

Poetry

Suzanne Buffam, *The Irrationalist*, Anansi, 2010

Steven Heighton, *Patient Frame*, Anansi, 2010

Tim Bowling, *The Annotated Bee & Me*, Gaspereau, 2010

Shortlisted for the 2011 Griffin Poetry Prize, Suzanne Buffam's second collection is a remarkable gathering of wryly ardent and cogently fractured lyrics. *The Irrationalist* presents an admixture of vocal registers characteristic of Buffam's poetic pitch. She typically works in an unsettled and unsettling mode, a practice that one poem, 'Abstract Fires,' names 'mixed media.' These poems tend, despite trying to speak in 'plain Greek,' to be shivered, variegated and polymorphous: always highlighting the inherent capacities of crafted language to be mediating and medial, but uneasily suspended in the interstices between word and event, word and perception, word and word.

'Abstract Fires,' for instance, offers a collation of random objects often barely suggesting possibilities of flame (like the faint echo of Hopkins's shook foil in the first line):

- #1. Candy canes, tinfoil, flamenco guitar.
- #2. Fork, butterfly, doghair, dust.
- #3. Trampoline, harpsichord, rust.
- #4. Thumbtacks, chewinggum, forklift, car.

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Abstraction has devolved into distraction, flashing Platonic fire into light bulbs and disco balls. Despite its scrap-heap aesthetic, Buffam's work aspires to tease out traces of the metaphysical, to draw scalar geometry from accreted detritus, its stuff. Notice the exacting envelope rhyme above, a figure of containment, a vestige of sure form. Buffam likes the textured compression of compound nouns, and the fabric of echoes that such compression produces. Each of these brief lists, line by line, offers up not merely a string of metaphors—each object somehow like, and yet abstracted from, fire—but also small forays into the process of metaphor making, colliding image with image, layering vehicle onto tenor, until what stands for what begins to lose its footing, to reveal the fabricating of likeness—or really, unlikeness—itself. 'I mean this metaphorically,' she declares in 'Trans-Neptunian Object,' although meaning has become heuristic rather than given. By combining herky-jerky successions of disconnected thing-words with the connective tissues of diphthong and rhyme, Buffam prods our attention towards recombinant making, *poiesis*.

Buffam's poems concern the dynamics of honing perceptual apparatuses: 'One must study how the crow flies,' she professes in 'Amor Fati.' Or rather, her enunciative subject does, articulating an increasingly urgent, self-imposed imperative, a demand that she notice, watch, listen, drink, see, touch, hear. The poems want to enact a Johnny-come-lately phenomenology, a frustrated bracketing of pure event or happening that strives to contact the fibres of experience, of meaning: 'Still I try to live in the moment, where everything is endlessly/happening at once.' She wants, she says, to 'separate the movement from the moving thing.' Still, her poems embrace their own want of attention, as Buffam finds herself unable honestly to lay claim to overcoming the detachment of description with verbal enactment. Her poems want to be more than merely about something, they want to do things, but they also recognize that they can never exceed their descriptive, secondary nature. Her taste for compact aphoristic declarative—poetry as 'little commentaries'—is offset by a thorough skepticism about overcoming the 'frail dimness' of language. But she persists; poetry presents, as experience, the want of experience. 'I cannot tell you what I saw,' she nonetheless tells us. 'My attempts to remember,' as she puts it, 'are proof in themselves.' Poetry subsists, audibly and lyrically, in what Buffam calls 'trying': a self-evident 'placebo' that makes from its illusory falsehoods delicate artifacts of insistent desire.

The collection's title suggests not so much unreason but a poetic calculus of desire, taking account of what is unaccountable and uncountable. Poetry is not irrational because it lacks sanity, but because it measures the world differently, differentially. The Latin *ratio* refers to reason and to calculation, to measure. Buffam's sense of what used to be called 'numbers,' of the (now fraught) rhythmic and structural integrities of a poem, plays out in the last lines of 'Exit,' a finale so unemphatic it remains unlisted in her table of contents; in another late gesture at Platonic abstraction, the poet wants to add up the shadows of clouds:

To count them is to know their many shapes
 Cannot be counted.
 They must be numbered among.

The ambiguity in the line-break produces a fiction of certainty, a knowing, immediately undermined across the enjambment, when counting is disavowed. The hanging preposition that closes poem and collection simultaneously extends and undoes the *ratio* of meaning, an awkwardly delicate shortfall of surety—a definitive period that, still, refuses to close.

If Buffam embraces poetic placebo, Steven Heighton retains his faith in the poem as healing artifact, as succor, as cure. The work collected in *Patient Frame*, his fifth collection, scripts the slow dissolves of soul and flesh that characterize a world of survivors and late-comers; these are careful reckonings with mortified flesh and spiritual crepuscule. Heighton's well-turned texts present deftly professional surfaces; a confident, crafted line remains a hallmark of his style. However, these poems evince not the detachment of skill but a very real, feeling engagement with his material, and consistently offer moving accounts of human ends and aftermaths. Heighton's artful formalism counterpoises colloquial offhandedness with a rigorous verbal intensity:

For days afterward, all talk and blog
was of the shootout, but about your condition
not even Google gave a clue.

In this poem, Heighton addresses the spectre of a white supremacist, converting a sound-bite about his refusal to die into a refrain: '*Race traitors want to see me dead/ but I'm not the kind to die.*' Moral revulsion is both mediated in ironic distance and buoyed by lyric skill. (The folksy cadence of the quotation—disturbingly close to Emily Dickinson—is foreshadowed in the tetrameter of the opening.) Heighton skirts an ethical quagmire by rendering the despicable in melodically layered text—the modulated vowel music of o's and u's, enmeshed in an alliterative consonantal netting—but also draws back into a critique of the aestheticizing, and anaesthetic, capacities of how we frame the things we hear, and speak about: 'Hang on a minute, wait, I always heard'

His interest in the human potential for monstrosity, particularly as fierce refusal to go gentle into any good night, is counterbalanced throughout the book by an equally human potential for redress and remedy. The most affecting of these poems is probably the first, 'Another of the Just,' an elegy for an officer who tried, forty years earlier, to save a child during the My Lai massacre in 1968 Vietnam; Heighton wants to leave aside both weapon and pen, as instruments of control, and turns instead—still writing—to the image of the human hand, a gesture at embodied contact, at touch. He wants, literally, to produce touching poems. 'Ribs,' a description of how 7-inch bootleg phonograph records were created in the Soviet Union using x-ray film stock, combines sound, voice, image, material text and body in a constellation that aims to draw song—an aesthetic object consisting both in American pop tunes and in Heighton's own poem,

broken and grooved across the page—from an aestheticized, even tangible violence. The images on the used pellicules, after all, are of broken bones, shattered bodies across which the phonographic needle skates, a small brutality. Despite its injury, the poem becomes both diagnostic image and healing incantation.

The book closes with a set of translations, 'Fourteen Approximations,' from a variety of sources. 'A song I can shape you,' he sings from and through an Anglo-Saxon original, asserting his own formal mastery (a control disavowed as it is performed in a subsequent translation of a Mallarmé sonnet). Approximating another poem offers Heighton a means of remedial conveyance: like a surgeon, he can remake masterful cadences, the shaping power of a shaped line, while foregrounding the ethical challenge implicit in displays of such virtuosity, the inherent violence of mastery. He translates: 'We lose,/ in translation, the worlds we know./ Say a thing and it turns untrue.' Heighton's is not Buffam's sense of unknowing, but an embrace of the power of the poem to make fraught silences bloom, not only to know loss as loss, but to come to know despite it.

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Tim Bowling's *The Annotated Bee & Me* is an extended gloss on a privately-printed book (*The Bee & Me*) by his great aunt Gladys Muttart, a family keepsake for her grandchildren. Bowling composes plainspoken annotations, distinct in their homey sweetness from Buffam's commentaries and Heighton's approximations, through brief iterations lifted from the original; his book—and it works best when understood as material book, as a typeset text you can touch and smell—superficially resembles Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* or *The Ledger*, with its recovery of everyday rural history from the relative obscurity of private memory. Like Kroetsch, too, Bowling is highly self-conscious about articulating his own presence, as poetic historiographer, within that work. In 'Herman Melville is Famous, You and I Most Certainly Are Not'—one of a set of poems following the gloss proper, which elaborate and extend its resonances, its hums—Bowling gently, wryly signs his own book: 'The Bowlings are my family. I'm Tim Bowling./I'm five foot nine. I write poetry/and I don't keep bees.' The timbre of his voice, however, is hardly Kroetsch's detached postmodernity. Rather, its childlike candour recalls the accessible, highly readable and aesthetically unimpeded tone of an intentionally public poetry.

The glosses themselves are rife with playful sound effects ('Knock! Knock!'; 'beeeeeeeeeee') and colloquialism ('It's ok, it's ok'), juxtaposed with an occasional bathetic poeticism ('Gah! Romantic piffle!'; 'Of late it seems') and, more significantly, moments of fine lyric dens-

ity ('Honey rises behind blank windows'). Bowling also replicates quotidian speech genres such as answering-machine messages ('Tim. Cousin Ian.') or parodies a beekeeping guidebook. Like Bernard Mandeville's 300-year-old *Fable of the Bees*, Bowling interests himself in the poetic tensions between what Mandeville called the 'publick' and the private, between 'social contract' and solitary writing self. Regarding home-canned jars of honey, he notices how 'the handwriting on the labels is/intimate and general,' neatly framing the central concern of his own writing here: how to make the intimacies of signature and touch speak to others. Pages from his great aunt's book, complete with her signature, are lovingly reproduced, and the book as an object—beautifully produced on rich, honey-coloured paper by the Gaspereau Press—has a wonderful hand-made tactility. It's meant to be touched, held, felt. Bowling wants his unknown readers to 'Lean in. Listen.'—to experience the vibrant hum of words on the page, of words from page to fingertips, lips or ears. While there is a danger here, a 'worry' as he puts it, that in the attempt to make mundane family history both accessible and telling, his poems might flatten into commonplace irrelevance, Bowling manages to distill a sweet lyricism of passing astonishment from his homespun past, to make 'the bees' luxuriant hum' go 'pulsing' into sense.