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"Words you Know and Cannot Say:" Poetic Surrender in Margo Wheaton's *The Unlit Path Behind the House*

***The Unlit Path Behind the House* by MARGO WHEATON**

McGill-Queen's UP, 2016 \$16.95

Reviewed by **ADAM KNEELAND**

One of the most striking aspects of Margo Wheaton's poetry is her formal and stylistic flexibility. Her voice is impressively consistent and recognizable throughout, even in those poems that shift from the tight, spare language that characterizes much of her work to more relaxed prose lines. In her subjects, too, Wheaton is surprisingly versatile, and her voice lends itself equally well to ekphrastic poems about Van Gogh, moments between lovers, strange encounters with a drunken neighbour and his record collection, and the dark edge of the woods.

Regardless of their setting, poems in Margo Wheaton's first collection dwell, more often than not, in liminal spaces—the eponymous path behind the house, the edges of woodland, fields beyond the railroad tracks, the suspended time of “the slow drag of death” (“Torn II” 4) in the wake of a tragedy. We rarely see Wheaton's subjects move beyond these liminal spaces and times, or at least not easily; more than anything, her poems are marked by a tension that quietly vibrates throughout her collection, a tension that speaks as much to Wheaton's poetic philosophy as it does about her poetic subjects' journeys.

“Pause,” for example, begins, “At the edge of these murmuring / woods are words you know / and cannot say” (1-3). Although Wheaton's poems just as often take place indoors as they do out, this

beginning is typical of Wheaton's poems—the speaker hesitates on the edge, considering entrance into a world that, although it is alive with nonhuman voices, is not necessarily understood. The speaker is sure that within the woods are the necessary words and the ability to speak them, “a name for the loneliness” (12) and “Words to formulate the question / fading light is the answer to” (17-18). Yet the pull to enter the forest and find the words that might enable coherent expression is arrested by a profusion of discrete, distracting details. The speaker is unable to stop contemplating individual pine needles and “the way each piece / of frozen rain dissolves” (24-25). The poem ends without resolution, the dissolution of each raindrop mirroring the speaker's ultimate failure to find words to express the whole.

The following poem, “Gifts,” does something similar, although here it is the poem itself that struggles to move beyond hesitation. In the first section we see the “Full moon, silent as a bone. a hole cut / out of the twittering sky” (1-2). The moon, a familiar image, is alienating, and its strangeness means that the poem struggles to find coherence: “Wind. Waves. Immeasurable sea – / gifts we can't open; we don't have hands” (9-10). As in “Pause,” the inability to fully perceive and express the setting undoes language. “Forget how to read” (4), the poem says, and Wheaton's laconic voice here makes the statement ambiguous. Is this a fact or a command, a result of poetic uncertainty or an answer to it? Regardless, the first section of the poem finds “Vowels scattered all over the floor. / Poems are white flags” (7-8). Yet the poem is written, despite it being a surrender. Everywhere in Wheaton's work there are attempts to move beyond confusion and alienation. Wheaton's subjects and poems

both possess an instinctive “feeling / for narrative” (“Torn VI” 12-13), a desire “fierce as the sea / knocking against a resolute shore: to unlock / door after door after door” (“When the Heart Believes it’s Found a Home” 34-35).

And some poems do achieve coherence, often by translating the murmurs and silences of otherness through the body. Many of the most striking and least self-conscious images are erotic, the sensual body grounding poetic language. The second section of “Gifts” turns from the scattered pieces of words to a coherent moment as the sun falls on kitchen gadgets and “suddenly everything’s possible” (14). The poem ends with “elbows point[ing] / to the sky” (19-20), a more hopeful and physical gesture towards what the poem

initially found difficult to express with only scattered vowels.

With her recurring interest in the limitations and possibilities of poetry, that anti-Romantic possibility of failure most notable in those poems that come closest to nature poetry and lyric, Wheaton joins an ongoing poetic conversation most notable in the work of such contemporaries as Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Jan Zwicky. Wheaton adds another strong and memorable voice to this discussion and begins a career that is worth following.

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