



## In Lieu of Scratching & Sniffing at Art

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Chances are that if you are reading this, you probably are already a reader of poetry. If this is the case, then maybe you stop reading this review and get a copy of Peter van de Kamp's *Scratch & Sniff* and read that instead. Actually, even if you are not a reader of poetry, become one, and get van de Kamp's work. I write the above because I am not sure that poetry, art in general, and here I hear the echo of Wordsworth's "We murder to dissect" from "The Tables Turned," should be reviewed, and I am even less certain as to whether or not it should be reviewed by me. However, when Jeremy Fernando asked if I would be interested in writing a review for *Scratch & Sniff*, I felt obligated to my friend and colleague; I also saw it as an opportunity to face the challenge of writing a review; something which I had so far been able to purposefully avoid in my career. Now Jeremy owes me at least a few drinks because at the end of his forward to the book, I discovered that he set me up: first by quoting Jean Baudrillard, "the poem lacks nothing: any commentary makes it worse," and then by extricating himself with "so before I continue to make it worse, and expose myself thoroughly, I shall stop, and plunge myself into the poems." What follows is my attempt to comment on Peter van de Kamp's work without dissecting it, murdering it, or diminishing your experience of it.

*Scratch & Sniff* is not a collection of scattered, isolated poems, although each poem is created with a deftness that allows it to stand alone as an individual piece; it is a single work of art, of poetic fiction/non-fiction, with evident characters, motifs, tropes, and threads tying the work together. When each piece is read in reference to each other piece, there is a deepening of context, of intensity. I am not going to talk about rhyme, rhythm, meter, of poetics, or of aesthetics, except to say that van de Kamp is *zurui*, a Japanese word, here used in a complementary way, for cunning, tricky. He knows what he is doing at every instant: nothing is left to chance in his endeavor to communicate to the reader common human sentiments, which are so often neglected, hidden in the thick haze of dulled emotion and thought that surviving everyday life induces, and van de Kamp does this without ever sinking into sentimental shallowness. The author, with various narrators as vehicles, is communicating something; whether he is playing with us or straight, whether we are duped or not, or mistaken, or confused, none of this is overly relevant. Poignant things are being communicated. Van de Kamp the poet initiates releases because he hits upon affinities of what it is to be human. All I can state is what I think might be being communicated to me, and only at this point in time because at each new reading of a piece within *Scratch & Sniff* there is a shift, a slide, sometimes massive, sometimes subtle – almost imperceptible, and it is always based upon me, for the words on the page remain the same, only their meanings change with my changes.

I have not really said anything about *Scratch & Sniff*, but then I might have said everything that should be said: it is a work about hope, loss, uncertainty, confusion, sureness; it is about thinking you know, then not knowing, then saying, *ah screw it, just keep going, experiencing, encountering pleasure along with pain*. There is never regret in *Scratch & Sniff*, but there is remorse at the lack of permanence of people, dogs, things of life that are loved. Traveling back and forth across the landscapes/dreamscapes presented in the work, I find myself conscious of senses of loss, both past and impending. There is a longing for life to not slip away: a sense of mourning for impending losses; a desire, well known that it will never be satisfied, to maintain life, to relive life, yet there is always hope coupled with the acceptance that life is continually moving, ebbing away. And this hope is always bloated with love: for dog, mother, lovers, for life, for the emotional and physical connections that define, that constitute one's existence. The feelings are personal yet universal: anything happening in the world, no matter how tragic and wide-spread, is nothing to the individual wrapped in the mourning or the joy elicited by those who are loved. Yet the poet pulls no punches, faces what will occur, with sadness, with strength, with playfulness, and with reverie, for what else is one to do.

*Scratch & Sniff* is a work of art from cover to cover, and as such it can be seen as a collaborative effort. Obviously, Peter van de Kamp's poems are the heart and soul. However, the cover design, layout, and the illustrations by Sara Chong and Yanyun Chen, the forward by Jeremy Fernando, and afterward by editor Lim Lee Ching are all pregnant with van de Kamp: he has served as their muse. Just as Fernando and Lim, verbally in a warm yet highly intellectual manner, react to and comment on the work of

the poet, Chong and Chen, with their imagination and talent, complement this work of art by sharing their reactions through their striking, vivid illustrations. This cooperative effort strengthens the whole of the book, for it guides the reader to deeper introspection, fosters a questioning within the reader that leads them back to what is so often lost: the living of life. The reader can garner further insight into the poet, van de Kamp, and the poems by reading through the notes at the end, *Vibes*. One will discover just how knowledgeable and dexterous a poet van de Kamp is. The reader will come to appreciate the years of study, the fine tuning of technique, the meticulousness of construction; however, the reader does not need this awareness in order to be affected by this work of art, she or he merely needs to enter van de Kamp's world and listen to him as he calls:

*Now let us go.  
And then I'll sing  
For you, solo,  
Of every blooming thing.  
O.k?*

My advice to you, is to just say yes.

### **Works Cited**

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*. Translated by Chris Turner. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005.

Van de Kamp, Peter. *Scratch & Sniff*. Edited by Lim Lee Ching. New York: Atropos Press, 2010.

Wordsworth, William. "The Tables Turned," in *Lyrical Ballads*, 179

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