

I do not think that I could love a human being

Johanna Skibsrud

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Reviewed by John Kerkhoven

“Halfway Rock”, the opening poem of Johanna Skibsrud’s *I do not think that I could love a human being* sets the lyrical and thematic tone for this collection. The “halfway” of the poem’s title also captures Skibsrud’s preoccupation in this book with questions of perspective and of distance in both place and time – the near and the far; the within reach and the out of reach; and the reaching.

“Halfway Rock” features a sailing party desperate for wind (“sails as slack as sleeves”) and concerns Ed, who, the poem explains, died in an accident some months after the doldrums day in question. He had also been rescued by the Coast Guard when he was nine for going out too far in these same waters with his parents’ boat. Another man, one time, survived for a week out on Halfway Rock, “saved, finally, by a woman hanging laundry out to dry” who had spotted the cairn the man had built.

One line of the poem, in Ed’s voice, harkens back to his childhood misadventure: “*Imagine.*” Another one-word line, in the author’s voice, instructs, “Remember”. (“I write this poem with nearly / five months retrospect, and so”) The poem, far from maudlin, ends with a question that becomes an assertion.

And what determines that a man survives,
when there's no good reason that he should?

...

Or that a man dies, when there's
no reason on this earth he should.

...

Well there isn't, is there?

No reason on this earth, at all.

Imagine. Remember. Reason. These are like points of compass, not just for this poem, but for the book. If we seek a fourth point of compass it would be desire, longing. We can feel the force of desire in the poem's closing couplet, a reference to Ed who yells

"Row!":

Throwing, with the word, his weight,
heavily to oar.

Skibsrud grapples throughout this collection with meaning and understanding; and she grapples also with that grappling. In a word, she is a philosopher, one who knows that she cannot step outside of herself, of her experience. We see this in the poem, "At a certain point, everything begins again," when she writes of "that furthest extension of the self where the line of thought is at once pulled taught and left to buzz at the end of its wire". In "Scene from window: North Bay, Ontario", she asks existentially, "Are we, then, the holes in the universe where / everything that we are not, is not?"

She exercises reason; and she returns over and again to the other points of compass. For example, speaking of a thick fog:

(....

Remember that— remember *this*—
in just this way—

this present moment, as if it were already in the past,
so that later I can retrieve it just ‘as it was’ just
as it is).

The cardinal point of desire:

..., and when I love I want to love
as recklessly as this: when I’ve been,
in my loneliness, desiring.

Or: “but that I would be somehow that *instance*, however fleeting, in which I find myself
/ again sometimes to be the cities ... of my childhood.” Desire, imagination and memory.

The cities of her childhood are imaginary worlds she created. We see the same spirit in
the ending of the poem “Getting dressed in the usual way on the day you told me you
didn’t love me anymore”: “... with unmitigated patience, / and unswerving devotion, I //
dug and dug as a child, out back in the yard” – digging for the “ultimate and unfamiliar
region I imagined I was looking for”, which was China, a landscape of which covers the
box in which she keeps items from her lover.

The poems are not all of equal force; we sense some lines or entire poems were
included because of the author’s affection for them. And there are places where
Skibsrud’s non-prose pieces (some are prose poems) feel rather like prose with line
breaks. But assuredly, she controls her words, her cadences and the weight of her
phrasings. In her account of tropical sickness shared with a lover, the line breaks evoke
the physical labour that goes with illness.

suspended parallel, in the jungle, the
ceiling fan stirring the thick air like a spoon. How

desperately we wanted to
comfort one another, then; to lift the
painful thing which crouched like a cat in our
brains. To get

rid of it entirely; to throw it out, and live
together in quiet rooms where we would
take always great
care with one another, and we
would not die.

Skibsrud writes with care and control – to the point that only rarely do we see that more energy lies beneath the surface, waiting to be released (“How did ‘love’, that is, the way we spoke it, turn / red like that, all tooth and claw?”); and the sensuous account of a man biting into tomatoes covered with oil and vinegar: “how they will draw the spit / from underneath his tongue, / and the corners of his mouth”). Her poem, “After drinking too much gin” seems like an outlier, but is a terrific poem of drunkenness that provides a contrast to her usual contemplations of, among other things, the landscapes of loss. In sum, this collection is rich with intelligent sensibility and imagery that resonates across the poems and sections of the book, “the mind like a child / wandering”.