

Alison Pick. *Question and Answer: Poems.*

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her father's fridge box and laughing hysterically in the middle of a busy library.) I was holding my stomach as I read Dalton's "Ignoramus" in *Reaney Gardens*.

Of course Dalton's political poems are brilliant, funny, poignant and rousing. I have only one quibble. It seems to me that Dalton does not take risks in her political poems. She attacks the many injustices that have been heaped on Newfoundland by mainland Canadians and who could argue with that? But the tone of the poems indicates to me that the poet does not consider the fact that most of these injustices have also been perpetrated on her fellow mainland Canadians. Also, she takes aim at goofy, ignorant, arrogant, and usually well-intentioned mainland social workers and tourists. What about the fact that many urban Newfoundlanders have become arrogant and ignorant about their fellow rural Newfoundlanders? And why is there no mention of all of the lazy, useless academics from the mainland who have spent their adult lives at Last Chance U making big bucks and hating the place?

Perhaps I am not being entirely fair to Dalton. I love the last poem in the book, *Gallows*.

I myself was one who could see only gallows driving through the wind-swept and bleakly beautiful Gallow's Cove. Dalton is hard on herself, the sixteen-year-old "vastly superior" Newfoundlander who cringed at the names rolling off her neighbours' tongues. But now the poet who leapt into the mainland world that malignantly caricatures her country (not province!), has grown to love her people and their language.

Now she can hear
how they kept safe with them
Maire and Seamus, even
those far-off Normans of Autun —
swaying in time, in the intricate
galliard of their gallous, gallous tongue.

(Gallows)

Janet Fraser
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Alison Pick. *Question and Answer: Poems*. Vancouver: Polestar/Raincoast Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55192-623-7

ALISON PICK'S POEMS seem to start almost as an exercise. In the first section, "Q & A," a question is taken from some other writer, isolated from its context, and an answer composed, on the principle that all one need do is "ask a question / and the marvellous answer appears." The questions are ominous: "How is one to speak with the dead?" "What colour's the future?" "What can you believe in?" A "thin shadow of death," sickness, and sadness hangs over some of the poems.

In the second section, “(Still) Life,” Pick uses fruit as a starting point — apple, cherry, kiwi, orange, pear. Pick’s fruits evoke images of love-making, pregnancy, birth. The pineapple with its “rough / knobby skin” holds “the element / of surprise. Love. That first cut / spilling with wet evening light / that is water and sugar / in bed....” Watermelon suggests pregnancy: the heavy fruit “rolls on its vine / like the child’s floppy head / bloating the space / in your womb.” Banana evokes a mother’s joy in her child, and cherry the sensual tongue. Cut in between these sensuous, fruity poems are grimmer poems about her grandmother, a Czech refugee from the Holocaust, who “lost her parents, / her home, religion,” her fear “locked ... in her body.” Pick uses the desperate simile of a gas chamber with every opening sealed off to suggest her grandmother’s state of mind. Birth is not a joyous event for her: “her cervix like a mouth / and the scream that tore out / was my father” (“Fear 1944”).

“What They Left Me” refers to the legacy of her great-grandparents: “Two names on a monument at the synagogue in Prague.” Thousands of names of those who died in the Nazi death camps are meticulously painted on the white walls of the synagogue, an overwhelming emotional experience for the viewer. The poem is understated, the facts are baldly presented, and the tone seems curiously cool and detached: what remains is the daughter who escaped, her son, Pick’s father, and her “own small life.” Yet the last line uncovers the terrible wound borne by the survivors whose lives are stained forever by consciousness of the past: “The first light snow of winter, their ashes at my back.”

The shock of discovering her repressed Jewish inheritance resonates through many of the poems. Her grandmother’s attitude was to shut out the past, “And God forbid we discuss it” (“Beef Fondue”).

Imagine the shock, the way you would lose faith if your mother was burned in a furnace (“Faith”).

The third and final section of the book, “The River Reflected,” is about journeys, by road and river: “let that road carry us home,” are the final, wishful, words of the book. The opening epigraph from Jane Mead, “bargaining / with my soul,” suggests a spiritual dimension to the journey for the poet, for “words come / from God” (“Grace”). The journey also involves exploring relationships, “pushing the limit of our love, / trying to find the place / it would break” (“Driving: Who I Was”). The archetypal Canadian canoe trip in the wilderness involves both solitude, as in “Wind Bound: Being Single,” and a yearning for union with the other.

We paddle
our cedar canoe out of dreaming
up the thin river of touch.
Our boat is called longing ... (“The Water’s Skin”).

As with many collections of lyric poems, there are sometimes problems with arrangement. Do the poems tell a story? If so, the fine poem “Infant Abandoned in Hyde Park” seems somehow out of place, poignant though it is. There are few infelicities — “my heartfelt respect for your verdure / that multiplies air” is one. Pick has a fine lyric gift, and the reader is rewarded with many pleasing images. Dawn is night “polishing / sky with a cloth.” Moonlight reminds her of cream: “moon a bowl of cream over fields,” “the orchard at night, moon drizzling cream over fruit.”

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Dale Jarvis. *The Golden Leg and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales*. St. John’s: Flanker Press, 2007, ISBN-10: 1-897317-07-8.

THE GOLDEN LEG and Other Ghostly Campfire Tales contains some 26 folktales, and although their compiler, Dale Jarvis, is Canadian, as is their publisher, the Flanker Press, there is nothing particularly regional about these tales: they are sparsely told, and few have anything approaching a specific or an identifiable location. This it must be stressed is quite intentional — Jarvis’s brief introduction notes that he has “deliberately kept the locations of the stories somewhat vague in the telling” — for this collection is a book with both a history and a mission. The history: Jarvis presented the stories around the campfire at Camp Delight Children’s Oncology Camp in Newfoundland. The mission: Jarvis hopes that other storytellers will use and adapt the stories “to suit the needs of your telling,” and all profits from the sale of *The Golden Leg* will go to assist Camp Delight and its children. These are noble goals, and one wishes Jarvis and Camp Delight every success.

Issues of history and mission aside, the stories in *The Golden Leg* are familiar ones, and a reader reaching the end of the volume will find a section, “About the Stories,” in which Jarvis — holder of an MA in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland — carefully details the origins of his tales. The titular story, for example, is an adaptation of Stith Thompson’s motifs E 235.4.2 (“return from dead to punish theft of leg from grave”) and E 235.4.1 (“return from dead to punish theft of golden arm from grave”). Other stories are equally well documented, the sources often but not always being Canadian.

It is perhaps unfair to fault *The Golden Leg* for being bland in its retelling of these folktales, for this blandness is intentional. Nevertheless, if one has previously encountered other versions of the tales, comparisons are inevitable, and all too often the tales in *The Golden Leg* are less than inspiring. Mark Twain’s version of “The Golden Arm,” for example, recounted in *How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1897), opens with a prologue in which Twain details how to tell the story, explaining that “the pause is an exceedingly important