Poetry Porch: Prose

If By Song by Marcia Karp. Whitman: Lily Poetry Review Books, 2021. ISBN 9781734786972 (paper).

Reviewed by Joyce Wilson

In her poetry collection *If By Song*, Marcia Karp develops poetry through excesses of word play, originality, and humor. A child's persona might appear here, but these are adult poems. Where else would onomatopoeia express romance, such as "his rattattattat" versus "his tattattattoos" ("Eratatum" 35)? Assertions and shifts in emphasis percolate in multiplicities of verb tenses, pronouns, rhythms, and rhymes, or off-rhymes. What these lines get right is the complexity of human nature, the fickle tendencies of love, the intricacy of family secrets, and the pain that can fester, scramble syntax, and release feelings in mysterious ways.

The opening poem "Enmity" provokes as it startles. One is pressed to ask if this is the way to begin, with negation. But a quick switch of focus alerts the reader to a flexibility that instructs as it delights.

> The sculptor does not contend with the word,
> Nor the poetry hate the stone.
> But the pit within each word – oh,
> That, may I have the stomach to corrode.
>
> ("Enmity," 1)

The contrast between subjects, objects, and verbs presents the perils of the artistic endeavor in the first two lines. Then the third line creates a solution through synthesis (pit within word). The end-words close the envelope of the quatrain with rhymes. But on line 3, the syntax has changed dramatically from rhyme to song, moving into line 4, which creates a conversational aside and an uplift that soars. The negation implied in the title and opening is upstaged by an image of

digestion, or indigestion, or that of grinding internal sand into pearls. This is not so much about malice as it is about struggle, or process.

Another poem seems to depend on lists of weekly tasks having to do with window shades opened and shut, bills paid, lists checked off, washing, vacuuming, and more. The opening, "The keeping of this house has nothing to do with love" does not convince, however, perhaps because the cat misbehaves, the longing for love has a place on the schedule (Wednesday), and the explosion of feeling on the bus (outside the home) reveals the knowledge of what is missing, the spontaneity of love. Does love depend on spontaneity? Or is love at rest, a form of latency ready to be recognized or awakened?

In a poem about watching the news, short lines warn the complacent reader to pay attention, which to some is a kind of prayer:

> We think it is new. We are so, so afraid.
> We think there has never been, ever been,
> A thing like our thing. So, we are so afraid.
>
> Just think.
> A village rapes a girl.
> A village burns a man.
>
> Here is the maelstrom.
> Here is the horror.
> People we like are like people we don't.
>
> ("What Is Left," 49)

The first person plural, we, watch the news, first with dread Line 1), then with denial (line 2). The word "like" in line 3 is a preposition, pointing out the subjectivity of sympathy (We think there has never been . . . a thing like ours"). The second stanza, beginning with the imperative "Just think," occurs as an overstatement. Then two lines suggest that what happens in the news consists of group violence on an individual. Stanza 3 pits nature (maelstrom) against an

abstraction (horror) that we are familiar with. But the verbs from stanza 2 (raping and burning) are about people, and what happens to them. As if to sum up, the third line of stanza 3 begins with our assessment of "people," with the word "like" repeated, as a verb and then as a preposition, designing a sentence of symmetry that encompasses a contradiction. We like [some] people [who] are like [other] people we don't like. This entertaining and harrowing analysis of the news has a satirical tone. We watch and congratulate ourselves that we know something, but the snake devours his tail.

A poem that analyzes the particular goodness of a friend departs from this kind of line-by-line word play and imagines scenes to explain the influence of histories or past experiences, in search of some kind of logic between people that unites them, seemingly without effort. We are familiar with the influence of the Holocaust as passed through genes. But what about friendship? Can our DNA predispose the bonds we form? Karp describes a boy with others who are like strangers to him, but he sees that he is not strange to them. He sees that he is familiar to them, as if they all knew each other from another time, that some kind of association reaches across centuries from a time in which these "cousins" had come to know the boy, known parts of him that he had never known.

> I'd glimpsed you, but darkly,
> And had but a hint that my wide experience
> Would be your never-failing kindness and reserve
> That no one but no one could miss,
> Not even. . . you
>
> ("The Good Man," 65)

An awakening has already occurred before; the friendship is preordained, an amplification of the idea of two halves of a soul reuniting. Defining the good friend as having the confidence that

everyone recognizes, that even the friend himself should recognize, even if he doesn't always, Karp uses deft strokes to suggest its tangible reality.

These are poems of complex surfaces that reveal feelings uttered, reimagined, and reconsidered. They are deeply felt. Karp invests her talent for imagining relations between the simplest of words and the most complex of word patterns to make agile inventive poems of unique expression.