

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE—Greg McBride

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 Reviewed by Annie Clarkson, Jon Stone and Stephen Payne

Annie Clarkson: *Back of the Envelope* is an A5 pamphlet, with illustrated colour cover, and a neat stapled-design. Broadly speaking, the poems explore three periods in the poet's life: early years growing up in various countries in a military family; the poet's experiences as a medical photographer in Vietnam; and poems about growing older with his wife.

The first few are more narrative poems, and seemed to me disappointingly flat with their insistent prosaic sentences. There is nothing wrong with 'stories' about childhood, but it is difficult to write them with originality. 'First Rites' stood out as the best of these early life poems: the 'billow' of the girl's dress and the 'filtered light' give a vivid image of the scene and the naivety of the boy beneath her skirts is well-captured. But others skipped past me without significance and it felt as though there were too many words, not enough to read between the lines.

There is such a different feel to McBride's poems about Vietnam. 'In Country: Day One' grabs the reader's attention in the second line with the words 'suicide seat'. We are given immediate insight into the poet's first day in Vietnam with a rich sway of sensory details: 'mud-scarred jeep', 'the smog of egg fried rolls', 'cyclos spat/ their two-cycled rasp'. It is a little heavy on simile, but the emotional impact is strong. Everything can be sensed by the reader, and it is fresh, as though only just experienced by the poet.

Other strong poems follow—including 'On Tu Do Street', and 'The Operating Room'. The latter gives outstanding poetic insight into an aspect of the war in Vietnam. There were strikingly horrific lines here:

Like a half eaten pomegranate, left for sniffing dogs, the boy lies open in Da Nang
 There is the expected gore, not from the front line, but through the lens of a camera in the O.R., where surgical teams are trying to piece a body back together with the 'unmouthed hope/ he'll die'.

After other intense pieces, the last pages of *Back of the Envelope* have a surprising tenderness. There is intimate focus on 'I' and 'you' and 'us', as the poet explores his relationship with his wife. These poems are beautifully observed:

Her good leg drags the bad across the kitchen's hardwood floor the way a jazz brush slurs a snare drum's skin.

There is a sense of quiet reflection, but also a fear of diminishing, a remembering of violence, almost as if these quieter, more mature poems have been steeped in blood from the past.

Jon Stone: When reading a collection like this, I'm reminded of Rilke in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* asserting that a poet needs to 'wait and gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime' and then, at the very end, you might perhaps be able to write ten good lines.

While increasing numbers of poets are publishing in their twenties, Greg McBride has waited until his autumn years to cast an eye back over the whole span of his life and produce this slim volume, in which the poems appear in roughly chronological order. As his bio states, 'his four years of military service included one as an Army photographer in the Vietnam War' and it's no surprise that armed conflict casts its shadow over most of this collection, right from opener 'The Occupation' through to the final lines where 'the brittle silence/ of our bed will not be defeated'. By contrast, we hear very little of his thirty years as a lawyer.

It's not war poetry in the same vein as Owen and co. though. While theirs was coloured by the immediacy and chaos of battle, McBride is very much Rilke's man, sorting through memories, forgetting them when they are too many and recalling those that can no longer be distinguished from what he has become. Pieces like 'The Operating Room' and 'In Country: Day One' impress upon us how some experiences score themselves indelibly into the memory, helped by clear, strong imagery:

Like a half-eaten pomegranate left for sniffing dogs, the boy lies open in Da Nang . . .
 And sometimes obsessive detail:

The photographer . . . nearly breaches the sterile field sliding his 16-millimeter Arriflex from the thoracic to the maxillo-facial . . .

If 'Dulce et Decorum Est' conveys an experience of war as events unfold, McBride's work captures the re-experience, the flashback. Elsewhere, he ruminates on more recent conflict, using similar motifs to tie it into his own time served, noting 'How heavy still,/ the freight of memory.' The title poem, meanwhile, has him meticulously arranging the minutiae of his remaining future in the same way these poems carefully order and frame his past into the space afforded by the page.

However, the cover design of the pamphlet is, to say the least, amateurish. How do you frame a title like *Back of the Envelope*? That's right—put it on the back of a cartoon envelope. And the accompanying photograph, though it has the ring of authenticity as one of McBride's own, is a bit of a 'Nam cliché. Both it and the blurb on the back cover have been bordered with an unconvincing burnt paper effect.

The team behind this publication need to reconsider their design strategy to achieve a more professional look.

Stephen Payne:Greg McBride is a poet who has lived an interesting life, and he writes about it winningly. The poems describe a military childhood in nineteen-fifties America and occupied Japan and a tour of duty as an army photographer in Vietnam, as well as some of the author's more recent, more mundane domestic concerns. The voice throughout is conversational and relaxed, even in the few poems that employ metre and rhyme. The poems are studded with grabbing images and expressions, a diction that seems fresh and slightly surprising without ever trying too hard. The syntax is similarly impressive—particularly the way that rather long sentences are unrolled so naturally.

Here is how 'Backseat Passenger' begins:

The spacious backseat of the '48 Plymouth was upholstered in new-musty muslin with a shiny leather panel where I parked the heels of my Buster Browns.

And here is a similar scene (from 'In Country: Day One'), the narrator now an adult in Vietnam:

Duffel bag stuffed in the back, he bounced down Cong Ly on the suicide seat. The sergeant crowed they'd stolen the mud-scarred jeep the night before on a whorehouse street in Cholon.

These short extracts show, I hope, the effortless tone and syntax, the interestingness of scene and vocabulary. Perhaps the rather ragged, mid-phrase line-breaks ('parked/ the heels', 'night/ before') contribute to the informality and add to the forward momentum.

But here's the thing—I feel I could have chosen almost any brief extracts to the same effect. The poems are engaging throughout, and this is an impressive collection.