

Begin With the End in Mind / Emma Healey
Review by Philip Coleman



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The front cover of Canadian poet, fiction-writer, and editor Emma Healey's book *Begin With the End in Mind* is a striking assemblage of six panels, each of which contains arrows drawn in blue ink pointing in various directions and formations. The same arrows, in black ink, reappear on the title page and towards the end of the book. They don't mean ~~anything~~. In fact, Healey's association with other contemporary Canadian authors and artists such as Derek Beaulieu and Marcel Dzama suggests that the visual aspects of her book – together with its design features – all signify in important ways that complement and augment the poems between its covers. The arrows point downwards in one panel; in another they cluster towards an empty space while they are aligned in diagonal formation, or facing across the page in others. Whatever they mean – whatever they are for – these vectors suggest, from the outset, both the multi-directional nature of Healey's vocal projections and her interest in the material appearance of poetic architecture.

In a weirdly apposite way the movement of the arrows in the front cover's panels may also be related to the book's epigraph, which is taken from Donald Barthelme's troublingly surreal story 'Porcupines at the University', which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1970. 'The herd [of 'thousands and thousands' of porcupines] was moving down a twelve-lane trail of silky-smooth highway' Barthelme writes halfway through that piece, and Healey uses its final paragraph in *Begin With the End in Mind*: 'The citizens in their cars looked at the porcupines, thinking: What is wonderful? Are these porcupines wonderful? Are they significant? Are they what I need?' In the same way that Barthelme (together with writers such as John Barth,

Richard Brautigan, and Thomas Pynchon) forced a radical reconsideration of narrative form in the 1960s, then, Healey's work also operates close to the edges of contemporary poetic discourse – and sometimes beyond them. As editor of the *Incongruous Quarterly* ('an online literary magazine devoted to the publication of unpublishable literature'), she understands the importance of the questions posed by Barthelme's text from both a critical/editorial and an artistic point of view.

In her own artistic practice, therefore, Healey demonstrates an acute awareness of recent developments in a wide range of literary, critical, and theoretical discourses but her work is also concerned with the experience of life lived in the personal present, as a piece like 'For My Neighbour' demonstrates:

I'm alive and it's spring so of course I had to break into
 someone's apartment. [...] I brought
 the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*
 with me, it's heavy and corners just dying to meet some
 poor eyelid or wrist and standing on your balcony I ate the
 entry for Free Association without reading it first. Which
 action I am now regretting slightly.

It is not easy to excerpt 'lines' from Healey's poems, but this passage illustrates the way that they proceed through a gradual but often swiftly-paced concatenation of images and impressions. Her method is reminiscent of that used in Frank O'Hara's 'I do this I do that' poems, but 'For My Neighbour' also reveals Healey's interest, in this volume, in giving voice to a self teetering between different levels of existence and experience and who is frequently encountered (as here) in precarious spaces of risk and escape. As she puts it in 'Expedition', which reinforces the sense of Healey as a poet well-versed in critical and theoretical discourse but who also has a keen eye for the everyday and the real:

you don't ever go back there this for a reason all the forks
 ever unopened bank statements flyers for night foods the
 sad edge of an excellent lemon curd coils turns toward you
 and lowing the filthy tall green of your centralest metaphor
 posturing upward except for when you pull it's not filament
 drainage or slight but a whole bench-pressed hockey team
 lazy with silverware long squinting into your curtainless
 sorry head down and dig back a signified not sorry just
 more plug everything in ever straighten once hums with
 a new sense of push it in chorus they large with your
 shoulders push out

It is possible, should one wish to do so, to take these lines and break them up into more conventionally digestible units of poetic measure ('you don't ever go back there | this for a reason | all the forks / ever unopened bank statements | flyers for night foods | the / sad edge of an excellent lemon curd coils | turns toward you'), but to do so would be to disrupt the formal logic of Healey's work's 'centralest metaphor' which, in this book, may be described as the self in a state of intense negotiation with the world of memories, thoughts, and impressions. From this she seeks to 'dig back a signified', as she puts it here, to convey meaning through the vast proliferation of signs by which her identity, to date, has been mediated and shaped.

It is for this reason, then, that *Begin With the End in Mind* begins with a poem in which the self of the author appears to be on full and open display:

My full name is Emma Flannery Lawrence Healey. There's a reason. I tell this story a lot. My mother went into labour with me during a screening of *Edward Scissorhands* in Toronto, January of 1991. It was snowing. They didn't own a car. You don't need to know this: the light on her face or the speed of her stomach and hands, what my father said, how they stayed for the whole thing anyway, how the snow, how the sound. On my kitchen floor now where I'm sitting to write this, there's half-empty carton of ruby red grapefruit juice, pulp-free, and a cookbook titled *Becoming Vegetarian* which I'm not. What I tell people isn't exactly like this, what I'm telling you here. I own seventeen T-shirts and twenty-five pairs of socks. I counted, just now, for this.

In the movement from 'I tell this story a lot' to 'You don't need to know this' and 'What I tell people isn't / exactly like this, what I'm telling you here', the abrupt changes in the speaker's sense of narrative purpose and direction are complicated by the detailed lists, inventories, and references to individual texts that may be said to 'exist' in the world we all think we know and take for granted: the world of *Edward Scissorhands*, say, or *Becoming Vegetarian*. These 'texts', however, are placed here by Healey not as factual signposts that might help us to identify particular historical or personal contexts but as random coordinates in the textualisation of identity in *Begin With the End in Mind*, a process that has less to do with sketching the personal/ autobiographical life of the author than it has with the process of exposing the extent to which selfhood is always a function of the forms of language. As she writes in the poem entitled 'Indigo':

if I could hire a team to re-order, -label, and -stock my nervous system every twelve hours I'd do it absolutely wouldn't you yes amazing to not seize amazing the huge walls the swallowing petty theft slow golden ratio glottal the staircase unfolding all lazy spring grow-your-own trees from a kit just to slip you come new season early under nothing has ever been wet here nothing will be I do not like nature but I do like to be one coherent linear system in the fluorescent diffuse of a larger complex million individual discrete systems all better indexed more reasoned about love and mystery and reference etc. than I am there's no [sic] much that's too slow to swallow the volume a tree graph a whole poem stands you can close for it only in light of your reference a sprawling nonfiction is this glorious beautiful compounded

Healey does not deny the self – she does not attempt to undermine or ignore the idea of the authorial subject – and *Begin With the End in Mind* may be read as a celebration of what she calls ‘one coherent linear / system’. However, she also strives to give the reader a sense of ‘the fluorescent diffuse small of a larger complex’, the ‘million individual discrete systems’ within which individual selves give and are given meaning.

While *Begin With the End in Mind* contains several poems that explore the nature of private and subjective experience it also includes explorations of Canadian and national/international identity, most notably in the long sequence ‘Heritage Moments’ but also in shorter pieces such as ‘Torontoist’ and ‘Brief Pause in Iroquois, On.’ Healey’s comments on Canadian culture echo US American satire about its northern neighbours: ‘Canada has produced many great works of art and also / much weather’ or ‘Canada’s official national sport is ice wine’ could have been said by one of the many characters with anti-Canadian prejudices in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Regarding Wallace, indeed, it is interesting to note that his work *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is also mentioned in the book’s opening poem, while the arrows on the cover of *Begin With the End in Mind* are similar, in a way, to those found throughout ‘The Suffering Channel’, which ends Wallace’s collection *Oblivion*. Nevertheless, ‘Heritage Moments’ is not just an exercise in Canadian self-mockery. On the contrary, in the poems of this sequence Healey scrutinises myths and stereotypes from both sides of the border and there are moments where the comic impulse is freighted with very real (cultural and existential) baggage, as when she writes:

Canada is often the second-largest country in the world,
and one of the least densely populated. The country's most
valuable export is distance, which we ship mostly in crates
overseas to less fortunate countries, and sell at a premium.

In performance, these lines – and many others from ‘Heritage Moments’ – would have audiences laughing out loud, but the idea of ‘distance’ as commodity is in fact a troubling reminder of the experience of social alienation that is such a prominent theme elsewhere in Healey’s collection, as it was for Wallace. Isolation, indeed, whether it is understood in personal or communal terms, is one of the overarching concerns of *Begin With the End in Mind*, together with the idea of habitation: how to live by oneself in a community with others. As she puts it in the final section of ‘Heritage Moments’: ‘With Canadians / there is always the question of staying; the act, once again, / of deciding to stay.’

In its treatment of the relationship between self and world, language and form, ‘nation’ and ‘narration’ (to use Homi Bhabha’s phrase), it deserves a wider readership beyond its local/regional audience in Canada. In the introduction to his book *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhabha wrote that ‘Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.’ Through the lens of Emma Healey’s poetry the narratives by which Canadian identity has been (and continues to be) formed are re-envisioned in powerful and at times poignant poems of profound personal and political import.