

Victor Enns, *Love & Surgery*. Regina: Radiant Press, 2020. Pp. 68. Softcover, \$20.00.

Victor Enns has had a long, distinguished career as poet, editor, and general mover and shaker in the Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Mennonite literary communities. His work on the Manitoba and Saskatchewan Writers' Guilds is significant; for Mennonites, his role as founding editor and long-time mastermind of *Rhubarb*, a seminal magazine of Mennonite literature and arts, has been equally important.

Enns's new book, *Love & Surgery*, is slender and square, physically, with a striking, semi-abstract portrait of the author by Murray Toews on the front cover. The blurred face, the flames behind, the star-like light on the right, between arm and torso, are enigmatic; the cane clasped between hands and the right leg that ends just below the knee are clear. (And what does it mean that the book tells us that it is his *left* leg that was amputated after various failed surgeries?) Books of poems exist in many and varied relations to the lives of their authors; in *Love & Surgery*, as the flat nouns of the title suggest, Enns seems little interested in coy games with speakers and personas, but rather with tracing a life that has seen both deep human connection and more than its share of pain.

The first and longest section of the book, simply titled "Love," follows a relationship from first date ("Coffee Date") through courtship and marriage. This is no youthful infatuation, but a relationship of mature grownups, perhaps on the downhill side, but rich with possibility, music, and even "Revelation": "The sunlight on the road to Chicago turns us / toward each other, stories full in our mouths." By the end of the poem the lovers have arrived: "In Chicago, the car empty of all but the moon, / we dream more jazz, less blues."

These are spare poems, simple in their language but dense in their emotions, tense with yearning and an understated awareness of the fragility of this love and the bodies through which it is expressed and experienced. This stanza from "Hesitance" embodies this tension briefly and beautifully, especially in the wordplay of "armour" and "amour":

Dislocated,
my shoulder remembers
light armour, my arm
amour.

The section culminates in one of the longest poems in the book, "Music for Men Over Fifty." In its complex blending of lust,

weakness, and love, it recognizes that the speaker's flesh may not be what it once was. But again music (here, Etta James) remains an inspiration, and dreams, allied with music, remain a crucial compensation:

True, it's been awhile, and longer than I would want
but there are so many excuses, so many reasons
I choose to sleep. Not enough blood in the old
pecker so many nights. You prefer love in the dark

Roll with me honey, in your dreams
roll me, honey, in your dreams.

The second section, "Surgery," focuses on the physical challenges that lead to failed surgery on the poet's ankle, and eventually the amputation of his lower leg. The characteristic tone is a blend of rueful realism and dark humour. Enns has never shrunk from acknowledging, even foregrounding, his weaknesses, as "Waiting for Dr. Hammond" indicates:

Every morning now I struggle into my braces described by my physio
as if they were guy wires holding up a tree not quite capable of standing
up by itself. Why, George, do I not find this reassuring though there are
days

I feel as big as a tree, but filled with ants and rot, just plain tired
of being a tree.

Enns has mentioned the American poet John Berryman as a major influence, and the language and tone here are indeed reminiscent of Berryman's *Dream Songs*, which also grapple with despair and darkness through black humour and wit. Berryman would surely have approved of the crafty turn between the bravado of "I feel as big as a tree" and the sudden bleakness of "filled with ants and rot."

This theme of bodily decay, and the long struggle to contend with both physical and emotional pain and weakness, surges into greater and greater prominence in the last pages of the book. "Protecting my soul, I close my eyes in the face of new pain centers. / Every time I get up, God pulls out another Jenga block," Enns writes in "With My Eyes Closed." "Keeping Time" and "My Body Says" carry the theme forward: "Pain jeers at my failures," notes the first, and the second becomes a kind of ritual chant, beautifully brave and heart-breakingly vulnerable:

My body says pain, my body says scream, my body says

shout, my body says groan, my body says
grunt—grunt louder than Rafael Nadal!

The last section, “Complications,” returns to the relationship of the first section, tracing its uncomfortable end. The rueful epigraph to this section, from Alphonse Daudet, resonates through the whole book, and surely applies to multiple sorts of pain: “Pain is always new to those who suffer, but loses its originality for those around them.”

The great challenge of writing about pain, of course, is precisely this problem: how to convey its particularity, and the strength required to meet it with dignity? I recall a reading from my grad school days when a fellow poet, also a grad student, read a long and tedious poem about *their pain*, which they explained had meaning and shape and all sorts of other characteristics. Daudet’s warning held in that case: the details as rendered were indeed painful, but not in the way they hoped; I, at least, was intrigued at first, but soon merely bored.

How does Enns manage to avoid this trap, as I believe he does? His resources include refusal of self-pity, a mordant humour, and a matter-of-fact skill at rendering both physical and emotional trauma in quick, sure-handed strokes. The long final poem, “Reading Mary Oliver,” displays all these resources, as it incorporates several lines from her well-known “Wild Geese.” Oliver’s poem acknowledges the poet’s own despair, but ultimately insists that each of us has a “place in the family of things.” While Enns never arrives at such—arguably sentimental—assurance, he does achieve a clear-eyed realism: “My last winter. I’m not waiting anymore. You are not coming back.” These lines, like all of *Love & Surgery*, are written with the candour and bravery of a man who has made it through a great deal, and learned to make a music of his own pain.

Jeff Gundy
Bluffton University

Nikki Reimer, *My Heart is a Rose Manhattan*.
Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2019. Pp. 112. Softcover,
\$16.95.

Nikki Reimer’s third full-length collection of poems, *My Heart is a Rose Manhattan*, is a delight. Its five sections of varying lengths reside primarily within the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry tradition, although the final section, which takes up forty percent of the