

Patrick Friesen, *A Short History of Crazy Bone: Long Poem*. Salt Spring Island: Mother Tongue Publishing, 2015. Pp. 122. Softcover, \$19.95.

The promotional materials for this book offer the phrase “a libretto for the wayward and solitary,” and the word “libretto” helped me grasp what was missing in this collection of 104 spare and lean untitled poems by Patrick Friesen. With music undergirding them, they could have a satisfying richness; alone on the page they are suggestive but indeterminate, enigmatic to the point of frustration. I certainly accept that enigma is indispensable when writing about a trickster figure, and a shape-shifting trickster Crazy Bone certainly is. But not much else is certain in this long poem, and your appreciation of Friesen’s audacity will depend upon your

appetite for the slippery mysteries of identity and time expressed with defiant brevity.

The lower-case language here is simple and unadorned for the most part, and occasionally a phrase holds a provocative kōan-like stillness: “*walking toward nothing / as usual // and always getting there / for sure.*” Like free-form jazz or the paintings of Miro or Kandinsky, Crazy Bone’s ramblings touch on reality but don’t remain for long, restlessly wandering through ditches and then climbing into the sky; the poems make cryptic observations and hover around memories but decline to stay. This could be stimulating or meditative, but sometimes Friesen undercuts the moments of illumination that do happen. Poem “88” offers, intriguingly, these lines: “*I guess I’ve earned / my life // you could say it is / a river of shattered glass // light everywhere and / nowhere.*” But where does this lead? A few lines later, the poem ends with “*blah blah blah / blah blah blah.*” In “100,” Crazy Bone comes to the realization that “*half the time / I don’t know anything // and half the time I know less than that*” and there is power here. But the poem concludes with “*oh christ / what a lovely mess,*” which concedes chaos too quickly.

Crazy Bone’s monologue is represented in italics, but the narrative voice is not remarkably different from hers. It is eventually clear enough that the character’s condition of femininity is important: she wears a blue dress, then a red dress; she has been courageous and been hurt; she has access to strength and knowledge that others don’t know what to do with. The poet’s tribute to mysterious female experience is laudable, but I also didn’t quite know what to do with it. A trickster need not be definitely gendered at all, and just how much of a trickster Crazy Bone is and how much a real woman never becomes distinct enough.

The poems are bundled by way of two-line stanzas and the lines are nearly always laconic. I like the form of this dyadic stanza – it doesn’t seem right to call it a couplet – but I was unsure of the reason for this form. There is a kind of terse chant set up in these lyrics which matches the rough holiness of some aspects of Crazy Bone’s character, but overall I failed to be able to parse her speech or actions for profound spiritual significance. This could, of course, be entirely my own fault, and probably is. But neither could I find enough of the wiliness or galvanism which trickster figures often contribute to myths; if Crazy Bone does have a good portion of trickster within her, she is a wounded trickster. The woundedness of a holy character is an intriguing line of investigation to follow, but I don’t think there is enough evidence to demonstrate that this is indeed Friesen’s intention.

What goes on in this long poem could be a nudging toward patience, so I spent some time pondering “the rich are with us always / but the view keeps the rest of us going” (“27”) and “fish and moonlight / and you know whatever” (“28”). Stymied by those, I found this aphorism worked better: “*but where is love / when you need it? // if it’s anything / you need at all*” (“77”). If one were to spend enough time with this book, perhaps patience would reveal meanings which I am, unfortunately, too restless to wait for.

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