BOOK REVIEWS

Judith Thompson, *Watching Glory Die*
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016
46 pages, $17.95, ISBN 9781770915152

Judith Thompson's 2014 play *Watching Glory Die* has been produced several times in recent years, was nominated for the Dora Mavor Moore Award in 2015, and was published by Playwrights Canada Press last year. The publication is timely given the play's relationship to current Canadian events. In the fall of 2017 the government will continue to debate Bill C-56, which would limit the number of days that federal prisoners can spend in solitary confinement. 2017 also marks the ten-year anniversary of Ashley Smith's death by self-induced asphyxiation while under suicide watch in solitary confinement, which is the event that originally inspired the play.

Thompson employs well-known facts about Smith's life and death to craft a powerful one-act play about mental health, the Canadian prison system, and the dangers of allowing obedience to overpower instinct, common sense, and compassion. The play follows three characters—the eponymous Glory, her mother Rosellen, and the prison guard Gail—who struggle to retain their sanity in a "world turned upside down" (27). Glory, "eighteen going on twelve" (25), has been incarcerated since age fourteen for throwing crabapples at a mailman. The sentence, initially six months in a juvenile facility, has been extended for five years due to hundreds of "incident reports" and "institutional charges" (8). "And what do you think those charges were for?" Rosellen asks the audience. "Swiping a pencil, telling a rough guard to eff off, maybe even spitting" (8).

Now in solitary confinement in a penitentiary, Glory constructs an imaginative "mother crocodile" who, in the process of protecting Glory, drags her down into the swamp. In Glory's first monologue she defiantly tells the crocodile: "No I am not yours to have I am mine and I am not I am not going to be sucked under the mud by your crocodile eyes so stop lookin' at me"

(11). A moment later, however, she turns to the camera in her cell and tells the guards watching her: "I'm reporting you I'm reporting you to God and my crocodile and I'm telling you she is gonna open her big big mouth and chew you up into little tiny pieces and feed you to her OTHER babies" (11). Glory's relationship with her crocodile epitomizes the vicious relationship between mental health and solitary confinement: the more Glory's mental health deteriorates the more she lashes out, and the more she lashes out the longer she must spend in solitary confinement, which further deteriorates her mental health. The audience sees the direct impact that segregation has on Glory's psychological well-being: after Glory experiences human interaction, or when she is told she will be released from prison, Glory straightforwardly recounts her memories, daily experiences, and goals. The more charges are laid against her the more isolated she becomes, and the more isolated she becomes the more she talks about her mother crocodile and takes to tying ligatures around her neck.

Integral to the play's call to action is Gail, the prison guard who struggles between her perceived responsibility to follow the rules and her "real," "deep-down" self, who is "disgusted" by what she is told to do (15, 38). The character is defined by her oscillation between these two parts of herself, and the audience is never able to sit comfortably with the notion of Gail as either villain or victim. Thompson thus asks the audience to question how far they can extend their empathy to someone who upholds a flawed system even when she herself is trapped.

The play is written for one actor, who plays all three parts. As such, it is comprised of several monologues, and monologue is undoubtedly the form in which Thompson most excels. Those familiar with Thompson's work will recognize her distinctive attention to a character's "voice," which combines natural speech patterns with beautiful, gritty poetry. The "one-woman show" genre is particularly apt for *Watching Glory Die*, as it highlights the interconnectedness and common humanity of the seemingly incongruous characters and suggests that they are all distinctly yet comparably trapped in a flawed judicial system. However, the use of only one actor also creates a distinct lack of human connection. The characters never physically touch or interact, which serves to highlight Glory's isolation, Rosellen's deprivation of her daughter, and the disturbing lack of compassion underpinning the guards' orders that if Glory chokes herself they are not to intervene until she "stops breathing" and turns "blue" (38).

Watching Glory Die is a powerful, important story, and it is for this reason, paradoxically, that I hesitate to recommend it for reading. Plays often lend themselves well to being read. Realist plays in particular are vivid enough in their dialogue and stage directions that a story can be told in its entirety, and while there is a sense of loss or incompleteness at not viewing a live production, the story and its themes can still be communicated. Some people may read a play and imagine staging, lighting, or casting choices—in other words, they may imagine the play as though they are an audience member watching a production. *Watching Glory Die* is different. It is not that one cannot imagine the play, but that the act of watching it cannot be substituted by imagining what it would be like on stage or intellectualizing about the relationship between themes and theatrical techniques, as I have done in this review. In fact, I believe merely reading the play and then engaging in such imaginative or intellectual processes is detrimental in its insufficiency, as it instills a false sense of awareness about issues arising from the script. The brilliance of her play is that it forces audiences to be bystanders and confront their complicity in tragedies arising from deep-rooted flaws in the prison system. The audience, like Gail, watches Glory die and does nothing. As Thompson says in a brief note included in the printed edition, "We must stop being bystanders."

The recent publication of this script is certainly timely and a chance to share a powerful story. Nevertheless, I urge readers to seek out a production of *Watching Glory Die* instead—or, better yet, stage one.

—Sarah Deller, Dalhousie University

Tenille K. Campbell, *#IndianLovePoems*
Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2017
104 pages, $17.95, ISBN 9781927426999

In her debut collection, *#IndianLovePoems*, Dene/Métis poet Tenille K. Campbell takes ownership of her sexuality and indigenous identity in poems that are raw, visceral, and unapologetic. The poems are set in the landscapes between northern Saskatchewan and the west coast, and they frequently draw on traditional aboriginal narratives and storytelling traditions. However, her use of the hashtag in the main title and her simple numbering of the poems (in lieu of titles) create a modern minimalist aesthetic that is

frequently juxtaposed with and offset by conventional and overtly romanticized images of indigenous life. By fusing pop culture references with traditional and, at times, self-consciously ironic representations of indigeneity, Campbell demonstrates her desire for her work to be accessible to a wide audience as well as specific to indigenous communities.

Campbell's writing, like that of many other indigenous and Métis writers, is closely tied to her community, upbringing, and identity. In #692 she speaks of eating traditional foods and of the "Rez" (3), invoking both contemporary and conventional portrayals of indigenous life. Campbell's language is crass, colloquial, provocative, direct, and unabashedly erotic: "I'm looking for that / sweet and flirty and hot as fuck / indigenous love" (29-31). Her voice is both authentic to her own struggles for self-actualization and accessible to her community, and she makes it clear that she is writing to an indigenous audience and trying to share her sexual experiences with people who will sympathize with, rather than fetishize, her pleasure and desire. In #7, for example, the speaker fantasizes about a relationship with an indigenous man: "I just *want* / … / to make him ache / … / as we make treaty / Cree to Dene" (11-22). The implication is that there is a level of intimacy and cultural sympathy that only another indigenous person can truly understand. This suggestion is taken a step further in #608 when Campbell defiantly writes:

> I am not your Pocahontas
> your naughty squaw
> …
> I define my sexuality
> I define my boundaries
> …
> I decide
> not you. (33-47)

The speaker's assertion of her body, voice, and self-defined sexuality is both raw and freeing, as she openly defies negative stereotypes of indigenous women as either "Pocahontas" or "naughty squaw." The speaker thus refuses to compromise her female indigenous identity while at the same time asserting her right not to be branded or defined by others.

The poems in *#IndianLovePoems* also display the intersections be-

tween Campbell's Dene identity and her attraction to aspects of white society. #692 and #64 romanticize indigenous men and describe the speaker's ideal companion: "I'm looking for that sweet tanned man / who speaks his tradition in bed" (24-25). However, other poems suggest that the speaker is torn between the desire to find her ideal indigenous partner and her attraction to white men. For example, #89 describes both the pleasure and guilt of a sexual encounter with a white male: "moaning in Cree / your thin *môniyas* lips / kissing my neck" (13-15). The speaker sees this pleasure with a white man as a betrayal: "making love with a white boy / still feels like treason / no matter how nice his pale flesh / looks next to mine" (1-4). This theme appears again in #509, in which the speaker vividly describes another pleasurable sexual encounter with a "*môniyas*," which ends "*I like him / shit*" (25-26). These poems highlight the very personal overlap between the speaker's desire and need to identify with and protect her Dene heritage from colonial influence. However, Campbell's inclusion of Cree and Dene words like *môniyas* ("white man" or "Canadian"), *neechie* ("friend" or "indigenous person"), and *sëchazeh* ("sweetie" or "babe") automatically excludes a non-indigenous audience and signals that these confessions about sexuality and indigenous identity are directed at her own community, even though the bulk of the poems are written in English. After using indigenous words in #2000, Campbell writes, "and we laugh / because our Cree / sucks" (13-15), foregrounding the strength and agency of indigenous peoples to collectively "laugh" in the face of colonial violence rather than fall victim.

The poems in Campbell's *#IndianLovePoems* are all connected by the speaker's assertion of her identity, sexuality, and struggle to stay true to her roots. As such, Campbell's collection deserves to be read through a theoretical lens as an assertion of contemporary indigenous and feminist agency.

—Elizabeth Tetzlaff, Dalhousie University

Michelle Elrick, *Then/Again*
Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2017
96 pages, $18.95, ISBN 9780889713314

Then/Again is Michelle Elrick's second collection of poems, and it has been praised for its playful experimentation with form and its combination of reflexive prose passages with brief poetic capsules that create long lyrical

narratives. She credits Italo Calvino as the inspiration for her work in the collection's acknowledgements, although her style does not merely invoke the works of stylistic forerunners. In fact, invoking Calvino's work in the form of her text makes her own style both familiar and unfamiliar, which is precisely her intent: to examine the space between familiarity and unfamiliarity, the remembered and the forgotten, which Elrick associates with the simultaneous availability and impossibility of home.

What is home? Elrick explores this question in all of its complexity, but her response is as provocatively uncertain as it is affecting. "Almost immediately, the definition gets complicated," she writes in the introduction. It is not the physical space but the essence of home that the collection searches for—the "what you take with you when you go," which is located in the "repertoire of sensual experience that produces feelings of familiarity and comfort" (10). "At the centre," she writes, "this is a story of encounter" (10)—an encounter with the traces of home that emerge through sought-out and spontaneous experience. It is also an encounter with the idea of memory as it collides with that simultaneous sense of nostalgia—with the fragments and glimpses of a past long forgotten and not so far away.

From ancestral origins to childhood homes, Elrick's collection takes us on a journey through the ghosts of home as they manifest through and are framed by the physical spaces of her past and her sometimes terse relationship with memory. Whether that memory is genetic or psychological, her poems continually manifest the dislocating experience of the return. This feeling of dislocation is conveyed through the humour that emerges through Elrick's incorporation of the technologically banal into the space of the poetic—a technique she adopts to diminish the elevated poetics of a style that can easily carry the reader too far away from the physicality of the spaces she explores—and the sense of numbness that results from the impossibility of returning:

> I close my eyes, pretend to sleep.
>
> hear a sea swaying back/forth, then/again, once/more into edges.
> feel a breath pressing ribs into thin skin membrane
> and retreat. shoulders sink. often I dream I am drowning.
>
> I open my eyes, google *sleep apnea*. (43)

Yet Elrick's poetry is more than simply infused by a sense of nostalgia and longing; rather, she creates that longing and embeds it in the very structure of her poems. Her work is formally, linguistically, and stylistically representative of the breaking apart of space, time, and representation to get at the ineffable and uncanny essence of those in-between spaces where home can exist: "New becomes known, known becomes home. Between memory and encounter the essence of home emerges slowly over time, developing with each new experience" (15).

The stylistic approach to a form that contains and manifests the affect of its concept is invoked by the very title of Elrick's collection, *Then/Again*, which exposes the in-between space of language and its ability to break apart and present a duality through which the alienating uncanniness of home—and memory—can be experienced. Her poems form linguistic dualities, representing the capability of words to contain something more than the reference: the space between, manifested in the waking dream state of experience and explored through an experimentation with language and syntactical structures:

> in in come in/ come in come/ in in in come/ come in come/ in
> come in in/ in in come in/ come in come/ in come come/ in
> come in in/ in in in come. (27)

Lines like "in come in in" represent the breaking apart of language through their abrupt and disorienting disruptions of syntax as well as the simultaneous breaking apart of the words themselves ("come in" becomes both "in come" and "income"). The duality of these linguistic structures thus unlocks the meaning that exists in the in-between spaces and structures of language. However, the uncanniness isn't located strictly in the syntax. Like the collection as a whole, this poem also represents an exploration of the flowing opposition/repetition of language. Her words repeat until they have lost their meaning, becoming lost in the space between familiarity and unfamiliarity until they contain the uncanniness of memory itself as it is recalled through the stories, spaces, and structures of a home that can no longer be recalled:

> "I've been here before," you say, we say: the view
> all feathers flapping downy down, rain on yellow moss,
> bark and bird legs and claws. (90)

The form and theme of *Then/Again* serve to convey a dull, dreamlike sense of near lethargy or a vague haze of half memory by simultaneously locating the familiar in the unfamiliar and then making the familiar unfamiliar once again. Elrick's collection thus explores and manifests the uncanny and affecting intricacies of a memory-warped encounter with the terrain she travels in her search for the always elusive and ineffable concept of home. I hope she'll return to this journey in her next collection—or perhaps I've already "been here before."

—Laura Bohnert, Dalhousie University