

*Here is Where We Disembark.* By Clea Roberts. Calgary: Freehand Books, 2010. 90 pp.

On the back cover of Clea Roberts's *Here is Where We Disembark*, a brief review and a synopsis interplay with each other and the collection of poetry inside. Both begin a dialogue with Roberts's work—one, the review, sparks a discussion of her precise skill on the page, while the other, the synopsis, chatters about her poetry's perceived place in the world. It is my hope that readers will enter into this dialogue and bend its trajectory. *Here is Where We Disembark* is a pool containing honest, clear-eyed moments and diluted, over-used myths. It is worthy of diving into—a pleasure, too—and deserves thoughtful, collaborative dialogue with the words both inside and out.

The eye falls first on the brief review on the back cover. Here, renowned poet Don McKay appraises her "scrupulous musically-tuned attention" to northern space. By the second stanza of the first poem within, one understands McKay's diagnosis: "the white weight/ you feel first/ under the eyelids/ before waking." Out of the gate, Roberts crisply captures that dream-like white-washed moment that is winter's first awakening to fresh snow; you sense you are disembarking on an honest, uncluttered path. The rest of the book mostly lives up to that initial thrill. Roberts's specific hone is in her viewing: a bird's eye sharp-sightedness combines with an of-the-moment, somewhat child-like observation of the world (always, in this case, a northern world) around her. Her best writing occurs when the initial experience feels untampered with—plucked fresh from the environment and planted on the page with little tinkering. "Somersault into snowbank!/ The empty thud of mittens/ meeting in applause" lays out undecorated the joy of play (the kind that is cushioned by snow and cold weather wear) in winter. "[T]he convincing logic/ of snow drifts/ wrapping the tires,/ pulling you softly/ into a ditch" draws the snake of snow across a highway, drops the bottom out of your stomach as you recall a slow-motion slide into a snowbank.

McKay writes poetry that oscillates seamlessly between a crystalline observation of the natural landscape and heartbreaking articulation of inner emotional terrain—even where the words tell of the exact (radial vein) blue of a heron, the voice speaks of the loss of someone painfully loved. Roberts, in contrast, stumbles awkwardly over emotional topography, unable to slip unseen, with the left hand, an emotional card, while the reader is watching the right. In a rare few phrases, her stride between the timbre of emotion and the fluid unravelling of her physical observations almost reaches a comfortable tick-tock rhythm, swinging out of one and into the other with a close-to natural pendulum gait: "the sad and the angry and the peaceful/ rooms inside the decisions we'd made/ and the poplars so remarkable/ in

their thin, white gowns." It is still an obvious and abrupt shift between the two worlds (as opposed to an unseen sleight-of-hand). The break between the two tones acts like a child who grasps a grown-up's face in her hands insisting he "look at this -now!" Yet, because of this urgency, because of its youthfulness and not its precociousness, these moments are forgiven. Roberts may not yet have convinced this reviewer she can speak of the inner life while telling of the outer world, but she is brave for trying the trick and she does so (refreshingly) without a foolish putting-on of airs. Even when taking such risks, Roberts retains her honest, streamlined path; thus, we never stop believing her.

Coupled with McKay's review on the back cover is a brief synopsis which references Roberts's two-part approach in the book. Here is *Where We Disembark* is both a diptych and a contradiction: Part One collects and displays her crisp, mental snapshots of the homes she has carved into northern British Columbia and the Yukon with pure, untainted delivery. Part Two, in contrast, is written like a script of monologues of familiar northern characters: the wolf, the woodcutter, the whore. The back-flap synopsis is heavy with allusions to Roberts's collection of poetry as "northern" work. "Northern," in this sense, seems to mean the stuff of Klondike folklore: bearded, swarthy gold-diggers and headstrong, weathered women surviving in a pristine and dangerous wilderness. Count the references throughout the synopsis: the Gold Rush, prostitutes, wolves, and wood smoke are all name-dropped, aiming to lure with the rehashed, standby myths of the Yukon. Yet upon arriving at these characters in the second part of the book, Roberts's sense of immediacy is lost; a fallback on northern representations feels fabricated after such honest retelling, as found in Part One, of her own authentic northern experience.

In Part One, Roberts is rooted assuredly, breathtakingly in the present. We are listening to the trucks "whistling/down the highway/ their J-brakes/a thick stutter." We are walking to the mailbox "through a hoarfrost/ the bright arteries of poplars/ holding all the world's light and space in their branches." We look out icy windows, calculating the list of detritus lost to deep snow: "February ate/ a cord of wood/a snow shovel/and a beaver hat." In this section, Roberts seems to have been sitting outside, all day long, each season, recording every minor alteration in nature, watching—without blinking—the lives of her people playing out on her landscape. The attention to detail and its pure delivery is like cold river water splashed on the face: utterly cleansing and bracing in its freshness.

Each poem, in the first half, is so honest to the northern dweller's daily life, it makes the myth of northern life, written about in the second half, seem like

a distracting, garish caricature. In “Load,” for example, an imagined Martha Purdy says: “I recommend a cord skirt cut above the ankles./ It’s warm and fetching,/ and practical for stepping over/ dead horses on the trail.” In Part One, Roberts’s observations seep in as already-known truths; in Part Two the images parade ostentatiously in full costume. We are doused in the face with used water, longing for our cold river once again. Were the two halves of the book to be published separately, it’s possible Part Two would ring more authentic. As it stands, Roberts maps out her northern world so brilliantly in the first half, she dooms her perceived northern world of the second half to failure—or at least, renders it untrue by describing it in terms so at odds with the parameters of authenticity she laid out previously.

It is not always the case that a book’s weaker points draw the reader back in, but it is this reviewer’s opinion that Roberts’s precise skill in observation, her honesty, and her presence in the moment (as experienced through the poetry of Part One) create a dialogue around the less effective elements of the book. What compelled her to abandon her crisp vision of the here-and-now to fabricate a retelling of the myth of the past? If we are to believe the synopsis on the back cover, it is perhaps the draw of the fabled North—but it is possible the myth and the reality of life in the North are meant to clash and engage the reader. And what courage, if we are to listen to Don McKay’s summary of her work, is beginning to show in Roberts’s willingness to tread between unmapped emotional terrain and the familiar, cold-water clarity of her physical world? To answer, to enter into the dialogue, one must read *Here Is Where We Disembark*; the poetry is well worth the conversation and the conversation worth the experience of the poems.

**Katie Zdybel**, Yukon College