

Reviews: Poetry

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REVIEWS — POETRY

Enos Watts. *Spaces Between the Trees*. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2005, ISBN 1-894463-85-4

IN THIS LATEST collection of poems by Enos Watts, the contemplation of death is a main theme. Death is an idea that most of us either avoid or else entertain only at the last possible moment but, paradoxically, I think, are often pleased to have someone else reflect on it for us. The one who most often does so is a poet; and this is a well-worked (perhaps inexhaustible) subject of poetry. Needless to say, it's a good one.

In a series of seven poems on his mother's death, Watts conveys his awareness of nature simultaneously with the intensity of his feelings at the time. The following lines are excerpted from the first in the series, "Without a Wind's Madness":

Two days past solstice:
slow windless snow,
building since midday
ceaseless and unremitting
as the lungs' foam
in her throat

...

The driver leading
I struggled with the stretcher
on the slope; my father
held her hand,
brushed the night's white
from her maiden's hair

...

I laboured mightily
with words
like an errant child
seeking the freedom of knowing
all was forgiven

If the tone of many of these is frank suffering, the tone of the whole volume is melancholy, worried and, at times, downcast. A poem called “And Old Men Shall Dream” uses the metaphor of dream beachcombing to explore the conclusion of life; what the beachcomber finds is not to his liking: “for dreamstorm or dreamswell / spills into my first waking moments / to ruin all the good hours, / scattering the wrack of the past / on my dwindling days.”

The above poems, based in profound personal experience, are among the most affecting. In these, the language and ideas are successful, and additionally, there is often some symbolism or obliqueness of exploration that heightens effect.

I liked the poem, “Junipers,” “the platypus of trees,” for its philosophical turn. Watts uses the peculiarity of the tree’s having needles and yet shedding them to suggest that the world, in its vast physical reality, is greater than anyone’s dreams ever could be. He throws in his lot with this odd tree, in preference to its “aristocratic neighbours.” The book cover shows one in silhouette in winter, I think.

I also liked the poem “Remembering Mosey Murin,” both for its vivid, sympathetic portrait of a village bum, and for its faint and irregular use of rhyme, which adds to the mood: “We called him vagrant, beggar, bum / Strange, but he was / all of these — / and none / Nor was he dissolute: he claimed / what was thrown away / Out of grids of garbage cans / he mapped his days.”

There were portions of the collection that seemed to me to fall flat; and there were lines (in one case, an entire poem) that I failed to understand. The poem “Billy” is an effort to describe the agony of a deranged boy, but it seems to offer no more than a sort of forced emotional imagining.

Others, on subjects more remote from the poet (“Beirut Roulette,” “The Grandmothers of Argentina,” for example) are well-written and valid reflections, but without the impact of something profoundly felt.

A poem called “The Disco Dancer” concludes with a line which is the title of the book; and this happens to be one of the lines I didn’t get. Watts rightly tells us in the beginning of the poem not to pity her for saying she’ll rejoin her ballet troop in September, but rather to realize that she is entitled to a few lies. Then, at the end, he refers to “the chrysalid slumber / of those winged / things uncompleted / the spaces between the trees.”

There are some line-breaks and punctuation that one might quarrel with (Watts has such an aversion to the period that there are only a few in the entire collection, and they fall as lonely dots between verses, never at the ends of lines), but these eccentricities are easy to ignore in what is a well-considered work.

It is one of Watts’s virtues, and perhaps a necessary condition for being a poet, that he has an unusual perspective, so there are bound to be occasions when a reader

fails to resonate perfectly with his ideas. On the other hand, when one does resonate, the result is a satisfying enhancement of feeling or perspective on a significant subject matter.

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Alastair Macdonald. *If More Winters, or this the Last*. St. John's: Breakwater, 2003, ISBN 1-55081-205-X

This is mine. A melancholy season,
visited by spectral gleams, and shadows
angled over ground. (“The Freedoms”)

THE TITLE OF Alastair Macdonald's seventh book of poetry *If More Winters, or this the Last* comes, as the epigraph on the title page indicates, from one of Horace's most famous and quotable odes: “Ask not ... what end the gods have set for you.... How much better to endure whatever comes, whether Jupiter grants us additional winters or whether this is our last.... Be wise, strain the wine; and since life is brief, prune back far-reaching hopes! Even while we speak, envious time has passed: pluck the day, putting as little trust as possible in tomorrow!” Responses to Horace's admonitions reverberate throughout Macdonald's collection: In “English June” the poet notes, “we cannot seize / and hold / such days” for they are “Gone / so soon / ungrasped: / short-lived / as the bloom / and life.”

A slim volume of 41 poems, *If More Winters* can be slipped comfortably into pocket or backpack to be pulled out and the poems pondered on early morning walks or evening rambles. The cover photograph by Carola Kern, an image of brilliant, crimson berries heralding spring's inevitable return while still held in winter's snowy grip, conveys the collection's central tension: death's certainty and the world's “primal pull.” In contrast to the colorful cover, a vertical black and white detail of berries and branches on the title and contents pages lends to the volume an air of tenuous fragility, as visually it evokes the lovely delicacy of a Japanese *kanji*. And, indeed, with their juxtaposition of “seasons contrary” and their “moments of intense perception,” several poems in this collection (“Looking Out,” “Out of the Wind,” and “Otherwhere”) echo the Zen-like sensibility of a Matsuo Bashō haiku: “The wind of autumn / is sharp in the chestnut tree, / yet its burrs are green” and “No one walks this road / on which I travel, on which / autumn darkness falls.” What is not necessary has been stripped away; and only the essential remains as in the taut and precisely beautiful description of a “concert / ... Postponed / because of weather” (“Visiting Orchestra”).

“[N]ow passed the blossoming” and nearing that “stage before death” marked by the loss of family, friends, and lovers, the speaker in several of these “melan-

choly” poems (“The Freedoms” and “Outlasting”) is keenly cognizant of his own loneliness and looming mortality: “Now is the time of life / when, as it seems, all about us leave.” In “Keine Lazarovitch, 1870-1959,” a passionate tribute to his “fierce” and beautiful mother, Montreal poet Irving Layton cursed “the inescapable lousiness of growing old.” In “Leaving” Macdonald mourns not the loss of close relations or “the body’s beauty” but the deaths of those whose “thereness in our lives / was casual, but constant.” In their wake it is the living, not the dead, that are bereft: “In their going they have taken / something of us. We’re diminished, / left with, as substitute, that core / of self, which they’d enlarged, shrunken in sadness, stale, / deprived of that larger air / of empathy, companionship.” While Macdonald continues to explore themes present in earlier volumes (time’s passing, life’s mysteries, childhood’s pleasures, nature’s powers), here he brings a new and sadder note: as we grow old and the fires of youth die down, we may lose “our capacity to feel.” And to feel is to connect.

Other poems consider from a more hopeful perspective the changes wrought by time. In “The Sideboard” the persona watches as a family heirloom, a Victorian sideboard “[t]oo large / for the straitened order,” is dismantled and loaded on a dealer’s van: “As people passed or sat, / in a long looking-glass / which backed its surface board, / it held the moving glimpses / of their forms and hopes, / indifferent to the mirrorings it made, / reflections, shadows, all / that we have been; / witnessed my people and their dreams, / and me and mine.” Though his own family dinners and celebrations have come to an end, he takes comfort in knowing that the sideboard’s mirror will reflect the faces of future families, that the sideboard will “start / to live again and serve / for yet a century or more / households I shall not know.”

Aging is not all doom and gloom. “Set Free” views retirement as a “release / from clocking traded hours / in a certain spot: constraint, *ipso facto* sentence, / to do what we do for hire.” Freed from the constraints associated with his public, civil self, the persona finally has time to explore his private, perhaps unsanctioned self. But that freedom is complicated by “people / no longer here” to share this stage of his life and by his own diminished dreams. The poem ends with a brooding reference to a funeral pyre. In “The Freedoms” the theme of freedom is explored more fully when he asks, “can we ever be really free, as / prisoners of our own imposed demands / upon the self, a lifetime long, induced / by ambition, social pressures, custom, / fear and hope.” While society is described as a “prison” of prescribed roles and restraints, the persona concludes that “freedom from the self / securest of all cages which enclose” is the only freedom worth achieving.

The passing of time has its humorous side in “À La Mod(e) 1976 Or So,” a playful tribute to the 70s generation with its sexual revolution, its hair fetish and obsession with youth: “Last decade’s / long-haired boys / start middle age. / Long / clung to / still, in side-slab / compromise / or worse. / Hair, and much / of it,

that swung / with gloss, / proud well-hung / bounce, / dry now and coarse.” A gentler response to time and human foibles is expressed in “Do Not Laugh”:

From now’s knowing
 in these after years
 should we not weep
 we smile,
 as if this understanding now
 were fixed, highest
 to be achieved
 by which to judge our then.

But do not laugh
 at what we were.
 Of our now’s insight this
 the latest proud evolvment too
 may scoff
 itself away.

Folly is not reserved for the young. “The Rounds,” a long dramatic poem, describes a group of “mostly middle-aged / and older, even old” walkers who regularly exercise in a city park: “round / and round the walkers pace, to court / their health, to find it if mislaid, / if not to tone, to slim, to glow / with that desirability / we are exhorted to achieve.” Caught up in our culture’s obsession with “longevity,” the persona, an observer/participant in the daily ritual, views his fellow-walkers and himself as a comic cast of characters: “In movement each displays / a quality which can be named, / in caricature or travesty / conferred on them by cynic mind, / which paces too.” No matter how fast or how frequently they walk, marching side by side is death’s grim specter decked out in many guises: “infirmities / we would not meet,” “ills, as if from garden bowers, / for some of them have names like flowers,” “diseases, grave and small. / Sometimes we think we have them all.” With dark humour, the poet lists in rhyming couplets the myriad of ills which stalk the walkers.

My favourite poem in the collection is the sensual, sophisticated “Otherwhere” with its lovely rhythms and rich, linguistic wordplay. In *Art of Poetry* Horace had this to say about poetic language: “In addition to using taste and care in arranging words,” he counselled the poet, “you will express yourself most effectively if you give novelty to a familiar word by means of a skillful setting. If you have to use new terms for out-of-the-way things, you then have a chance to coin words unheard of ... and you will be allowed the licence of doing this if you do it moderately.” I suspect, despite his call for moderation, Horace would approve of “Otherwhere”’s exuberant, epithetic compounds:

And I made a journey, shortfar
by plane to another land with spring
already there, earlybroken
only into white and yellow
flowerthings, on twigs barish still, and
netted brown on eggblue skyshell,
or grass of green in lane and pasture:
almond, mimosa, pearflower, dotted
like starshake in sky's winter....

I sojourned a few days only
in a spring poised then for its bursting,
its brangchirp and dazzlebreak.

Coining new words, the poet captures the heightened sense of “other states / of being, the whirling herethere / of divided worlds” experienced frequently by travelers who move between different time zones. Such liberating, mind-expanding journeys as the poet describes serve to remind us of the existence of other “people, lives, in otherwheres / we’re separated from, so that / heartreal in far may bleed the now-here.” Somewhat reminiscent of the best of e.e. cummings, “Otherwhere” allows the reader momentarily to glimpse those other realms.

The collection concludes appropriately with the haunting, hopeful, anticipatory lyric “Rencontre” (a French term for a meeting, a discovery or coincidence), where death is imaged as a mysterious “figure / looming towards you.” During past encounters with the unknown, what lingered beyond the darkness (a “face / though familiar ... / a blank as grey paper / waiting for lines / to be drawn”) was a riddle for the persona to ponder, a mystery to unravel. But “tonight you are sure / one dusk you will draw the lines / to make the face / you have known and / waited for / backwards through years into / the future’s now / when you / will see and know.” The journey nears its end as the pilgrim poet comes closer “towards the mystery.” In *If More Winters, or this the Last*, Alistair Macdonald affirms his intimate connection with nature and suggests that memory may well be our only way home.

[*Dr. Alistair Macdonald was the reviewer’s first English professor. He died in the spring of 2007 before this review was ready for publication.*]

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Adrian Fowler, ed. *The March Hare Anthology*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2007, ISBN 978-1-55081-228-2

READERS OF *The March Hare Anthology* will fall into two categories. There will be those who have attended the March Hare, as performer or patron or both: who have made its grand tour of the island; who have taken in the music "from then to when" in King Henry's Pub at the Glynmill Inn; or sampled the "March Hare soup, etc." celebrated on the early posters for the event.

And then there will be those, like me, who have not attended a March Hare, nor made the grand tour, nor taken in the music, nor sampled the soup, and who must therefore approach this anthology rather like Alice approaching the "Mad Tea Party" which gave it its name, with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

The March Hare is "Atlantic Canada's largest poetry festival": the evening of words and music — inaugurated by Al Pittman, Rex Brown, and George Daniels, circa 1988 — that became a weekend of words and music, that became a month of words and music, and expanded to compass events not only in its native Corner Brook but in Gander and St. John's and, most recently, in Toronto and at "seven venues in Ireland." *The March Hare Anthology*, edited by Adrian Fowler, commemorates the twentieth anniversary of the March Hare with a gathering of work by festival participants: 76 writers all told, well known and little known, experienced and inexperienced, "from here" and "from away," living and dead.

Like Alice, confronted with this various gathering, my first reaction was perturbation. This, I thought, was a book that could not make up its mind what it wanted to be. A historical document? a festschrift? a florilegium? Fowler's well-researched introduction provides a fine account of the genesis and growth of the festival, of its guiding principles and its reigning spirit, and of its significance both as a social event and as a cultural touchstone. But it is less helpful when it comes to describing the gathering of poems and prose-pieces in this book; there is scant account of the *anthology's* genesis and development. As for its guiding principles, Fowler writes: "In creating the *March Hare Anthology*, I have tried to remain faithful to the spirit of the event. As many former participants as possible were identified, tracked down and asked to submit work. Editorial judgement was exercised in the selection and arrangement of material, but I have attempted to utilize the same elusive principles of balance and eclecticism that have always shaped the development of the March Hare programme." I wanted to know more. What sort of work were participants asked to submit? Or was it left entirely up to them? Do the selections in the anthology represent work that was actually read at the festival? Is the anthology a document of Hares past, or rather an attempt to recreate the spirit of the Hare, in print, in the present? Flipping through, I wished for more in the way of editorial apparatus to guide me along: biographies of the contributors, source notes for the texts. Both appear, of course, but in small print, and at the conclusion of the gathering.

At this point, the March Hare must have shushed me, as he does Alice — or offered me the Dormouse's rejoinder: "If you can't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself." For I held my questions, and began to read. And as soon as I did, I was drawn in. I saw that what had appeared at first glance to be a hodgepodge is in fact a curated exhibition of wonderful variety and range; an animated, ongoing conversation, which is constantly being enlarged by new voices, new narrative threads. And Fowler's reservation of biographical and bibliographical notes until the end is, I saw, canny; it forced me, like an audience member at the March Hare, to accept each "reader" on his or her own terms: to "listen" to the work without media fanfare or bibliographic packaging, and to hear what it had to say to the performance that preceded it, the one that would follow. There were pieces that seemed formally stunning, and others that seemed maudlin, or garish, or twee. Yet I learned to welcome, as I do at live readings, the occasional upset of my expectations: that a writer well known to me might prove disappointing; that a writer previously unknown to me might take my breath away.

As the collection developed, through-lines suggested themselves. Do island poets — familiar with shorelines, with thresholds and margins — have a knack for endings, I wondered: for the subtle, sudden turn in a poem or story's final line that reconfigures all that has come before? I was thinking of the light in the speaker's father's house, in David Elliott's "River IV," which guides the speaker across the harbour at night — of how it becomes, in the poem's final lines, a beacon in "a greater dark" he travels toward: "that unknown sea." Or of the wonderfully ambiguous final stanza in John Steffler's "Cedar Cove": "After Cedar Cove, / how will we look?" (Both, "how will we appear?" and "how will we see?") Or of the concluding passage, so perfectly balanced between eros and thanatos, in which Tom Dawe's Emily (Brontë), that "unlikely Rapunzel," lets down her hair. Or of the last lines in Michael Winter's "The Point David Made Earlier," or in the excerpt from Libby Creelman's "Landscape," in which the writer turns a peg that tunes the fiction to a subtly (and heart-wrenchingly) different key.

Fowler has managed to get such works to speak back and forth to one another, sometimes across many intervening pages — just as, at a weekend festival, a conversation from Friday night might be picked up on Sunday morning. Thus Lorna Crozier writes of a time when children fell into wells: "We are made / of mostly water / and water calls to water." Twenty pages on, Mark Callanan's "Wheelbarrow" guides the speaker, its handles "like two prongs of a divining rod," but "drawn by something stronger, / more urgent than the presence of buried water." That "something" is most obviously gravity — but it may also be home, or love, or the need for winter-warmth (the barrow carries junks for the stove). One might say "gravity," then, in all its senses. Which include the grave. One might then recall the card-playing widow in Mary Dalton's "Kitchen": "She shuffles the deck — / in the stove with a thud / a junk collapses." Or the fresh-water well in the excerpt from Alistair MacLeod's "No Great Mischief" which ends the anthology: "Out on the island the neglected fresh-water well pours forth its gift of sweetness into the whitened darkness of the night."

Perhaps my greatest delight in reading this anthology was the sheer variety of its language: from Stan Dragland's deftly punctuated sentences, so alert to their own "jogs" and "realignments," to the unpunctuated sweep of Gordon Rodgers's "Emergency Roadside Service"; from Bernard O'Donoghue's elegant iambs, in "Anamnesis," to the dactylic punch of Mary Dalton's "Headlong (A Kind of Ode)"; from the cringing propriety of Lynn Coady's Mrs. Dacey ("I would like to know.... Why is it people feel they have to concern themselves with matters of the bedroom."), to the jovial vernacular of Michael Crummey's Aunt Annie ("Put a pair of boots on that one, Sarah, she's ready for the woods.").

The proof is in the pudding: or, in this case, in the Hare soup. Fowler's selection and collation ultimately justify his editorial choices, the manner of his introduction. Some anthologies ask to be dipped into. This one asks to be read from first to last. Having read it so, I returned to the introduction, and revised my sense of the categories into which this book's readers will fall. There will be those who have attended a March Hare. And there will be those who now seek out the chance to do so.

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Richard Greene. *Crossing the Straits*. Toronto: St. Thomas Poetry Series, 2004, ISBN 0973591013

THE POEMS IN "Islands in Memory," the first section of Richard Greene's new collection of poetry, *Crossing the Straits*, strike a notably public tone as the author uses aspects of personal history to address a variety of historical relationships. Sectarian divisions between Newfoundland's English Protestant and Irish Catholic communities, dealings between merchants and fishermen, as well as the relationship between St. John's past and St. John's present are engaged in successive poems. In "The White Fleet," Greene chronicles the historical relationship between Portuguese fishermen and Newfoundland:

The ships, docked three abreast, filled the harbour
with a swaying thicket of masts and yards
and the white blaze of their clustered hulls.
I cannot imagine how it must have seemed
at night on the Banks, their city of lights
over a sea that teemed with endless cod,
but in port they were magical enough
to paint the town with rough benevolence,
a giving of half their lives, year by year.

Greene's poems foreground sense before sound. His diction is an unusual blend of the plain and the oratorical. He favours a line that hovers around ten syllables and that tends toward the syllabic more than the accentual syllabic. Poems as solid as a kitchen chair, I noted, on my first read through. Subsequent readings, however, revealed weaknesses in the language, as in line six from the passage quoted above which resorts to a tired description of the North Atlantic: "a sea that teemed with endless cod." Occasionally the phrasing is awkward: in the poem, "Occupation: Pilate Speaks," the speaker says of Jesus, "he requires or enacts no policy, / and recruits to his cause no persons / unworthy of the nails." I soon began to revise my choice of simile. Maybe "pulpit" more than "chair" would have been a more fitting vehicle.

There is no doubt that Greene holds the people of his home province in high esteem, but it is questionable whether his characterizations of them do justice. In the poem, "Pachelbel's Canon," Greene could easily have been speaking about himself when he says the following: "for them, love was always a deference / to the good." In the poem, "Seachange: the Newfoundland Regiment," the Newfoundland character is described as follows: "Eyes averted from unanswerable death, / my people bequeathed endurance and denial, / having met the spray of water and of lead / with muscularity and silence." Elsewhere, in the poem "Under the Bridge," he describes the lives of his ancestors this way: "Such lives make of our conscience a homeland, / teach us compassion by gifts of exile, / yet it is wrong to think them downtrodden / who expected small comfort in the world, / spoke little of their sorrows, turned their hands / to the work of the living and finished it." Similar examples abound. These are fine sentiments, of course, but they do not make for convincing poetry. The poems in "Islands in Memory" offer a set of idealized portraits of a people and of a place. They are poems that exist uneasily between personal memory and commemoration.

The poems in the book's second section, "The Way Out," strike a more personal note: "in prayer, I speak of journeys / and hold his hand who, / in loved companions, / goes beside me" (from "No Unmoving Thing"). Although I knew that The St. Thomas Poetry Series favoured Christian poets, it was not until I read the poems in this section that I realized the extent to which Greene's vision is filtered through a Christian faith. This partly explained — to me, at least — the idealizations of character and of place found in the earlier poems, as well as the reoccurring themes of self-sacrifice and of subjugation of self. Greene, I think, is less a spiritual poet than he is a religious poet. I define the latter as one who identifies more with doctrine than with "spirituality." I define spirituality as that force which suffuses consciousness but resists codification.

Personal lyrics, meditations, and narrative poems that witness the lives of various Christian martyrs make up the poems in section two, "The Way Out." These poems are confessional and explicit only to the extent that they describe the speaker's struggle with Christian doctrine and his difficulties in surrendering to its teachings.

The following sestet from the sonnet, “Determinings,” is a good example of the work:

The wild tossings of an ungoverned keel
 will not be mastered by bully or saint
 nor will great trying bring it close to land.
 Pray, then, or better still, wait without zeal
 for heart’s surrender to know true constraint,
 the fist’s unfolding to a human hand.

Something of that human hand unfolds in the last section of *Crossing the Straits*, “The Living.” The title poem from this section documents the speaker’s failed attempts to become both a priest in the Church of England and to set down roots in Great Britain. “It was the thing I most wanted — / priest of the Church of England, as I had / failed to become one in the Church of Rome ... I made my excuses / problems of finance and citizenship, / and closed the book on the matter of England.”

The last poems in the book describe the speaker’s tentative efforts to relocate his vocation in the world, specifically in the multi-cultural environment of Toronto. It is a hostile place — and again, an oddly idealized one — “where at night the voice of being human, / is a siren blare or a drunk crying fuck / something or other on Sherbourne Street ... [where] security men wear Kevlar vests / and follow a German Shepherd on a chain” (from “Sherbourne Street”). From within this harsh environment the speaker looks to the church for community:

Once white as Rosedale, the congregation
 is Filipino, Tamil, Caribbean,
 their Canada a few acres of shabby
 towers across the street, the most densely
 populated place on the continent.
 Even the white men here are outsiders,
 not husbands and fathers, but gay couples
 who live in the streets just east of Yonge ...
 (from “Apparitions”)

It is a church that on first inspection looks very different from the one the speaker is used to. On closer inspection, however, he finds similarities:

The Tamils leave cookies beside statues,
 and at the grotto, candles, money, toys,
 in December, a coat for the shoulders of
 Bernadette, lest she shiver in the light.
 There is only a little extravagance

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between this and my grandmother's yearly
pilgrimage to Ste Anne de Beaupré
or my mother's daily rosary.

(from "Apparitions")

The accommodation is tentative; there is a glimmer of hope that the speaker will find a way to integrate into this world, but only a glimmer. This is perhaps a fitting end to a collection that might best be described as a book of endings.

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