

BOOK REVIEWS

Michael Katz, *No Turning Back*

Montreal: Thirty Torches Publishing, 2016

96 pages, \$40.00, ISBN 9781944784560

In his introduction to Michael Katz's debut collection of poetry, *No Turning Back*, New York Times critic A. O. Scott claims that Katz is "a young Canadian poet" disguised as a "middle-aged American attorney" (5). Although he was born in Montreal in 1964, Katz has spent the majority of his adult life living in the United States, now residing in Orange County, where he practices law. As the poems of *No Turning Back* reveal, however, Katz's Canadian roots are deep and unmistakable. His collection evokes Canada in "overt and subtle ways, giving voice to a history and a feeling of a place that cannot be falsified" (Scott qtd. in Katz 6). From the plaintive cries of wailing loons to the wrenching cold of winter, *No Turning Back* is a work that dreams of home.

If Katz is a "young Canadian poet," he is first and foremost a Montreal poet. While he writes about the usual subjects—love, death, desire, sex, religion, and nature—he locates them in the "Worn wooden floors, / And open fire ovens" (55) of Montreal's St. Viateur bagel factory or the aching isolation of "Sipping cherry cola / And staring at faces" (82) in Schwartz's deli in the sweltering heat of Montreal's "tar-pitched summer" (23). One of the collection's thirty poems is even titled "Ode to Montreal," in which the male speaker—a young Baudelarian flâneur—bicycles past the "Strip clubs where you can touch the girls / Next to grey stone churches with quiet priests," observing the city's every vice and virtue: "Riding bikes by the canal / Was an honest way to observe you / When my love for you was new" (44).

As a poet, Katz is indeed an honest observer. His prose is often sparse and self-consciously unpretentious. He is rueful at times, sardonic and humorous at others. One of the most memorable lines of the collection appears in the final stanza of "St. Viateur Bagel Factory":

Why not put a hole in things?
 It makes it easier to hold onto,
 And harder to let go. (55)

Here, Katz is at his pithy best, at once “[c]racking wise and dispensing wisdom in the face of mortality” (Scott qtd. in Katz 7), loss, and pain. In “Too Many Places” the speaker envisions his own death with a similarly wry pragmatism:

On my gravestone I hope
 They etch this simple truth
 “He died eating smoked meat
 Not alone, in a booth.” (83)

Like many poets before him, Katz locates the universal in the particular, searching for metaphysical truth in the most banal of “things,” like a smoked meat sandwich or a donut hole. Yet, for Katz, individual experiences of death, loss, pleasure, love, and loneliness never exist outside of a collective framework. The individual may be alone—painfully, exquisitely alone—but s/he never truly leaves the people, the culture, the history, the time, and the feeling of a place behind: “I’ve been so many places, / “They’re all part of me / I’m never alone” (83).

No Turning Back is itself the product of a collaborative effort. Katz is joined by the Quebec photographer Athena Arnell, who provides an image for each of the poems. Arnell’s photographs are not merely illustrative of the poems; rather, they express the photographer’s own artistic vision. Where Katz is sardonic and wry, Arnell is often nostalgic and playful. Where Katz is sombre, Arnell is celebratory. Yet, like Katz, Arnell “achieve[s] eloquence” in her work by “taking care not to say too much” (Scott qtd. in Katz 6). Her photographs are typically unassuming and understated, depicting scenes of everyday life: an old man taking a midday nap, a mother holding her infant child, a young boy playing with his brother, a barber giving a shave. Arnell also incorporates archival images of Montreal and Quebec landmarks and landscapes into the collection, placing them side-by-side with photographs of familial and domestic life. The effect is both haunting and reassuring: we are all “Together and alone” (37).

While *No Turning Back* is a work that dreams of home, it is a work

that—as its title suggests—can never fully return. In “Turning a Corner” Katz emphasizes the constancy of change:

Sometimes you get turned
 Inside out.
 That’s when you’ve changed
 And she’s changed
 And everybody has changed

The speaker advises the reader to “keep on moving” in the face of life’s inevitable turns. However, the speaker also concedes that sometimes moving forward is not an option:

Turns out
 The corners have turned on you
 Could be a good thing,
 Probably not...

Some times
 You’ve got to stop walking
 To find out. (69)

Katz’s first book of poetry may be the work of a “young Canadian poet”—that is, a poet yet to fully establish his voice and take his place in the Canadian imaginary—but it is nonetheless a welcome and worthy debut. Contemplative and insightful, self-conscious and philosophical, *No Turning Back* is a lonely and loving work by a poet who—let’s hope—is only just beginning. After all, “There is no turning back” (93).

—Brittany Kraus, Dalhousie University

Jordan Munteer, *Liminal*
 Winlaw: Sono Nis, 2016
 158 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 9781550392470

Jordan Munteer’s *Liminal* is a slim debut volume comprised of eighty poems. It is the work of a young poet and a young man, and Munteer’s recent

spate of journal contributions and poetry contest awards, including a finalist spot for the 2015 CBC Poetry Prize, mark him as a prolific newcomer—and a welcome one. Broken into four sections, beginning with “Origins” and ending with “Ritual of our Days,” the collection marks formative moments in the life of a child growing up in interior B.C., including roaming passages of tree planting, a flight to the coast and then into the world, and a return that is not a return home. *Liminal* is a work rooted in place, especially in the dirt and rock of the Kootenay mountains, but it is not a work of belonging; the dedication reads, “For my parents—and those who wander.” The severance of that dash, from origin to grasping unknown, from home to intermingled solitudes, is the first indication that some primal wound lies unfound in the words on each page.

The first section features works of self-aware pubescence, pulsing with a muscularity that gradually exposes itself. The collection opens with “Hammer,” which speaks from a bridge over water with a voice of absurdly masculine rationality, intertwining images of a girl reading Lorca and water as “green calligraphy” (13). But the poem knows the limits of its attempted mastery of the feminized river below:

As if a hammer over and over
Has bent my need to be alone
Upon itself, the work of men
Hardening like iron under water. (14)

This masculine certainty is a necessary moment that arrives in *Liminal*, as childhood does, at the moment of its fated end: the collection’s first line is “Tail end of summer” (13). Water is steam in the next poem, and iron’s hardness becomes a boy in a winter sauna, his body the mirror of a naked girl’s, the two tentative lovers or lovers-to-be curled opposingly on a wooden bench. Through three meditations on “Girl, Sleeping,” the collection indulges post-coital youthfulness but comes to rest in the voice that dominates the work—a solitary maleness that feels precariously every footfall on the forest floor, that agonizes that touch is taxonomy. The first section, which identifies the girl Joslyn as the central figure of *Liminal*, ends as origins should: with the world opening, from the rivers and forests of the Kootenays to Vancouver Island, which hosts two moments of silence between the poet and Joslyn that are among the collection’s most perfect. Intimacies that were

once fumbling or voyeuristic, in the way of children, become in the verdant worlds of “Vulnerabilities” and “Kin” a quiet sacrament that reciprocates, rarely, the space of the forest. The world is possibility; dusk is “convex” (47). For perhaps the only time in the collection, solitude is nothing other than a thing self-gifted—the offering of a family to itself.

There is brutality at the edges of childhood’s eye in *Liminal*, but as the young poet travels, planting trees in the Kootenays and along Vancouver Island, and then further, leaving Joslyn and the continent for Asia and South America, the hammer’s hardness returns as viciousness: “Behind / you now an empty room waits / like a beaten dog” (100). Generally, Munteer confronts the dread things with a human eye, and dogs trot with muddied paws or scavenge femur bones from around slash piles; there, human loyalty comes in a dog’s guise, and it is human loyalty that endures the beating. Here, by contrast, the metaphor ends with an abused animal. It is the prose of raw violence—an impulse that also runs through two poems with cougars dead and dying, “Deicide” and “Object Permanence,” which are among the collection’s most ruthlessly affecting and finest. These two poems speak to each other of death’s causes and find no solace in intention. This sense of process—poems and moments paired but willfully unbalanced—is the life of the book. In “Object Permanence” that convex dusk is concaved into silence as it witnesses something wounded and dying. The work of the poems to balance and settle their internal contradictions feels like they bear a weight of immediacy for the young poet; the hardness of that hammer is, too, the tensile, expanding resignation of a young man growing older. Dust gathers in the latter half of the collection, blown in from the souks of Marrakesh in the imagination of a boy on his porch to settle when he has returned, later, from Japan and Cambodia and Peru. Now it is “right-angled on my dresser / where something now I cannot place / is missing” (125). Now it is settled on the collected works of Rilke or on the lips of wineglasses meant for company. Solitude, now, un-gifted.

The mountains of the collection’s cover art, credited to Owen Fitzpatrick, tower bare over forest like snow-covered tents. They do not recede into the distance, but are quiet in the centre, sky at their backs and their fronts. It is a different type of resilience than mountains usually offer, content to stake out their place in solitude rather than expand to cover the horizon. *Liminal*’s poems, too, have the sky at their backs, appreciate stillness, but are pressing ever onward. Early in the volume, Munteer writes:

...The poet as something more
than planter. Some way to reconcile the violence

of youth spent wandering the private acres we keep
to ourselves... (52)

The mind slides restlessly along these lines, as each clause shifts and amplifies meaning but refuses to uncover the source of the poems' wounds. The collection is a story of lost love, another wounding, but this unutterable violence precedes it.

Finally, the work feels current. Munteer is a poet of our time, a poet whose work is not just sparse and yearning and weighty but feels like part of a continuity. *Liminal's* vision of death belongs to the shaded forests of the Kootenay wilderness, its purpose to the empty footpaths of the world, its wry humour to the people—both the poets and the planters—of the Slokan Valley. But its moments of quiet, painful and poised alike, are its own and the reason to seek out this tiny, hidden corner of Canada.

—Chris Shalom, Dalhousie University

Sandra Ridley, *Silvija*

Toronto: Bookthug, 2016

96 pages, \$18.00, ISBN 9781771662642

There is raw power in Sandra Ridley's *Silvija*. It is the power of grief, abuse, and pain, but most of all it is the power of language to embody these things—to express them, confront them, and confess their effects. Ridley's words, like those of the abusive parent of "Farther/Father," "lash... feverish" (21) and strike out, asserting the physicality of grief and firmly locating it in the body. More of a poetic sequence than a collection, *Silvija* is imbued with the formalism of funeral rites, requiring the reader to proceed through the sequence as if on the path to healing, experiencing the beauty in grief and the consolation in order.

Ridley experiments with a number of sparse, fluid, and disjointed poetic styles to explore the ways in which language can express and embody grief. In particular, her use of the forward slash in "Farther/Father" and "Dirge" foregrounds the work of poetry to call for the creation of meaning in

blank spaces. While forward slashes are conventionally used to demarcate line breaks in poetry, here Ridley uses them to separate and link phrases on the same line. The forward slashes ask the reader to create connections between phrases but also taunt the reader when s/he is unable to do so—not unlike how the experience of grief compels the bereaved to seek meaning in suffering, often with little success.

“In Praise of the Healer” (a five-part poem or five poems with the same title) presents a particularly interesting case for the power of experimentation in poetry. Situated in regular intervals throughout the collection, the poem’s organization suggests both the experience of grief as a recurring presence and the repetitive, formalized structure of religious rites. In its various reiterations, the poem addresses the body’s relationship to grief, foregrounding the acts of swallowing, breathing, speech, crying, and feeling pain. Grief not only affects these bodily acts, but it is also expressed through them. Indeed, it is through the acts of life that the speaker acknowledges death, loss, and pain. To “Swallow down / the fullness in the throat” (11) is to make grief a physical act. In the context of the poem’s tone of religious ritual, swallowing evokes the Christian act of receiving communion, making the expression of grief not only ritualistic, but also an act of communing with the object of grief. Ridley’s use of Latin and noted lack of religious sentiment suggests that, for her, consolation and healing are found not in religion but rather in its rituals.

In claiming *Silvija* for her title, Ridley relies on the aggregate meaning of its variants. *Silvija* is a “silva”—a collection of poems or a “poem composed...at a start, in a kind of Rapture” (5)—but it is also a dark, wild forest, whose trees form a kind of community and whose inhabitants encounter death and suffering in daily life. At the same time, *Silvija* is also a “sylvan”—the spirit that haunts those woods and resides over that space. Most importantly, “Silvija” is also the name of the person to whom the collection is dedicated. Ridley’s *Silvija* is thus deeply personal and yet strives towards the universal. It is poetry that is strongest not in its individual poems or words but rather as a collection that draws the reader into the dark forest of grief that is beyond words.

—Jane Boyes, Dalhousie University