along with this reflection and attention to people and objects—what the poem 'Stillness' calls 'an attention/which gave its word not to wander, not to lull'—is a narrative element that occasionally distracts from this sort of attention. '[W]e cannot live in lyric,' one poem states. *The Reflecting Pool* is fascinating ground on which to reflect upon the struggle to render things exactly as they are while at the same time ceding to intellectual and linguistic barriers, as when the author states, 'When I imagine a field/I see the field above me.' I admire this collection for confronting such opposing forces, even if some of the poems eschew this confrontation for a too comfortable

lyric-narrative. What this confrontation yields, at its best, is precisely the sort of whole, clear notes that sound an exciting new poet, much like the arrival of the train:

Three times
the whistle blows, long,
longer, then
pure sorrow.

Heather Cadsby is one of those rare Canadian poets shoring a well-honed and generous sense of humour against the hard edge of grief and loss. She acknowledges the limitations of humour while at the same time giving room to its enormous capacity for relief and pleasure (as well as poetic accomplishment). This odd angle is sometimes just what's needed to push through oncoming currents. Don Doman-ski, who is quoted on the book jacket for Cadsby's fourth collection of poetry, *Could be*, released a pack of metaphorical dogs into his last book *All Our Wonder Unavenged*.

In Cadsby's work we see the recurring animal embodiment in the duck. She worries over them in 'Bridge over Mimico Creek':

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A boy was throwing pieces of bread
at the ducks. I said, 'Excuse me but
that is killing them.' He turned and
said, 'Lady, these ain't stones.'

She then later interrogates them in 'Why always me': 'What are those ducks doing/peering up at me like that?' And lastly, she chastises their quick, sharp quacks in 'He has a book on the wall':

He too has the autodidact's arrogance.
That book is Mimico Creek music
of which we could've been the Paul Simon
instead of these one-note ducks.
Threnody for the quacks.

This mixture of love for and frustration with the duck is not incongruous with the kind of love and frustration that the speakers of these poems feel toward their own experiences—and toward the voices these experiences set chattering in their heads. The backdrop of *Could be* is one of loss: the loss of a mother; the loss of a husband; miscarriages; the loss of a creek to industrialization; the loss of lives during 9/11. The collection is structured around a series of *aubades*, literally songs or poems about lovers separating at dawn. Cadsby, for the most part, draws this loss out from her own experiences and

into the public sphere, stating: 'If it's too private, it's unreliable.' She brings her grief over these losses to bear upon the peculiarities and quick turns of daily contact with others. The best moments of the book occur when the private and public find a way to dance with each other:

Give me rage.
Not this dull dumb torpor,
this weary body moving down the aisle of pet foods.
I have no cat, no dog, no bird.

The rest of 'Single woman on the death of her mother' is fraught with the kind of obsessive interiority that Cadsby questions in the previously quoted lines. But many of the collection's best poems—'Man walking his dog,' 'Would you like to have a poem, I know I would' and 'Bridge over Mimico Creek'—are ones in which the speaker is engaged in conversation with another person, real or imagined. In these poems she documents lapses in communication, sudden divulgements and changes in tone with the skill of a master dramatist. This interplay brings forth some of the book's most revelatory lines:

A dog barked Blue Skies two times.
It was a semiotic moment you said. Then you said
actually more 'pataphysical.
And to let myself in I said Meta Meta
Met a man with seven wives. But you
were daydreaming about some girl. I knew
you didn't hear me. Ears are too close to brain.

Could be is full of memorable passages like this one, leaping beyond guffaws, beyond weirdness for its own sake, and casting new light on the human condition the way only the sharpest wits can. Even Cadsby's speakers get caught up in their own acrobatics. However, the collection is not without flaws. Some of the poems have difficulty landing on their feet, ending with an interrogative or simply '[taking] off in a huff.' 'And here I am going out on a limb, doing it all,' she says in 'Why always me.' This sort of self-consciousness bogs down some of the poems: 'Whoeee,' she says at the end of '!!!!' 'what a ride, this full-tilt posturing!' A reader could revel in this pure glibness more if Cadsby hadn't so successfully exposed the dark, grieving underbelly of so many other poems. When outwardly focused, Cadsby is ready for anything to 'Land on and muse Me.' When turning inward she occasionally risks self-recrimination:

Right now I'm not trying to sing.
It just comes out like that.
Humming over every errand
so you avoid the wholehearted effort
and sidestep to now and lose
yourself in never wanting to really know.

But this sort of admonishment is an intrinsic part of the wholehearted effort the speaker fears she avoids. In this way, Cadsby creates a complex, layered collection.

This Way Out is Carmine Starnino's fourth collection of poetry. He works meticulously to ensure that each word adds something to the scaffolding of a given poem in terms of both sound and sense. This skill is apparent in the opening lines of 'Next Door Café':

We were bored, so we stayed. The days knocked deep
into other days. A glacialness set in, and life kept pace
with the dried fruit in the jar. Brushed steel gave back
our pissed-off bits, our doubled selves so drained of disguise
we forgot where it was we were hoping to go, holed up
all summer in a corner so dark you'd half expect bison
chalked on a cave-face every time we cadged a light.

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And it never quite (in a good way) lets up. Every break in this passage enacts a fruit-drying, booze-pickled slowness, and the consonance, assonance and internal rhyme cadge a light from a well-stocked OED. '[T]here's no excuse for simply staring,' Starnino states in the poem 'Virginia.' When the poems in *This Way Out* apply this rule toward what the speaker perceives to be lazy—as in the blogosphere-skewing 'Doge's Dungeon'—what we get, for all of its linguistic pyrotechnics, is an equally lazy poem, one that substitutes didacticism for thematic complexity. Thankfully *This Way Out* puts 95 per cent of its linguistic energy in the opposite direction, toward complex, accurate and accessible depictions of wives, family members, squash rackets, local and foreign merchants, barbers, butchers and watches, not as soapboxes for literary diatribes, but as people and objects immersed in their own work. What's candid about this collection—and it is candid—isn't derived from any new thematic, philosophical or confessional ground so much as it is from the stylistic leaps Starnino employs to render his subjects more accurately. So the 'working-class clouds' of 'Heavenography' billow and stew in a two-page block of prose, and the lines of 'Squash Racquets' leap and slice and drop as unexpectedly as a partner's next shot.

Starnino brings this same sort of accuracy to the subject of his family, the great subject of his first two books, *The New World* and

Credo. 'Lucky Me,' my favourite poem in *This Way Out*, eschews the pratfall of romanticizing the father figure in favour of the harder work of '[learning] about the real him, / the second life he led in half-lit card rooms, // basements with two or three tables operating, / where he sat at ease among his only peers.' In four pages of fluid couplets we get a frank portrait of a man down on his luck, 'rigged on the stage-wire of his own self-love,' of a marriage in trouble, of 'my mother / who always seemed to draw the short straw,' of another father on the street calming a bawling daughter with a bet she unwittingly couldn't lose. We get a speaker growing up and considering his own luck in love in light of his father's lack and discovering, through all of the resentment and narrative debris, an empathetic turn to the man who might not have always been there but, as it is with sons and fathers, was always somehow there. It's the sort of poem that reinvigorates this reviewer's notion of the efficacy of the poem itself. If you're reading this you possibly have some sort of opinion on Carmine Starnino as a canon maker, reviewer and cage-matcher. If you want some sort of opinion on Starnino the poet, I highly recommend *This Way Out*.

—Nick Thran

