

The Photographer of Wolves. By John O'Neill. Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1997. 77 pages. \$12.00, paper.

The Man with the Dancing Monkey. By Barbara Mulcahy. Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1997. 75 pages. \$12.00, paper.

What Kind of Love did you Have in Mind? By Eric Folsom. Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1997. 92 pages. \$12.00, paper.

There is a discomfiting edginess to John O'Neill's accomplishment in his third collection, *The Photographer of Wolves*. The poems in this volume are sometimes shocking, occasionally brutal. But we know we are in the hands

of an extraordinary talent when the particularized instances that flash before us resound as if we had lived them ourselves.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first is a single long poem, "The Story of Snow," a meditation on the speaker's early life growing up in Scarborough, Ontario. The poem follows a strict chronological progression, taking the speaker from childhood to adulthood. As the narration moves forward in time, we begin to realize that the poem is largely about the speaker's brother Ronny. Initially we glimpse Ronny as a child, even then "always the one to darken things." Through the medium of snow, O'Neill introduces elements of unsettledness and conflict, finally stating

The snow is my father's words
the snow is my brother
the snow their argument....

Ronny's behaviour achieves a kind of erratic apogee on the day he leaves home in February 1973, drunk and jobless. As he chronicles his brother's descent into alcoholism, O'Neill's narrator never slips into maudlin regret. To be sure he is perplexed, but his search for meaning is a broader one that returns again and again to snowbound landscapes and replays family confrontations. The "Postscript" to this sequence is a tranquil backward glance at the best of what the brothers shared.

In the title section O'Neill presents a series of poems that proposes a symbiotic relationship of sorts between man and wolf and suggests ways in which each inhabits the life of the other. "Werewolf" begins, "Man into wolf. What's so frightening?" and describes wolflike characteristics from which man could benefit.

The wolf life is simple, direct,
without pretence or deceit
and ferocious only when required, tidy as knives.

By contrast "wolf into *man*" is "Much more frightening":

Imagine the animal's horror,
its sleek, straight arrow head
suddenly gone
flat, round, fleshy:
and fat, reflective, morose
its once edgy heart.

O'Neill's writing in this section—indeed, throughout the book—possesses the same animal sleekness. It is unpretentious and unsentimental. The wolf metaphor is apt because O'Neill's is a predatory art. In these inward-looking poems he is on the hunt for raw emotion which he presents to the reader with unsparing frankness, as if it were vanquished prey. These are not

poems we read for solace or to be cheered. However, O'Neill's terse facility with language and image is often revelatory and this is certainly reason enough for anyone to seek out this book.

Much of O'Neill's imagery is drawn from the natural world, as is Barbara Mulcahy's. In her first collection, *The Man with the Dancing Monkey*, she composes with an ingenuous fascination for natural phenomena. Mulcahy obviously delights in description, in diligent observation of the real world. Her poems are animate with colour and texture. And this is both a strength and a weakness.

The book is divided into two sections: *Three Beginnings* and *Raven Meditations*. The poems in *Three Beginnings* are united by their reliance on natural imagery. Often these poems are richly textured and lush with detail. Mulcahy's eyes and ears miss nothing. Her gift for observation is everywhere evident, as in "Shore":

Noon. The water sounding ... the sway of a
pregnant woman's
hips. Thrust
and slide, thrust
and slide, and a mussel closes it lips
on the blue elastic water.

And in "Three Beginnings":

Wait like a silverfish dry and boneless.
Wait with legs and the castanet
back of a beetle. Wait in the woollen cowl
of the sky.

When she zeroes in on the event or the object, Mulcahy proves herself a brilliant chronicler of the precise moment, skewing her observations according to a perspective uniquely her own. Her phrases often shimmer, appear to us authentic in their ability to capture and convey, much like a camera does, the details that breathe life into the moment, details that most of us are too distracted by mundane concerns to notice. Other poems in this section are less successful: poems that describe but do little else. In these—"The Chair" and "Belief" are examples—Mulcahy lets the images speak but stops short of infusing them with the quickening spirit of her imagination. These poems seem stingy compared to the others, which offer so much.

In *Raven Meditations* she relies more on straightforward locutions and the poems are sometimes simply declarative in style and structure. These poems, some of which have been reduced to statements that convey information, do not always work. The most successful of the poems in *Raven Meditations* are those that introduce a speaker who can offer a perspective on ravens and "raven-ness" and link external and internal worlds.

On the evidence of *The Man with the Dancing Monkey* Barbara Mulcahy is a talent to watch. Even her weaker poems possess subtlety and wit, qualities that will serve her well as she refines her art and develops her voice.

Eric Folsom's second collection, *What Kind of Love did You have in Mind?*, at 92 pages is the longest of the three works under consideration and suffers for its length. The poems in this collection revolve around relationships and the theme of love in all its multiplicity: conjugal love, love within the family, love of the planet, warring love, etc. There is passion here, and sex, sorrow and ecstasy. Folsom writes in a measured and reflective voice, usually in the first person. The moments he chooses are those in which his speaker is reminiscing on love lost or won. In "The Dog in Compton Park" he states,

I used to lie beside you
 in bed at morning
 unable to quiet the dreadful voice
 that thought of things about me
 not quite the inner mind searching
 for the orgasm of self-pity
 but more like a moment of insight
 self-knowledge dropping from my jaws
 bouncing and wet with saliva
 a corrupted understanding
 of why I didn't deserve you

While there is undeniably an earnest and searching intellect at work here, there is also no doubt that the power of these poems is diminished by their sheer length, which often makes the writing seem flaccid, the effect of word and image diffuse rather than focused. Startling images and apt metaphors languish amidst a surfeit of utterance. Some of Folsom's longer efforts stretch to three and four pages. In these poems the reader senses that the speaker will always take the argument as far as it will go or push the metaphor one step further just to see if he can do it. The poems in this volume also suffer from a sameness of tone and voice. Just as they all look alike printed on the page, they all tend to sound alike. Perhaps as separate contributions to literary magazines the poems work quite well, but presented together as a book, the boundaries between them seem to melt away and they become fused in the mind as a single poem.

Folsom's strengths are many—individual stanzas cohere nicely, his descriptive powers are finely honed—but one hopes that he will learn to trim back his profusion of words before publication so that future volumes are not hampered by the same monotony of voice and meandering style that mar much of *What Kind of Love did You have in Mind?*