Clarion Review

Surface Tension: and Other Poems
David J. Murray
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Two Stars (out of Five)

Surface Tension tackles that greatest of mysteries: the male—female relationship. Only a former professor of psychology would have the guts to openly acknowledge such a project. True most poets can't avoid the subject of love but it is safe to say that many would like to. Unfortunately David J. Murray's collection of poems is undermined by the all-too-human fear of being misunderstood. He explains in his foreword that "surface tension" is a metaphor for the distance between peoples' thoughts and their actions and this concept is demonstrated repeatedly.

In the first section thirty-one poems pair a man's musings on nature with a couple's dialogue. Wisely Murray puts the strongest poem first; "Vibrations" illustrates the potential of this philosopher-poet. In the tradition of the Romantics he finds parallels to human concerns in nature: "The large images rise the coloured landscapes / The faces we sought to love but ended in leaving." Under the pressure to repeat this formula the poems that follow become more abstract as well as polysyllabic.

Murray is at his best when he lets his guard down. Confident that he has made his point the last section of *Surface Tension* does not have an agenda. Rather it is a collection of miscellaneous poems. "Skull" opens the section with the memorable image of encountering "a bowl / Of copper beaten round a skull." Many of these misfit poems are similarly charming such as "Old Age and the Muse." If most of the poems in *Surface Tension* feel strangled by intent these last are allowed to play. Presumably the poems of this collection do not appear in the order in which they were written. However there is a certain progression from stubbornness—making poems bend to an idea—to flexibility—trusting the muse. "Old Age and the Muse" concludes that the muses are "Capturing in words a child-like trust / That never could be captured by a youth."

Murray is comfortable in a variety of writing styles from ballad stanzas and sonnets to free verse. As a retired professor of psychology he has both the knowledge and presumably the time to find his own style. This is only his second collection and many poets before Murray

have taken longer to write great poems. Of course the simpler solution is to find a trusted editor. *Surface Tension* is three times the length of many collections of poems. The fifty best poems would make a respectable book.