

Book Review

Northern. By Dawn Macdonald. University of Alberta Press, 2024. 80 pp.

Reviewed by John Morgan*

Dawn Macdonald's poetry collection, *Northern*, is full of high spirits, wit, and intriguing poetic experiments. It takes the reader on an exhilarating adventure in terms of place (the remote north), form, and language. The poems are always questing, never settling for easy solutions.

The book opens with a poem called "First Things," which features an eggshell that's been blown out and "Inside / was a cathedral." The egg is described as "a riddle wrapped up ... brooded, clucked upon." Eventually, a chicken turns up too and the poem concludes, "Last things follow first," delivering its answer to the which came first riddle.

Macdonald's inventiveness extends to particular words—not gobbledygook as in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky"—but plausibly formed English words, like "overmarmaladed" and "orangelessness," both of which appear in the poem "Aperture." The poem is about unsuccessfully searching for a fox, which ultimately shows up as the image of a fox's tail flicking "from cloud to cloud" in the sky. The title of the collection, "Northern," also seems to be made up. But my favourite word invention describes the lowest layer of packed down snow, which won't come off the sidewalk when you're shovelling, and hence is "unshovelable." You have to say that word out loud and let it roll around in your mouth to get the full taste.

Macdonald's wit includes lots of punning and word play. For example, the poem "About the Author" plays on the author bio format. It begins: "About the author hangs / a nimbus of expectations and defeat." And it goes on to say:

She walks a lot
but cannot walk
this algae off her
an offer too good
to be, etc....

And later in the poem we learn that “The author has a body // like and liking other bodies.” Her word play isn’t just on the surface, because in this basically lighthearted poem, the reader can discern elements of the poet’s desires and self-questioning.

Occasionally a poem may be too clever for its own good (or at least for me to grasp its point). For instance, “Transcribed on Leaves Thrown into the Wind” begins “Sometimes I talk too fast and,”; then it hops down the page to the notation “[five lines missing]” followed by more skipped lines. The intriguing title puts pressure on the fragments that follow to be vivid and epigrammatic, but instead I found them puzzling. The wind behind this poem is strong (“an eight on the Beaufort scale”) but its ultimate point blew past me. On the other hand, the poem “The town filled up” combines prose and a scattering of the word “(coyote)” in an amusing and effective take on “invasive species.” The “foxes” here aren’t the homegrown kind, but rather intruders from Toronto.

We learn some actual facts “about the author” on the back cover. Macdonald was raised “off the grid” in Whitehorse, Yukon, and this off-the-gridness is spelled out in a series of poems toward the end of the book. In one of the book’s prose pieces she writes: “On the radio they were saying how technology is everywhere nowadays. We looked from the radio, to the lightbulb, back to the radio, which was about all we’d got.” Her schooling is alluded to in the poem “Please Leave On,” where the initials P.L.O. on the chalkboard are misunderstood by the kids to mean Palestine Liberation Organization. “Our wisdom was the kind / that’s learned in Current Events ...// We got in trouble ... / for reading / unassigned texts.” In another prose poem sarcasm underlines her annoyance with conventional northern subject matter, as commonly displayed by artists from down south: “wow that’s *so real*, those Northern Lights sure do resonate on a hipster wavelength.”

Macdonald’s perspective on life in a remote northern community includes instructions for plucking a chicken, a skirmish against wasps in an outhouse making use of spray paint, and an anecdote about a woman waiting for a bus “who was clearly not too familiar / with the whole system of public transit.” I won’t give the punchline away, but it should bring a laugh, at least it did for me.

Northern is a pleasure to read and to explore. There are some sharp turns in the climb but the view is expansive. The last sentence in the book is “the and” (not, as we might expect, “the end”), and so we’re invited to look forward to more work by Dawn Macdonald to come.

***John Morgan** moved to Fairbanks, Alaska, in 1976, to direct the creative writing program at the University of Alaska; he has published eight poetry books, an essay collection, and four chapbooks, and his work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, and many other journals. <https://www.johnmorganpoet.com>