

Tom Dawe. New and Collected Poems

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Tom Dawe. *New and Collected Poems*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-550-81755-3

In "Grand Canyon," from his 2019 collection *Pilgrim*, Tom Dawe recalls Don Marquis, who "once said / that publishing a book of poetry / is like dropping a rose petal / down the Grand Canyon / and waiting for the echo" (55). If this is the case then Dawe's recent *New and Collected Poems* is a bouquet of fallen petals that reminds readers, as it reminds the poet, "how wonderful the canyon can be" (55). Gathering together poems from five collections, as well as several previously uncollected poems, the book is testament to Dawe's achievement over more than five decades. In "Witness," also from *Pilgrim*, Dawe contends that "In many and various ways, creators / have been always telling us to pay attention" (26). Reading Dawe's collected works suggests that he has taken this advice. His poems convey an acute and at times whimsical penchant for observation, shifting through a range of topics from nature, memory, childhood, and aging to religion, labour, family, and Newfoundland culture. Dawe's irreverent eye is on display in poems such as "Circus," where he recalls the "drunken clown, / stamping his mask into the mud / when the fortune teller told him / she was pregnant" (31), or in "Of Mice and Books," where he meditates on the possibility that Sir Francis Bacon may have been "referring to mice / when he wrote that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, / and some few / to be chewed / and digested" (51).

However, Dawe's eye for detail is perhaps at its sharpest when focused on the relationship between the human and an ecological world that, while at times threatened by encroachment, also demonstrates both resilience and a fundamental indifference to human suffering. In an era of ecological crisis, Dawe's environmental poems are perhaps the most compelling in *New and Collected Poems*. On one level reflecting the toll centuries of exploitative economic and political practices have had on the Newfoundland environment, and the human communities it has traditionally supported, Dawe also represents the natural world as a powerful force that should be respected by human

communities, and that will endure long after those communities are gone. With nods to other ecologically-minded poets such as Mary Oliver, Robert Bly, and Robert Frost, Dawe asserts himself within a tradition of environmental writing that tries to remember how “flowers rise / from dark spots / where the vulture fed” (“To Mary Oliver,” 21).

This ecological consciousness is particularly visible in poems such as “Salmon,” from *Where Genesis Begins* (2009). In this poem Dawe charts the history of the Atlantic salmon, from “mystical, / wise prophetic creature . . . emblem of folk heroes, / patron saints and kings,” to its contemporary incarnation being “tallied / by federal government officials / at a river mouth” (107). Here the salmon, being counted to monitor dwindling populations, testifies to the impact of human activity on natural environments. The fact that it will continue its journey upstream only to “gasp / in the arms / of a poacher’s son” (107) highlights Dawe’s unredemptive vision of the human in relation to ecological degradation. This vision reappears, for instance, in “At Western Arm,” where human development, over time, is reclaimed by the hardy Newfoundland environment: “There was once a saw-mill here / giving a swift brook / its last fling / before it found the sea again. There were houses too . . . Now everything is gone / down / in a tangle of alders / and the slow / revenge / of the birch” (173).

Dawe’s laments for dying environments are frequently tied to the loss of the human communities they once supported. His poems rightly suggest that human and environmental sustainability are co-dependent, and that failures of political and economic stewardship have irrevocably altered both human and natural landscapes. This attitude is evident, for example, in nostalgic poems where the speaker recalls sitting with friends and watching “big silver sea trout . . . on the pull of the new moon . . . splashing in the water below the fences” (“One Fall Night,” 162); or following “in his father’s footsteps / as they walked back / across one day’s snow / and three silent ponds, / carrying a stiff rabbit / through the frozen loops / of the alder clump” (“The Trapper,” 298). However, these poems that reminisce about a positive relationship between the land and those that use it for sustenance are

frequently juxtaposed by much starker visions of personal, environmental, and cultural loss, as in “The Abandoned Outport,” where the land quietly reclaims a lost settlement (172), or in “Visitation,” where nature is endowed with a shadowy and hostile violence: “Sea wind under a porch door, / and somewhere outside, / real as caplin rotting, / the death angel / perched in a dogberry tree / waiting” (22).

Dawe’s *New and Collected Poems* is not limited to poems about the strained relationship between nature and human communities. At over 350 pages in length, the collection testifies to a poet with a varied imagination who, over the course of a long career, has written eloquently about topics ranging from fairy tales and folklore to literature and politics. However, when read as a whole, it is the provocative, stark, and sometimes severe environmental poems that seem to best define Dawe’s oeuvre. While the bulk of these poems are not new, they are certainly prescient in an era of environmental crisis. Indeed, that is what makes *New and Collected Poems* an important contribution to Newfoundland, and Canadian, environmental writing.

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