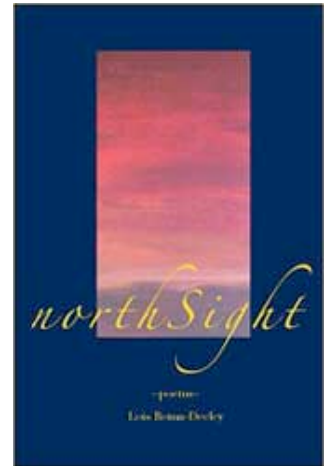


northSight
Lois Roma-Deeley

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Reviewed by Kate Cayley



The poems in *northSight*, Lois Roma-Deeley's second collection, walk a line between compassionate and distanced storytelling and often painful confession, written in a first-person that deliberately confuses the reader as to who is speaking. Is it the poet, telling us her story, or the poet taking on other voices to articulate experience if the original bearers of these stories lack the means to express themselves? This collection is concerned with speaking about and for personal losses and tragedies that are so common as to be almost unnoticed. A woman with no health insurance lies at the hospital when her three-year old daughter has an accident. An aging salesman is fired from his job after being diagnosed with cancer and dies in poverty and humiliation. Immigrant girls change their names to fit into new homes and new worlds, and find that a gulf separates them from their parents. Sex workers, incest and rape victims, and confused young women populate these poems, while America's wars and a general sense of social failure loom in the background. There is great strength in Roma-Deeley's observations, in her concern with commemorating unnoticed experience. That said, the litany of stories creates an impression of a kind of psychic pile-up which, while moving, also feels wearisome.

She is at her best when investigating the relationship between voice, violence, and text itself. In a poem about incest, "Short Hand for Shame," she begins:

*Who do you think you are?
Who/do you/think/you/are?
Whodoyouthinkyou are?*

A simple, almost naïve question starts us off, then fragments and runs together, taking on different meaning and resonance and transforming a common question into an exploration of the splintering and blurring of the soul engendered by violence to the body. What follows is a series of jagged images of sexual violation that may spring from a single incident, or be a collection of different voices speaking about linked experience. The

question of ‘who do you think you are’ becomes a challenge and an invitation to the poet, the woman or women for whom the poem is written, and the reader. The poem ends:

*it's too much it's not enough just shut up
know what this is? Now*

lift your eyes off this page.

The poem ends by directing the reader away from the poem, away from the questions of poetry or identity, and towards the world in general, which waits outside the book. The question ‘know what this is?’ goes unanswered, because it is unanswerable. All the reader can do is let the question hang, and go away from the poem into what lies outside and beyond it.

A recurring figure in *northSight*, present implicitly in many poems and directly addressed in others, is Roma-Deeley’s father, the aforementioned salesman. The story of his sickness and death becomes a touchstone through the work, an image of the urgent need to remember ordinary, common agonies, and the impossibility of remembering adequately. What is ordinary is also unspeakable. In “A Young Senorita with a Rose in Her Teeth,” she writes:

Can I really say this? At 55,
you have two heart attacks, go bankrupt,
have no health insurance? That, in 1981, you get cancer
and the boss fires you. That the day they repossess your last blue
Cadillac you leave the keys in the ignition.
Make it easy for them, you say to me. The men come
all the way to our front door, call through the screen: *We’re so sorry.*

The father ends in a hospital bed with his daughter feeding him frozen grapes and lying to him about his sickness. This poem encapsulates the collection’s greatest strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the father is beautifully evoked, and we are given an image of poetry as a form of loving remembrance. On the other hand, the particularity of detail and occasionally flat language fails to move beyond the merely descriptive.

My chief quarrel with *northSight* lies in the relationship to the ordinary. For example, one poem in which the central event is an overworked mother’s crisis over a broken freezer could be glorious if the dismay at the thawed pork chops and melting ice cream was tempered by any humour or self-consciousness about a despair over what is, when you get right down to it, just a broken freezer. The frustrating details of our lives can be telling and moving, but only if they are spun into something beyond themselves. Otherwise, commemorating a small moment of breakage topples over into simply taking oneself too seriously.

However, the final poems in the collection point the way, through the door of very small and mundane moments, into something remarkable. “Once on A-Pond,” a wonderful poem about a girl mishearing her teacher saying “once upon a time,” reflects:

Later when I was older and less deaf, I’d know
God puts spaces between words so we can find ourselves
less alone, to make it so
we can breathe in and breathe out

the distance between us
and the unknown.

Here, language is a thing which calls attention to silence, to the distance between words and the distance between what can be expressed through words. Poetry is not simply a facility with language: it is a call to notice what lies between, beyond and through language. In its final pages, *northSight* traces ordinary experience and transcends it by moving outside language and into the world itself.

Kate Cayley is a poet and playwright. Her writing has appeared in *The Antigone Review*, *existere*, *dANDelion*, *Room*, *CV2* and *The Canadian Theatre Review*, and was shortlisted for the 2007 CBC Literary Award for Poetry. She is currently working on her first collection of poems and on a play for Tarragon Theatre's Playwright's Unit.