

BOOKS

## Mild cleverness and wit fail to resuscitate

**Traumatology**

Priscila Uppal

Exile Editions; 2010.

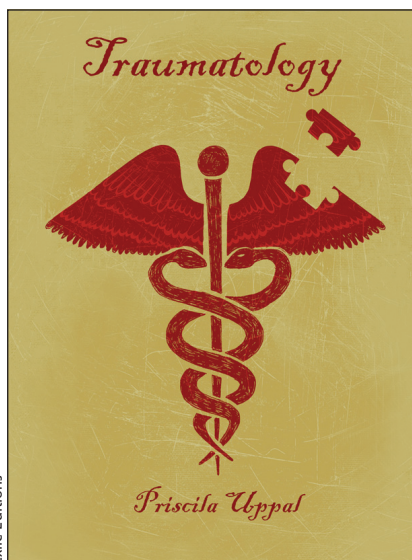
Priscila Uppal's seventh book of poetry, *Traumatology*, contains poems that revolve around clevernesses: each poem has something to do with medicine or health, either peripherally or centrally. But medicine is not essential to the trick each poem attempts. There is always a single idea behind each poem, a thought-engine on which each poem succeeds or fails. For example, "My Stomach Files a Lawsuit" is exactly as billed: Uppal's internal organs rebel against her and her stomach does indeed fulfill the expectations of the title. Yet the poems mostly sag because this mild cleverness is the excuse for the poem, rather than the higher purpose. "Training" is an example: Where is the cavalcade of sound, the crash and bang, the poetry, in the following?

Mostly I feel sorry and resentful.  
I change my will every two or three weeks.

I don't want a street named after me.  
Or even a bench.

I want your body. To jack up  
your ribcage and suck the air right  
out of you.

It will probably take the rest of my  
resilience  
to finish such training.



Uppal is making a comment about dying tethered to the idea of love, but the expression is so flat, that the idea behind the poem dies. There's nothing linguistically adventurous, just a stock "I want your body" and a vague "resilience" abstract noun gesture.

But all is not lost. "Spell for Relieving Migraines" is a short little prayer to the god of pain and its strength is duplicated in the other short poems in the book. And the longer works can have an interesting line or two. "Think Outside the Circle" turns a cliché on its ear: "Boxes everybody's busy thinking outside of,/ I'm wondering what's inside you no one wants." This is an instance when Uppal's wit serves her. But in other cases wit isn't enough to resuscitate the work, as is evidenced with these few lines from "10 Ways to Destroy Love."

Encourage love to develop interesting hobbies, like taxidermy or juggling ...

Take love and surf the internet. That love will click on other loves and those loves will click on other loves and those loves will click on other loves and then they'll all lose their shirts at blackjack.

The absurdist touches are the only other flourishes her poetry has, and outside of this method, things can really break down. Consider this line from "Now that All my Friends are Having Babies: A Thirties Lament:" "My breath stops, my ears tingle, the backs of my knees go cold as ice." This is underwhelming cliché, coming as it does from a Griffin nominee (2007 for *Ontological Necessities*).

Sometimes there is unintentional hilarity. Uppal in one poem asks her dead uncle, "Why don't you take out the garbage?" Fatally unserious, blending consequence and the inconsequential into a ridiculous mix, Uppal asks in another poem, "Do I want a divorce or Spanish lessons?" As a reader, I'll answer this question with the lines from one of her own poems: "Uncorked, the guilty pleasure/ of indulgence seems endless./ However, after one glass.../ quite frankly,/ I've had enough."

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DOI:10.1503/cmaj.100523