

Katherena Vermette, *North End Love Songs*.
Winnipeg: The Muses' Company, 2012. Pp. 108.
Softcover, \$14.95.

In any book of poetry, individual poems echo and speak to each other. But with some, the reader gets the definite impression of not so much a compilation of individual poems as a single portrait seen from many angles. Katherena Vermette's *North End Love Songs* is that kind of book. While many of its poems stand well on their own, they all gain resonance from being read next to each other. Together they form a multi-layered, multicoloured depiction of the Winnipeg neighbourhood where Vermette grew up.

Vermette, who is Métis, also has some Mennonite roots, but her writing focuses on her indigenous heritage. In an interview for *CV2* magazine she says: "... my first audience is always indigenous people, inner city people, the people I am talking about in my poems."¹ *North End Love Songs*, her first full-length collection, won the Governor General's Literary Award for poetry in 2013, and was the 2015 selection for *On the Same Page*, Manitoba's province-wide reading project.

Outsiders have consistently viewed the North End through a lens of prejudice and misunderstanding, both in its early days, when it was home to working-class immigrants from Eastern Europe, and in recent decades, as growing numbers of Aboriginal people have made it their home. Vermette is candid about the way girls grow up in the North End: they try out beer and cigarettes at a young age, take on too much responsibility too early. Some live in dilapidated houses, or witness child abuse next door. The many voices in the long poem that makes up the book's final section are

explicit on this point: life in the North End is hard. But the girls in these poems also know a fierce, visceral love of life. They dance, run through parks, imagine themselves flying. They find strength in each other's company, and they are at home in their neighbourhood.

The poems in the third section, "November," both acknowledge and push back against stereotypes. When a young indigenous man goes missing, his family finds out how easily the media and police dismiss his case: "indians go missing/ they tell the family/ indians go missing/ everyday." The poems respond by naming him, depicting him as a person with a particular way of dressing, of wearing his hair, of teasing his sister.

Like other old neighbourhoods in Winnipeg, the North End is lined with tall, century-old elms. These trees are a palpable presence in the poems, almost as much as the people. Poems like "bannerman avenue," "green disease," and "under a shroud of trees" give a sense of how much the trees are a part of the essence of the neighbourhood, and how wrenching it is when one of them is cut down.

Among the trees, there are birds—not literal ones, but girls-as-birds, an analogy that feels very fitting. Without saying so too directly, the poems attribute the birds' qualities to the girls: their fragility, lightness, quickness; their colour and beauty; and a hint that they are stronger than they appear. Seen in this way, the girls become more than themselves: in the simple act of crossing a street a girl transforms into a bluejay "poised for flight."

Vermette's diction is deceptively simple, depicting much in a few short, unpunctuated lines. The poems that get inside the heads of very young girls are especially bright and vivid, conveying the intensity of a child's response to the world. Assonance and half-rhyme give apparently plain language added resonance, as in "pritchard park": "she sits/ on the far park bench/ exhales cigarette smoke/ and cold." In pieces like "big gulps" the sparseness of the language brings the scene into tight focus: you hear the sound of an empty plastic cup on concrete steps, taste the salt of potato chips.

A few poems suffer from language that's a little too general, or from the use of adjectives instead of demonstrating by action or example. The poems are strongest where they're most specific, not in the sense of offering a great deal of detail—Vermette never does that—but in the use of well-chosen images that bring them to life. Like the girl walking under elms whose leaves "dance shadows/ across her/ upturned palms," or the two crossing a bridge, whose "long hair/ cuts the wind."

The final section, “I Am a North End Girl,” differs in form and tone from what comes before. Subtitled “verses in many voices,” it resembles a long prose poem composed of short (often one-sentence) paragraphs. The voices, many of them female, are blunt, passionate, and occasionally tinged with dark humour. This is the only passage written in first person; everywhere else the reader observes along with the poet. The third-person poems are no less intimate, but they are quieter and more reflective; here the voices are direct, insistent. The final lines emphasize that the speaker has “never/ not once/ not for one second/ looked away”—a point that doesn’t need quite so much emphasis, since it’s clear, from everything that goes before, that Vermette hasn’t ever looked away from the North End.

Calling these poems love songs is fitting. They embody an abiding affection for the neighbourhood, not despite but because of what it is; not just a general love of the place, but a love of its particular streets and trees and, most of all, its people.

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Notes

- ¹ Clarise Foster, “A Conversation with Ketherena Vermette,” *CV2*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2015), 31