


7-3-2014

Brilliant Falls by John Terpstra and placeholder by Charmaine Cadeau

Matthew Zantingh
McMaster University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zantingh, Matthew (2014) "Brilliant Falls by John Terpstra and placeholder by Charmaine Cadeau," *The Goose*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Brilliant Falls by JOHN TERPSTRA
Gaspereau Press, 2013 \$17.95

placeholder by CHARMAINE CADEAU
Brick Books, 2013 \$20.00

Reviewed by MATTHEW ZANTINGH

John Terpstra's *Brilliant Falls* finds a poet who knows his craft and uses this knowledge to good effect where Charmaine Cadeau's *placeholder* shows a poet getting her feet wet and experimenting widely. In the interest of forthrightness, I confess that I have been reading Terpstra's work for a number of years while Cadeau's is new to me. While these two collections are divergent in their content and style, I do think they share a similarity in their approach to the world around them. Both Terpstra and Cadeau have their ears to the ground around them, paying careful attention to the language and the materiality of the worlds that they encounter.

Brilliant Falls is Terpstra's ninth book of poetry, and his first book of new poetry after the 2006 publication of *Two or Three Guitars: Selected Poems*, a collection that selects poems from across the span of his career. What stands out most in this new offering is the way that human mortality has touched the poet's life. As with his earlier work, Terpstra pays close attention to the natural world around him in poems like "Hindsight," "The Spirit of Sitting Bull Returns to Canada . . .," and "Contraband." In "Topographies of Easter," the speaker sees the Niagara Escarpment as "this body that is broken / by time and season and violence too deep," recognizing the awesome violence of geological forces yet still acknowledging the beauty such work can produce. This poem, in particular,

resonates with his work in *Falling into Place*, a work of creative non-fiction that takes the Iroquois Sandbar, a geological feature of Hamilton, as its protagonist.

However, what stands out most about this collection is the thematic importance of death. Most of the poems deal with the slow decline and eventual deaths of Terpstra's parents. In "Driving Home Christmas," Terpstra reflects on his "annual deep blue funk" each time Christmas nears and he is reminded of his father's recent death, calling these emotional journeys "blear excursions through the barred regions of the psyche." In "Emptying the House," Terpstra reflects on the process of getting rid of his mother's possessions with his siblings, realizing that "we had no idea how much work / she was doing, sitting / in her chair, filling crossword puzzles / by the score, holding together not only herself / but all the smaller stuff / that was so precious to our growing up." The heaviness and melancholy of intimate loss hangs throughout the collection, but Terpstra is careful not to sink into depression or the maudlin. Poems like "Birds," a reflection on the closeness of the elderly in an old-age home to birds, and "Geese," a poem that draws connections between the laboured flight of geese and our slow descent to death, make room for both humour and surprising insight. *Brilliant Falls* is an assured collection that builds on Terpstra's body of work while introducing mortality and aging into it.

On the other hand, Cadeau's *placeholder* presents a less mature voice marked by experimentation with different styles and voices. Cadeau's voice is terse, preferring to operate by suggestion and implication. In "Fusion," a reflection on the interconnection and surprising slippage of things, Cadeau writes: "Everything, a chain

of knots, snarls: back / muscles, the home computer wires, the quiet / rip of thin white roots tangled in seeding / pots as they're separated for the garden." Here, readers are invited to draw the list of concise images together so that the human body becomes a computer becomes a seedling for planting. In "How we reminisce," Cadeau writes "At the table, we split / a red pear, scarred where skin touched / branch, a long-felt hurt. / Another story: small / hum of orchard flies, sweet / juice." Like the Imagist poetry of the modernists, readers encounter a language stripped down to the absolute essentials. Yet Cadeau's careful construction allows for meaning to proliferate: the pear's blemish becoming a means of human reminiscing, the second stanza an alternative story of being encompassing orchard flies and the sticky sweet fruit. In "vow I," Cadeau performs a bpNichol-esque experiment of removing vowels from a repeated set of lines, creating different meanings while in "Other people," "Slip," and "Glasshouse," among others, she tries her hand at prose poetry. I appreciate Cadeau's willingness to move across different forms of poetry, but some of the results are uneven in effect.

What stands out most about Cadeau's collection is her use of the everyday for poetic material. "Two can play" uses the language of children's games, "Oh" uses a lover's casual conversation, "Osteology" uses the body's aches and pains, while "Renters" centres on an apartment as it contains the circle of two lovers' lives. Saying Cadeau uses the everyday may suggest the poems are mundane, but this is not the case as she is willing to make daring linkages and metaphorical leaps, with her poems moving about at will. Where Terpstra's collection has a strong sense of thematic cohesion,

placeholder is more diffuse, showing Cadeau's skills across a range of material.

In terms of ecological content, both books present opportunities for ecocritical analysis. *placeholder* uses numerous metaphors from the natural world throughout the collection, refusing to draw a distinction between the natural and human worlds. Terpstra's book uses the natural world to reflect on human mortality but also on the human position in the larger geological world in poems like "Topographies of Easter," "The Spirit of Sitting Bull," and "Hindsight." Overall, I find myself returning to *Brilliant Falls* frequently while *placeholder* remains on the shelf. I prefer Terpstra's cadences, metaphors, and content over Cadeau's promise.

MATTHEW ZANTINGH is a PhD Candidate in English at McMaster University. His dissertation analyses literary depictions of urban nature in three Ontario cities. He will take up a teaching position at Briercrest College in Saskatchewan in the fall.