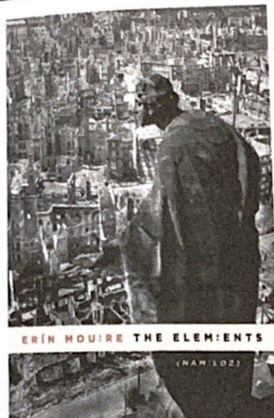
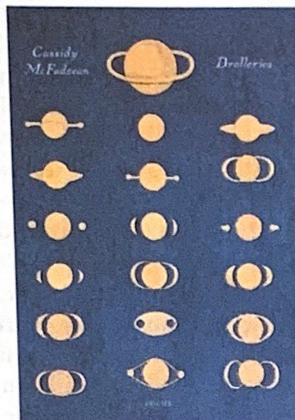
TO NAME A FEW

ANDREAE CALLANAN



The Elements
by Erín Moure
House of Anansi Press, 120 pages.



Drolleries
Cassidy McFadzean
McClelland & Stewart, 84 pages.

In Erín Moure's new collection, *The Elements*, a concept called "Namloz" appears as a philosophical ("Derridean, you disdreamers") notion of namelessness, of ineffability. How does a poet grapple with the unnameable? Moure's book is dedicated to the many-named "Pop, Dad, Paw, Papy, Papai: William Benito Moure," the poet's father, who died in 2013. Through *The Elements* we get glimpses of William Benito, "known as Bill," as he is absorbed into increasing dementia, more and more at odds with memory, language, and naming.

Moure isn't the first Canadian poet to walk us through the experience of dealing with a parent's dementia; Lynn Crosbie's *The Corpses of the Future* and Agnes Walsh's *Oderin* both emerged over the last two years from similar life transitions. But Moure's forty-year career of inquiry into the nature of language and her accomplishments as a translator and polyglot allow her to immerse the reader in her father's world in a palpable way. Moure confuses us by moving between historical prose and lyric verse, between French and English and Galician, between the so-called "old" and "new" worlds; she lists names and nicknames of her father's European ancestors with the urgency of someone "[t]rying to get the words out of the head fast as possible before they vanish." The poems make us second-guess our memories by repeating entire phrases ("concentration on a smell of ink + feckless disobedience" is one such), sometimes in more than one language, giving us the sense that we've heard this before but we can't put our finger on exactly where. The effect is disquieting, sometimes alienating, and, given the context, heart-rending.

The collection's shifts in language and form can be flummoxing. *The Elements* isn't a book to be consumed in one quick sitting; in fact, it demands to be reread. There's a great deal of flipping back and forth to be done, and moments where a reader without a knowledge of French or Galician has no way forward but to surrender to the syllables and let the language work on a level beyond the cognitive. This, too, has value, and is especially poignant in a book that centres the acquisition and loss of words and names.

Despite the *The Elements*' occasional opacity—or, perhaps, to lure us through it—Moure's wit and her eye for the beautiful infuse the poems. There are flares of humour throughout (one poem is titled "Ayam Wotayam"; another relates a dream of being in a band called Noise Vulvas), and bursts of exquisite imagery ("Cheer me on! / My mother's blue anorak on my back and chest / soul-bright as a scapular."). *The Elements* asks a lot of its reader, but the collection is intensely rewarding, tender, and humane as it attempts to name the unnameable, to bear the unbearable.

Cassidy McFadzean's sophomore collection, *Drolleries*, is a serendipitous companion to Moure's newest offering. While Moure's father's crisis of memory brings us on a trip into Galician history, McFadzean leads us through the museums of Europe as we watch a marriage hit its crisis point. Rings appear over and over in the poems, as do tarot readings, superstitions, and prophetic dreams. A "gold-leaf laurel necklace" is bought in a museum and has lost its lustre several poems later. The Christ child comes to life, and so do paintings by Goya, Bosch, and Velásquez.

The collection's title refers to grotesques, medieval manuscript illustrations depicting part-human, part animal beings; and indeed, *Drolleries* is populated by comparable monstrosities. McFadzean draws on myth and lore from classical antiquity and from the European Middle Ages, and while this is hardly new ground for a poet, the collection's success comes in part from its drollery, that is, its dry self-reflexivity. Lines like "if my father figures stop trying / to fuck me, will I still have daddy issues?" and "Now my computer's haunted, / a MacBook-of-the-dead," juxtaposed against McFadzean's more mythological motifs, make something new of old inspiration.

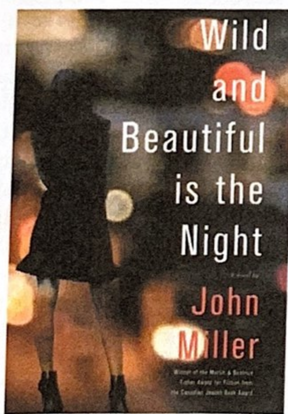
Perhaps McFadzean's most ambitious making-new is her reclamation of the unicorn in a lengthy poem called "The Unicorn Tapestries." It's a risky creature to take on, inundated as we have been of late by innumerable unicorn-themed stickers, pastel temporary tattoos, and sparkly

knick-knacks. But the unicorn, too, is a monstrosity, a fierce and nearly untameable beast, one that's been rendered inert by contemporary cute-ification. McFadzean's unicorn resists capture, "gores a hound as it / kicks a hunter." The beast is subdued by force, but not without a fight.

There's a lushness in *Drolleries*, an opulence; even the shortest lyrical pieces are dense with detail. Sometimes the collection's tone turns nearly documentary, illuminating minutiae with an art historian's fervour. If McFadzean's catalogues and descriptions occasionally veer toward the extravagant, it's not due to a lack of self-control (the poems are, in fact, admirably precise and restrained). Rather, McFadzean seems to want to demonstrate the difficulty of packing the too-much-ness of it all—the feelings, the grief, the regret, the terrible beauty—into easily digestible pieces. The poems strain at their seams, larger than life, their beasts threatening escape. Like *The Elements*, *Drolleries* is a collection to read many times over. ♛

BIAS CUT

PAIGE COOPER



Wild and Beautiful is the Night
by John Miller
Cormorant Books, 296 pages.

The most inviolable cliché of writing sex work is that the published product must always be accompanied by an image of a faceless woman in heels. While John Miller's newest novel—*Wild and Beautiful is the Night*—certainly has the cover of a *Pretty Woman* novelization, the book is so ambitiously and fastidiously empathetic in its execution that I almost took the cover image in the snide spirit of the art on Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. In other words, as a warning that your biases are cute but that they're not this book's problem.

As often happens when men write about sex work, the author's primary concern is moral. In this case, though, Miller is preoccupied with the ambiguities of appropriation. From the first few pages, as our narrator, Paulette, weighs how best to relay both her experience and her friend Danni's—tell it straight? or rabbit around like Danni herself would?—Miller is cautious and self-aware. His acknowledgements detail extensive research, and a recent column in the *Globe and Mail* (entitled "How far will writers go for our craft—and at what cost?") eulogizes the former colleague who granted him several interviews, knowing he'd use her experiences as material.

"Using" is the word writers say when they've struck oil. "I'm using that." "Can I use that?" We are capable of using other people's pain like painters use paint. Here, it has other connotations. Both of its main characters are street-based sex workers managing crack addictions. Any one of the book's plot points—poverty, homelessness, jail, rehab, relapse, assault, single motherhood, abortion, HIV—could fuel most Canadian novels for three hundred pages. Paulette, whose parents were Jamaican immigrants, is gay, and lost her first daughter to Children's Aid years before the story starts. Her friend Danni is an upper-middle-class Jewish girl with a degree in women's studies and a pill habit stemming from childhood sexual abuse. You see how the question of appropriation becomes inevitable; where, exactly, is the line between bearing witness and pain tourism?

Miller is a goal-oriented novelist, moving cleanly through five years of emotional and environmental extremes most of his readers will never face—and nary a confusing tense change, despite Paulette's early anxieties. He doesn't indulge in showy line work or poetic obfuscation. All the usual scuffs that mark a novelist's ego are effaced. Even the occasional slip towards homily—Danni on not disclosing her HIV-positive status to her clients: "I gave them three clear reminders about condoms. Are we their fucking mothers? Are we the fucking health department?"—is a canny rendering of politicized minds, rather than pedantry at their expense. At times I wasn't sure where the satisfaction even comes from for Miller: he seems to barely exist in his own work. He's so self-restrained that the book could read like an act of service to atone for the temerity of having written it. I'm moved by this humility.

The day before I began work on this review, sex-work Twitter was raging: a teachers' conference in Calgary had hired a recovered addict named Andrew Evans to share his "message of hope." In 2006, Evans was high and drunk when he strangled Nicole Parisien to death because he was unable to get an erection. He spent seven years in jail for killing her. When local media outlets questioned the choice of speaker, conference organizers doubled down (teachers are critical thinkers). The next day, national papers picked up the story, and the organizers cancelled Evans and his honorarium. I mention this because when men who murder a certain type of people are consequently invited and paid to tell the story, questions of appropriation go from shrill to siren.

Writing in *Room*, Alicia Elliott recently proposed a basic guideline for writers worried about appropriation—she was referring specifically to settler portrayals of Indigenous people, but it applies here: