

## REVIEW

## Lyrical poetry that pays homage to Sylvia Plath and Vincent Van Gogh

Title: *Grace Must Wander* by Stephanie McKenzie.  
Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland: Salmon Poetry, 2009. 71 pages.  
Reviewed by: Mary Hanna

Writing with cool control and an ear for lyric potential, Stephanie McKenzie pays tribute to Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath in *Grace Must Wander*, her second collection of poetry. This well thought-out and powerful text is beautifully designed to share the poet's deep feelings about art and the word. It is with singular authority that McKenzie writes of winter in the profoundly frozen North and of the search for meaning in relationships on a global scale. McKenzie is a Canadian who has spent time in Kingston, Jamaica, studying the trickster figure in Caribbean Literature as Louise Bennett Exchange Fellow for 1997 at the University of the West Indies. She presently lives and teaches in Newfoundland, which is also an island and bears many similarities to Jamaica in unusual ways. For example, both countries have a creole that is different to Standard English. McKenzie's interest in other cultures is a driving force of her research. She specialises in the literatures of the Native peoples of America. Her poetry is redolent with allusions to Canadian landscape and the crisp, calculating coldness of the winter season. In "Suite for Winter", McKenzie writes:

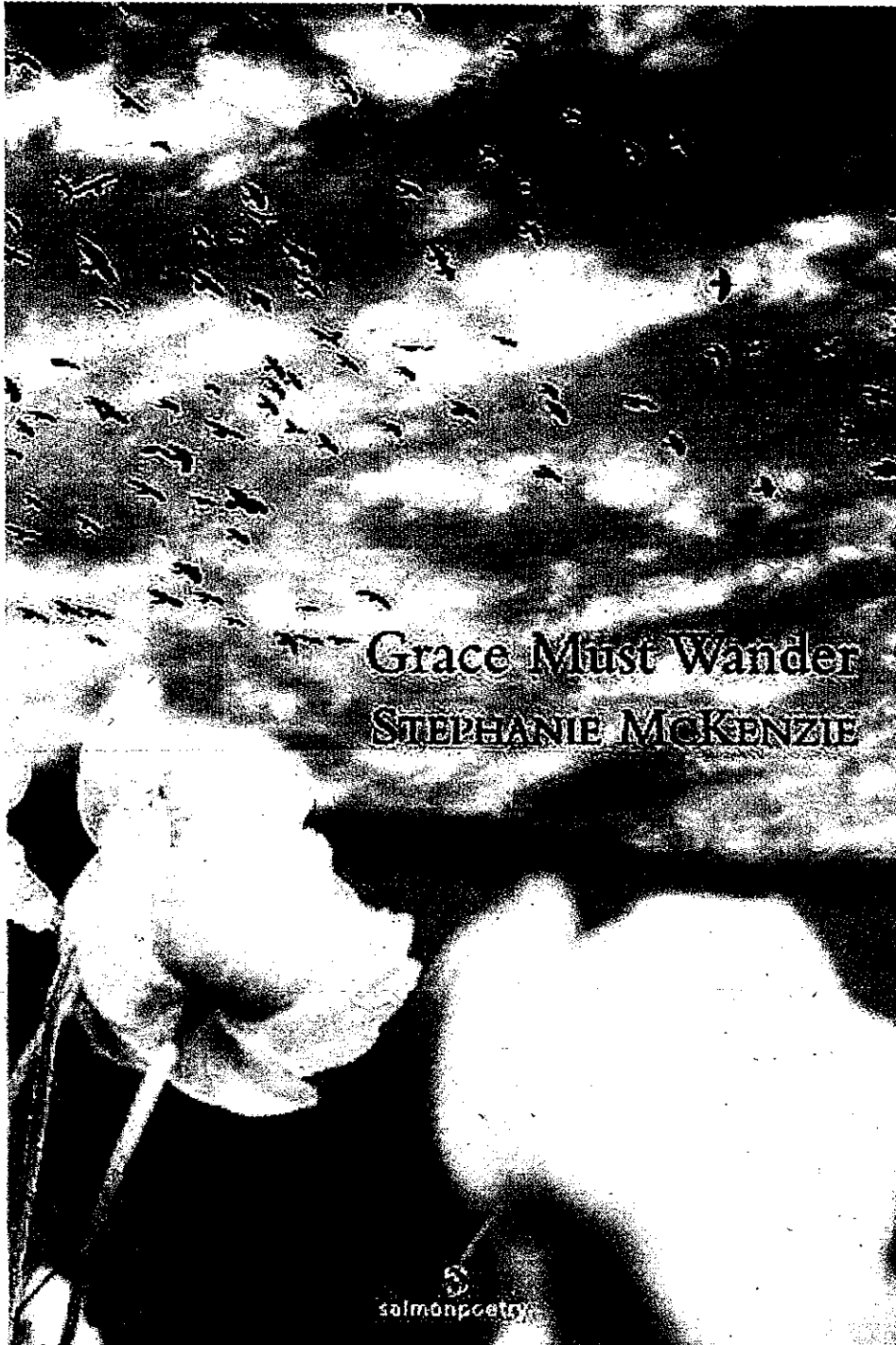
I shook you off before my dwelling. You were sludge  
by the top of the stairs, a glacial melt inside my door.  
I drew buckets of water from near frozen taps warmed  
soapy to scour the hardwood. I scrubbed your ears;  
they sparkled like salt on snow, your lobes gritty  
puddles in corners.

This carefully crafted poem is part of "Suite for Winter", a collection of 12 interlinked sonnets that illuminate the winter experience in the Canadian North. McKenzie writes in poem five, "The snow, my love, would never stay on your breath.

You'd hiccup gladiolas and as you walked the streets  
you'd scatter blues songs and parrots at the feet of the jealous winter walking. They would hear birds' voices mimicking private conversations. They would think you a god.

"Suite for Winter" is the main component of the opening section of this collection. It sets the tone of yearning and circumspection for the collection as a whole. There are six sections to the text with "The Van Gogh Poems" and "Lonely Dazed" (dedicated to Sylvia Plath) as the formidable centre of the collection. These are the strongest poems, presented with a kind of majesty in their great sympathy for the painter and the poet who did not, either of them, die of natural causes.

"The Van Gogh Poems" contain seven muscular poems that open with "Glosses for Theo: An Evangelist Among the Miners". Theo, the brother of the painter Vincent, supported and encouraged Van Gogh throughout his short life.



McKenzie writes:  
The hasbeens, junkies on the road to Damascus,  
lord  
how their hands bleed as they hit the ground  
sowing.  
Some call it withdrawal or a kind of weeping  
but it was the ecstatic flight of the mind that  
brought  
the tempest to Delacroix.

McKenzie's great love of art shines through in the most casual of references to the great painters. Later in the poem, she groans: "I'll be straight. I do not wish to die, nor does anyone. / But god, to have relief from things...". These moving asides are like breaths raked into the lungs in the midst of the poem. In the second Van Gogh poem, "Molting Time for Birds", she addresses Vincent and exhorts:  
Your beard is a small nest of pin feathers.  
Your jaw could lift off the face and soar.  
It has been four days, Lazarus, your tail

feathers tickling. Unlike other birds, though,  
you are alone.

And again, in "Wheat Field Under Thunderclouds", she speaks to the artist:  
Hardly under, the corn seconds away  
from storm. Your exhaustion, Vincent, grows.  
Like white tumors in sad blue each brushstroke  
spears faith, each colour a fist in the face  
of God. But yet you believe.

In a reflective tone, she concludes the section with "Death of a Friend" ("Death stands on a woodcut stage. / Though not yet done, we beg an encore.") From the second to last poem, "The Sower with Setting Sun", McKenzie ponders feelingly the meaning of this painting:  
We give pause to hearts of trees, arteries  
stuffed and cancered. Our sowing  
is mania, futile stab at deliverance.

The sun falls slowly into water.  
We cannot suffer the horizon to bend.

“ McKenzie is a Canadian who has spent time in Kingston, Jamaica, studying the trickster figure in Caribbean Literature as Louise Bennett Exchange Fellow for 1997 at the University of the West Indies. She presently lives and teaches in Newfoundland, which is also an island and bears many similarities to Jamaica in unusual ways...”

These powerful poems are balanced by the next section which pays tribute to Sylvia Plath. The title of the section, "Lonely Dazed", is taken from Alice Walker, "After the Shrink", "Without my melancholia I am lonely/ dazed...". It is a fitting title for poems about the incandescent poet who ended her own life so early. There are six poems in the section with three of them written directly to the poet. From "For Sylvia (1)", we get the eerily prescient lines:  
I say my prayers to bees now, their claws  
turned to honey, though gold and thick  
resting in any organ is a death march come  
too early and too late to heal with any balms  
the persistence of minds' drums beating,  
beating  
beating to a dug-out grave.

The section concludes with "Photograph of Sylvia Plath by Rollie McKenna" and the lines:  
"Your crown suggests the possibility of female/  
balding, but this is not an issue. / Dear Sylvia,  
there will not be time."  
McKenzie leaves us with a resolute return to the winter of the opening section of her text. Here we find the solace of the title expanded and offered up with simplicity and joy. From "The Disciples of Winter":  
Grace must wander even with the lonely sight of  
crows,  
the purple and the purple black, each one  
spotted  
like a snowflake, fingerprint. Birds sing of other  
worlds  
that are not grown here but happen somewhere  
out there  
in the land of blow away the dead make a wish  
we give to children.

Stephanie McKenzie is a poet, editor and professor. She holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Toronto where she specialised in Aboriginal literature in Canada. Her poetry reflects this interest. Her book of criticism, *Before the Country: Native Renaissance, Canadian Mythology*, was published in 2007, and her first collection of poems, *Cutting My Mother's Hair*, in 2006. She currently teaches at Memorial University and lives in Newfoundland, Canada.