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Breathing Useless Beauty

Invisible Dogs by BARRY DEMPSTER
Brick Books, 2013 $20.00

Reviewed by DAVID HUEBERT

Barry Dempster’s fourteenth poetry collection, Invisible Dogs, seeks to thread big ideas through small openings. Though the poems themselves are humble and apparently innocuous—formally consistent, aurally conversational, set in Canadian cafes, parks, and highways—they tackle some of the great themes of human thought: death, religion, love, the anxiety of aging, and the tenuous nature of self-identity. In these highly interior vignettes, seemingly quotidian subject matter often veers to reveal the emotional depth underlying the everyday. The collection as a whole couples the rhythm of breath with a tone of melancholy awe.

The form, for the most part, is standard for contemporary Canadian poetry: Dempster writes lyric poems in free verse, mostly ending stanzas with full stops and giving the impression of complete sentences broken into lines. The effect of prose crumbling into verse does, however, push its own limitations in the section “She Said/He Said,” an extended meditation on the end of a relationship told from the split viewpoints of two unhappy lovers. Here the lines become much longer, approaching margins at a daredevilish proximity. There are no stanza breaks in “She Said/He Said,” and the reader perpetually experiences verse on the brink of prose. The cumulative effect of this section is striking and moving—a wrenching, relentless melancholy.

Two large questions arise from the packaging of Invisible Dogs. First, the title promises a serious engagement with the question of the animal. Second, the opening epigram suggests a dialogue with one of the giants of western philosophy. The epigram comes from one of the most memorable moments in Friedrich Nietzsche’s oeuvre, the passage in The Gay Science when Nietzsche asks his readers to imagine a demon stealing into their bedrooms at night and asking whether the eternal recurrence—the infinite return of all the ecstasies and agonies of their individual life, “all in the same succession and sequence” (341)—is a cause for celebration or despair. Expecting to grapple with Nietzschean thinking in these pages, I was perplexed to find that most of Dempster’s poems are highly domestic and many of them follow an apparently Dempster-like first person speaker through the drama of “missing his wife back in Ontario.” Where is the Nietzschean fire, the Zarathustrian angst, the will to power? The remarkable poem “Bare Trees” suggests what Dempster is doing with his epigram:

Any number of people are in love with the spaces between what might have been
and the desire for it all to start again. [. . .]
By God, the lost
are dancing, unwrapping wind. Courage,
says the blizzard, says the slow-brained sap. Might as well dance along, shadows playing scatter with themselves.

Here Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence comes to serve as a lens through which the reader might view this collection as an extended meditation on aging and death. Dempster’s speakers pose versions of the demon’s question again and again throughout this volume, perpetually confronting death and wondering whether
this life is intrinsically valuable. Life, as Dempster articulates it throughout the collection, is precisely the tension between the hypothetical “might have been” and the nostalgic desire for the return of the same. The verdict tends to be, as it is in “Bare Trees,” a kind of capitulation: “Might as well dance along.” Rather than Nietzsche’s ecstatic nihilism, Dempster proposes something more subtle: a kind of enchanted acquiescence.

The collection’s title, *Invisible Dogs,* encourages the reader to track the animal theme through the volume. Dempster offers visible and invisible dogs along with geese, bears, toads, crows, skunks, cats, swans, rabbits, vipers, squirrels, grasshoppers, and chickadees. These animals, though, most often serve as background material. This tendency is perhaps most evident in “Groin.” Here Dempster’s speaker describes his experience of a doctor’s examination table: “Inhuman to be / naked here [. . .] as I stretch out on the table like luncheon meat.” The speaker’s anxiety is that he has become animalized. The poem ends with a turn towards redemption: “This is human / after all, a scrutiny that only love can muster: / the desire to really know.” Dempster’s complimentary use of the word “human” hints at a certain human exceptionalism that runs throughout the collection. *Invisible Dogs* describes a litany of animals, often presenting them in creative and surprising ways. But the reader seeking a progressive or radical engagement with the question of the animal may walk away from these poems disappointed.

The collection as a whole, though, is human in the most generous sense of that word. The final section, “Walking Away,” is perhaps the best in the volume. Here Dempster’s great themes come together in a series of ambulatory images. In the first piece of the section, the speaker takes a walk by the Avon River, accompanied by “swans all around like so much useless beauty.” Life itself begins to emerge as scenes of useless beauty patched together. It turns out that in addition to a literal fear of death, the collection has been dramatizing a subtler anxiety all along: Dempster is creating precisely the useless beauty he worries will pass away, and so fear of death is also the fear of the death of art. The speaker’s response is conflicted; he both wants to embrace the fleeting wonder of things and to acknowledge that he must one day leave it behind: “Ultimately, / I’ll walk away from everything, moments / on their tiny toes, each breath an exit.” Dempster leaves us with a consolation: yes, we must submit to death and time’s passing, but there is movement in that gesture—the simple, elegant movement of breath, of dance, of stride. The section as a whole has a lovely, spectral euphoria about it, a respiratory sensibility. Life, here, is as fulfilling and ephemeral as breath.

In the eighth untitled poem of “Walking Away,” the speaker describes a visit to a sick friend in the hospital. The final stanza is riveting: “A patient out there, thin cotton, lifting / a cigarette through a web of IV lines. / I walk through him, feeling cloudy / coming out the other side.” Fantastical scenes such as this one emerge periodically throughout the collection, and for this reviewer such moments characterize Dempster’s work at its best. Here the speaker literally becomes the ghost which the section suggests he has been all along. The collection’s profound anxiety about death and aging emerges as both inevitable and, in its way, harmless—a threat as empty as the skin of a ghost. The title, it turns out, does not just allude to the
invisible dogs that crop up in “No-Show” and “Going Under.” Instead, the invisible dog is all of us, trotting through the “useless beauty” of our fleeting lives.

Works Cited


DAVID HUEBERT, of Halifax, is a PhD student at Western University. His poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Event, Grain, CV2, Matrix, Vallum*, and *The Antigonish Review*. Recent work is forthcoming in *Broken Pencil* and *The Dalhousie Review*, and a first book of poetry is forthcoming from Guernica Editions.