

FICTION

Stuart Ross, *Buying Cigarettes for the Dog*, Freehand Books, 2009

Amy Jones, *What Boys Like and Other Stories*, Biblioasis, 2009

Sometimes at an EVENT fiction board meeting, one of our team will put forward an inventive ultra-short manuscript as a ‘sorbet piece,’ a palate cleanser between other works lined up for publication in upcoming issues. The collected short-fiction works by Stuart Ross in *Buying Cigarettes for the Dog* are more like quick shots of tequila. Ross is a co-founder of the Toronto Small Press Book Fair; editor of the anthology *Surreal Estate: 13 Canadian Poets Under the Influence*; and a writer of six collections of poetry, two collaborative novels, a previous collection of short fiction and a collection of essays, *Confessions of a Small Press Racketeer*.

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There are 23 very short works in *Buying Cigarettes for the Dog* and each is a strange, self-contained world. Unifying the collection is a beguiling expansive feeling created through narrators who appear to relish the art of storytelling. Ross engineers a general loosening of temporal markers so that his characters seem suspended outside the world of the ticking clock. He also finds Beckett-inspired absurdity in the process of naming, cataloguing and defining terms.

The words of the narrator at the end of ‘Mr. Joe’ seem to speak for Ross’s approach: ‘I practise the politics of inclusion.’ There is a galloping anthropomorphism in the writing so that the entire landscape seems to participate and breathe in response to events. Birds, dogs, cows and chicken feet are actors on the stage, making appearances as totemic visitors from another dimension. Conventional power hierarchies are comically inverted in stories like ‘The President’s Cold Legs’ and ‘Me and the Pope,’ where everyday blokes have intimate access to institutional figureheads.

There are a few persistent motifs recurring over multiple stories. For instance, we hear repeatedly about Hank Williams’s music, Payaso cigarettes, death by drowning and spumoni ice cream, giving an eerie cohesiveness to the parade of dreams. Other references pull popular culture and classic literature into the framework of the stories in interesting ways: We learn how one character played the song *Suicide is Painless* in a school band, how another used a hardback

copy of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as a weapon. Throughout the volume, Ross embeds the reader in the story as captive listener: 'right now you're the only person who will actually talk to me.'

The quirky four-page story that launches the collection is titled 'Three Arms Less'; it links two casualties involving severed limbs. The tone here is everything: a cultivated linguistic naiveté enveloping a burnished seed of contained outrage. Ross writes, 'When there was a war, a little brown boy had his arms exploded right off the sides of his body, where they were attached at the shoulders. He was ten years old. It hurt him a lot.' In addition to the little boy Ali, we meet Aron, a mountain climber who lops off his own arm to save himself from death by exposure and starvation. We discover that the loss to the planet in terms of limb count is precisely measurable:

So then what you had was this world with three arms less. It really threw things off all over the place. Buses were late and a guy fell on his head and Miss November's left breast was a little bigger than her right breast....

Making sarcastic pronouncements with deadpan certainty, Ross constructs a biting fable about human interconnectedness and the process by which we forge celebrities. In Ali's story, particularly, the idea of culpability and the human cost of war intrudes uncomfortably into the landscape of fable. The narrative focus flares briefly within the experience of each delimbed character before bowing out with a hyperbolic flourish: 'After that, the number of arms in the world never changed.' Ross conceals a political razor's edge under his cape.

If 'Three Arms Less' is a faux-naïve documentary about collateral damage, 'Bouncing' takes us right into the very noggin of body trauma. The self-proclaimed Bouncing Man reveals how he tripped in a 'precise sequence of limb-related fiascos' and began bouncing on his head 'like an upturned pogo stick.' The narrator's journey has an epic quality:

Each village became an overturned blur, each downpour a welcome laundering. I could focus only on the blows to my skull and the subsequent rattling, the quiver of every molecule of bone that held my increasingly irrelevant brain in its protective embrace.

While continuously bouncing, the narrator lists the reactions of those who gather to observe him: 'those who mocked and those who tried to help; those who genuflected and those who tried to profit.' The ongoing action of bouncing becomes a way of highlighting the range of human response to unexpected events.

'Guided Missiles' is the only extended story, though it proceeds through titled subsections that maintain the short-burst fictional approach. Archie, an aspiring DJ, encounters a prophet, engages in a violent act, experiences an apocalypse and ascends to 'green man' status, where there is finally peace:

Archie had been in the tree for fifty years, or seventy-five, or three hundred. His flesh was a deep brown, weathered bark. Small green sprouts emerged through fissures, decorating the lengths of his arms and legs.

The mythic image conveys the metamorphosis in vivid physiological terms and reinforces the concept of elastic time.

This is short fiction to savour. Maybe there's a kind of sorbet infused with tequila we could name after Stuart Ross? Eat with a little salt and a wedge of lime.

If Stuart Ross hails from the land of bouncing heads and tree-bound men, Amy Jones writes from within the realist tradition in a contemporary, urban idiom. The Warhol-via-Lichtenstein cover art for her debut *What Boys Like and Other Stories* extends a vivid, cartoon welcome to the reader, but when one looks closely at the duplicated female face there is a ferocity that visually matches Jones's crisp linguistic edge. *What Boys Like* showcases her experimentation with story structure and point of view, and features revised versions of stories first published in literary journals.

In 'A Good Girl,' Jones orients the reader to Nova Scotia landmarks and puts the relational themes of attraction and obsession into play. The story charts the course of a sexual relationship between 32-year-old Alex and Leah, the young waitress he meets at a restaurant called the Rusty Mackerel while in the company of his coarsely genial buddy Yousef. Leah has youth and sexual savvy, but a large part of her ongoing appeal to Alex stems from her elusiveness and what she conceals. As Alex climbs on the wife-and-baby plotline with another woman, Martine, he can't stop thinking of the way Leah absently cracks the cartilage in her ear when she is bored. Jones deftly marks the way that obsession eroticizes gesture.

Jones seems to be calling for a rethinking of the good girl/bad girl dialectic. In the blankness that is Leah there is also a haunting pathos; even as Leah looks frankly at Alex while stroking another man's thigh at a Halloween party, she seems both vixen and victim. The costuming neatly tweaks the drama: the young male rival to Alex is dressed as a dead surfer with seaweed draped around his neck. When Alex asks Leah, 'What are *you* supposed to be?' she offers him a slit-eyed smile and responds, 'Myself.' The true power of this story



lies in the tension between Leah's performance as self-directed siren and the reader's growing awareness of her as a lost soul who may crash on the rocks.

Love on the downward arc is a frequent focus in this collection. Men and women in fading alliances look wistfully out of windows to an imagined freedom beyond. It could be predictably bleak, but the hankering after escape is made comic in 'Talking About The Weather,' where the thin walls of an apartment on Sunday morning document everyone except Tom and Susannah having sex. Later, Susannah watches lovers howling in the storm and 'wishes she and Tom could be out there with them: outside and away from here, the shell of their life cracking open, their arms raised, faces soaked with rain.' Up to this point, Jones keeps the line of satire taut, so that when the lyrical statement of yearning appears, it carries a strong element of surprise.

Many stories include a dominating absence in a family. In 'Post Mortem,' the survivors of a young man killed in a car accident make a road trip to his death site. A woman addresses her aborted child in a letter filled with intricately-imagined details of the shared-life-that-might-have-been in 'Where You Are.' A pregnant widow at a funeral in 'The Church of Latter-Day Peaches' is a walking embodiment of life in the face of death.

In 'One Last Thing,' the third-person narration of the fate of a troubled runaway sister is abandoned with a sudden shift into first-person intensity. The narrator of the story is unmasked and for a moment we are not sure if it is the writer surfacing in the middle of the fictional world: 'I can't tell this story anymore. Not like this. Let me try again. You ran away, Joey. You ran away and I went to find you....' It is an arresting authorial intrusion and other writers might have whisked it off the record. Yet by emphasizing a redirection in the storytelling voice, Jones actually heightens our investment in the story. It is as if a new layer of sublimated guilt enters the scene, infusing the narrative with stark emotional energy.

Another standout story in the girls-at-risk category is 'How to Survive a Summer in the City,' which takes us through a day in the life of an alcoholic mother named Stacy and her adolescent daughter, Marie. It is told from the daughter's perspective in a third-person limited omniscient point of view. Jones makes an interesting structural choice in heading each section of the story with italicized directives that seem as if they are cropped from a glossy magazine's how-to list: '*Drink lots of fluids*'; '*Seek out free air conditioning*'; '*Take lots of showers.*' The banality of the headings is fiercely at odds with the minute-to-minute struggle of mother and daughter. One feels the claustrophobic intensity of the shared space and the painful parallel quest for control over



chaos. The story has a stripped-down quality that is bluntly naturalistic in its depiction of poverty and addiction; in a few sharp strokes, it also evokes a determined, bleak-edged resilience—survival gear worn close to the bone.

Counter to the experiences of obsession, absence, longing and survival, the title story, 'What Boys Like,' offers a breezy change in pace. Audrey, a virginal lingerie salesgirl, is groomed for a date with 'Across-the-hall Paul' by her older sisters. With a light touch, Jones marks the way in which a passing moment engenders growth. Here we have evidence of Jones's comic timing and her ear for dialogue in the playful layering of voices:

'She doesn't try,' Susie says.

'She just doesn't care,' Pam says.

'She totally needs highlights,' Mandy says.

'She just hasn't met the right boy yet,' her mother says, tucking Audrey's short brown hair behind her ears....

Audrey's self-confidence rises when she realizes that her revered sister Susie, so free with her advice, has never had a boyfriend. Audrey registers this knowledge, 'wonders why she never noticed,' then moves on with a new awareness of her own power, even though her face has been branded by a wayward curling iron: 'I'm sure you've got a few old scars yourself,' she says to her bewitched suitor. In Jones's stories, wounds are inevitable; they are the price of engagement in the game.

One image comes to mind as emblematic of this writer's fresh voice and polished style. In 'Places to Drink Outside in Halifax' there is a reference to the Alexander Keith monument 'pointing at the sky like a giant middle finger rising out of the mess below.' And Amy Jones is good at bringing to life both the mess below and the forces that constitute the rising finger.

—Christine Dewar

