

## BOOKS

## The heart resuscitated, with poetry

**Exterminate My Heart**

Shane Neilson, with wood engravings by  
George A. Walker  
Frog Hollow Press; 2008. 94 pp \$35

Shane Neilson, who practises family medicine in Erin, Ontario, also happens to be a skilled poet, with a fine ear for language and a subtle lyrical take on everyday life.

The 55, free-verse poems published in *Exterminate My Heart* are dedicated to Neilson's wife, Janet, and his daughter, Zee, or Mizuki. They are also the primary subjects of the poems. The first section of the book offers 19 poems about his daughter, including several fine lyrics: "Picture of a Failed Kiss," "Bedtime Poem," "Mizuki" and "Monarchs in Mississauga Lighthouse." In the last, the poet captures to perfection the child's sense of wonder and loss, when she doesn't understand that the monarch butterflies she has seen are fairly common and will appear again someday. For her, once these 3 monarchs have fled, all monarchs are gone forever, a truly heart-breaking view into a child's mind.

The gem of this section is the poem "Disney Propaganda," which explores the nature of childish wishes: "Here under the hot sun / one is admonished *Wish, Wish*, and I think about lies / like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, those seasonal charades, / but here it's Perma-Wish, the wishes are limitless. / At least with Santa there's decorum, a proper amount. / But in Disneyland we're wish gluttons ..." Neilson, the realistic father, thinks perhaps it is time for the "Life is Hard and Then You Die" speech, but he holds back and soon learns that wishes can be for the most ordinary things. A marvellous poem.

American poet William Carlos Williams, also a medical doctor, once stated, as a first principle of poetry,



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“No ideas but in things.” When Neilson sticks to the objects of our everyday world as carriers of poetic meaning, his poetry sings. When he delves into abstractions, the poems lose focus. Luckily, he doesn’t do this often. Whether he’s writing about red hair, “shutters rustling” or “the house yawning with weight,” he engages the reader by grounding his poems in the real, physical world.

Neilson, who is a frequent *CMAJ* contributor, also proves highly capable of making magic with sounds. Just listen: “comic wooing and manic shenanigans”; “striking your body like / a breaker, like bad news, like dulcet thunder / like an obscene onomatopoeia”; “Up the stairs, up the stairs: Grandmother’s arthritic / *clickity-clack* of rheumed hips and crepitating knees.” With this level of sonority playing in the background, the occasional weak rhyme can be forgiven.

The last poem, “Ready or Not,” about his wife laughing at death, provides a splendid closing for the book. Although I find the “daughter” poems generally more successful than the “wife” poems, altogether this is a strong and enjoyable collection, made more so with the 18 accomplished wood engravings by George A. Walker.

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Ottawa poet and novelist Mark Frutkin has published 11 books. His latest work is *Erratic North: A Vietnam Draft Resister’s Life in the Canadian Bush* (2008).