

Winning Chance

by Katherine Koller
ENFIELD & WIZENTY
2019/\$21.95/192 PP.

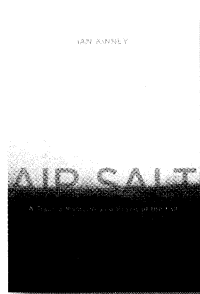
No part of Katherine Koller's *Winning Chance* is cynical. The 15 stories in this collection—the first from the Edmonton-based playwright and novelist—read more like the good-news piece at the end of a broadcast than the doom-and-gloom preceding it. You know the story, the one that radiates such human goodness it couldn't possibly be true, except it has to be—it happened right down the street.

You will not meet anti-heroes here. You will, however, meet do-gooders: women who take in rough-speaking young mothers and their babies (“Beloved by the Moon,” “The Return,” “Love, Janis”), a child who forges a friendship with an elderly woman and her handicapped son (“The Teeny Tiny Woman”), a husband and wife who, in the afterlife, become guardians of highway drivers (“M & M”). For better or for worse, *Winning Chance's* down-and-out are often personified opportunities for change.

All told, Koller's protagonists face no shortage of their own pain. Wounds of the past—unhappy marriages, deceased spouses and parents, miscarriages—make people hungry for connection and resolution in a way that feels true to life. This pain is resolved in transcendental moments of sentiment. In one story's ending, a couple repairs their fractured relationship by reflecting on a bird bath made from their broken dishes. In another, two women plant flowers together, healing the wounds of motherhood through a literal act of rebirth. We may consider these flourishes as testaments to the redeeming power of human connection—an antidote to the more cynical norms of contemporary literature. Or, given the privilege already afforded to these characters—often homeownership, white, straight—we may consider whether the grace they receive is truly groundbreaking. The collection's standout stories are those that complicate our ideas about who is deserving of a happy ending. “The Care & Feeding of Small Birds,” for example, believably captures the disarming aftermath of grief, laying bare the hurt we cause others when consumed by hurt of our own.

These stories punch above their realist, slice-of-life weights, thanks to Koller's specificity and description. She pays particular attention to evoking complex worlds of the home (“the salmon-pink room where sleek Sandra had steamed him in her hot tub, hand-fed him fruits he could not name”), and these domestic portraits linger long after the first read. It would be too easy to dismiss these stories as mere antidotes to cynicism. Instead, we might see them as a challenge to acknowledge that, yes, pain is a given in all lives, but hope and redemption are too. The ingredients for near-transcendent goodness, *Winning Chance* urges us to believe, all exist in life as we know it.

—Kate Black is a writer in Vancouver. She grew up in St. Albert.



Air Salt: A trauma mémoire as a result of the fall

by Ian Kinney
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY PRESS
2019/\$18.99/128 PP.

Ian Kinney's poetry is shattered. Or, in more literary terms, in *Air Salt* he uses disjunctive or cut up compositional methods, a non-linear form in keeping with an “accident” and its implications, as suggested in the subtitle.

Kinney, an Alberta poet, fell seven storeys from an apartment balcony, apparently under the influence of ingested mushrooms. The book is evidence that he, miraculously, survived. He has parsed his story in a way that captures how such an event scrambles, defies and reassembles much of life—body, logic, memory and even, for the memoirist, writing itself.

While this debut collection collects a series of discrete poems, it's really one long poem, as themes, images and phrases recur throughout. Amplifying and unsettling the reading experience are 29 illustrations that depict X-ray images, often showing orthopedic implants—body repair hardware—attached to joints and bones. These medical images are sometimes overlaid or underscored by poetic text.

Captions under the images “Fig 66F & G” sum up the compositional result: “The narrative may also contain amnesia... The amnesia may also contain narrative.” Beside the image of a foot with a metal bar through it, the poem “Consult to spine” narrates, primarily in medical-speak, most likely a nurse's report: “transfer to trauma unit as per dr. / confused but better than yesterday / extubate today. remove drain.”

The interjection of different elements—police and EMS reports, eyewitness comments, excerpts from emails or personal, hospital-room conversations, physiotherapy activity, the author's journals, and “neutral” found material from real-estate listings and hospital brochures—shifts the tone of the language and point of view. The patient/author is identified sometimes as “pt.” or “17(I),” and as “you,” “he” and “I.” He asks, “who is I?” “17(I) sketches // in precise // pain” and, “pt. continues to chatter. he hits the ground.” Moments of human connection are incised, adding emotional pull: “many hugs and we hope that you continue / to heal” or “we love you / you are very very ill” and “the curtains tighten // when she leaves.”

While Kinney's recombinant narrative is not a poetic norm, it is not without precedent among poet-experimenters. In *Air Salt* the disjunction aptly mirrors the content. In this context it is worth noting that Kinney has been shortlisted twice for the Robert Kroetsch Award for Innovative Poetry. The work's eccentricity invites rereading, which offers reward—new discovery, new pleasure and connections, and unnerving empathy with the poet, his traumatic fall and the result of his attempt, touched on in the title poem, to “imitate // the sky.”

—Steven Ross Smith is Banff's 2018–2020 poet laureate.