

**Alexander MacLeod**, *Light Lifting*, Biblioasis, 2010

**Ann Perdue**, *I'm a Registered Nurse Not a Whore*, Insomniac Press, 2010

**Rachel Wyatt**, *Letters to Omar*, Coteau Books, 2010

It is difficult not to come to Alexander MacLeod's Giller prize-winning *Light Lifting* without enormous expectations. The author is, after all, the son of the brilliant writer Alistair MacLeod, whose recent short-story collection *Island* is as accomplished as his famous previous work, *No Great Mischiefs*. Not that we can assume that the talent gene is hereditary, but we'd like to think that the son is a chip off the father's block. So why haven't we heard from him since his first story came out nearly two decades ago? Probably because he's been working very hard, not just at his writing but at the practice of living, and it shows.

This debut collection of seven stories will call to mind the muscular fiction of Colin McAdam, whose novel *Some Great Thing* documents the lives of ordinary working Canadians labouring in construction and living in trailer parks, with greater attention given to the physicality and the grind of such labour than, say, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, with its romanticized renderings of construction jobs. These new stories contain the vividly observed details that startled so many readers encountering Alice Munro for the first time because she so accurately captured the familiar rhythms of daily domestic and working life in Canada. They also have the melancholy weight felt by characters in David Adams Richards's fiction, who sense that their lives are not as big as they once dreamed they would be, and whose occasional escapism is easily forgiven. The realism evoked by these authors is startling, echoing the way Émile Zola's naturalism shook Victorian sensibility, and it reminds us that good writing observes not just disembodied intellectual pleasure, but also the shared experiences of ordinary lives lived as well as possible.

'Writing is making sense of life,' said Nadine Gordimer when she won the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature. 'You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area.' MacLeod has made sense of several areas here. The opening story, 'Miracle Mile,' provides a graphic sense of the singularity of purpose behind an athlete's daily practice in his brief career as a minor track star watching the rise of his reckless running partner. It's impossible not to squirm at the sensory detail describing the two friends' disturbing hobby: both enter the train tunnel between Windsor and Detroit at night, the first running through it, while the other follows five minutes later. The two runners are not the only ones left breathless, as we read the speaker's recollection of one night when, having fallen during a peril-

ous run through the tunnel, he emerges on the other side, realizing then that his buddy hasn't arrived at the awaited time:

I was actually hoping that he'd been caught on the other side, or that he'd chickened out, or come to his senses. I didn't want to think about the other possibility but it still came flashing into my head. For one second I imagined how even at top speed, there would still have to be this one moment, just before the full impact, when Burner would feel only the beginning of it, just that slight little nudge of cold metal pressing up against his skin.

The same bonding is described in the title story, in which a group of bricklayers goes out for lunch on the final day of one of the temps and a fight breaks out; in the nostalgic exploration of kids playing road hockey in 'Good Kids'; and again in an exploration of memory in 'Adult Beginning 1,' in which a group of lifeguards dare one another to dive off a pier, with devastating consequences. No sentimentalist, MacLeod captures both the excitement that lies behind such camaraderie, and the anguish when human connectedness is lost, whether through death in the story of a man who loses his wife and son in a car accident ('The Number Three'), or through the gradually declining health of forgotten line workers in southern Ontario whose jobs are being outsourced, and to whom a young boy delivers pain medication on his pharmacy delivery route (an old man's handshake is diminished to a 'flaccid jumble of separate fingers that won't squeeze together right' in 'The Loop'). In 'Wonder About Parents,' the metaphor of a head-lice infestation informs a fragile history of family and relationship. To his great credit, MacLeod elevates the circumstances of all of his characters and never lets us forget their dignity.

104

The same cannot be said of Anne Perdue's treatment of her deluded and often hypocritical characters in another debut story collection intriguingly titled *I'm a Registered Nurse Not a Whore*, where the Toronto-based writer's satire trumps her charity toward them. These are marvelously funny and dark urban tales about desperate people engaged in desperate acts. In 'CA-NA-DA (One little two little three Canadians),' Perdue gives us a recognizable portrait of a well-meaning liberal whose arrogant bid to improve humanity inspires her to house a Haitian refugee and her infant son, while her own overgrown and indulged son still lives in the basement and rules the roost. At the same time that she is acculturating the Haitian woman to Canadian life, her son is fornicating with the refugee behind his mother's back; the theme of 'screwing and getting screwed' lives below the surface in this story, with each character manipulating another to his or her own benefit. 'The Escapists' is a wickedly humorous depiction of the

kind of couple we always encounter on vacation and try to flee, but there is no avoiding the painfully embarrassing antics of Doug and Shar in 'Puerto Vallarta or Puerto Plata or Santa something or other.' The couple is foiled by a pretentious pair whose contrasting civility raises the stakes even higher.

The tantalizing if misleading title of the collection comes from a throwaway line in the opening story, in which a hapless drywaller tries to save money by drilling his own hole through a tooth that has been giving him pain, but we can see that no amount of ingenuity will ever save him from himself. Again the real story is taking place below the surface. 'Underwriting Loss' demonstrates how to feel safe in a world that is increasingly hostile and offers no security; the murder of a local convenience store owner sparks a descent into fear: 'After that the scales start to tip from the power and the glory of human connectedness to the neediness of gluttony, anger and greed.' These stories are wonderfully varied in tone, and the voice of each character is well inhabited, whether it is an alcoholic grandmother, a teenaged dishwasher, or a suburban father who, panicking during the dreaded visit from his mother-in-law, hides the barking dog in the barbecue and forgets about it until his daughter moves to ignite the grill. Like MacLeod, Perdue redeems her characters by affording us a glimpse of their hopefulness and their desire for unattainable perfection.

105

In Rachel Wyatt's new novel, *Letters to Omar*, the recently retired Dorothy Graham is also determined to achieve perfection, whether it is through her pastime of penning unsent letters to her hero Omar Sharif, or to others who she imagines deserve either her admiration or her admonition. These letters reveal a well-meaning busybody who might best turn her righteousness and indignation inwardly in self-improvement, rather than inflicting her boundless energy upon improving the world she lives in, with often hilarious results. With no children of her own, she interferes in the lives of the offspring of her friend and her cousin. Dorothy and her cohorts Kate and Elsie decide to put together a fundraising effort for a charity organization by hosting a dinner in aid of food delivery to remote parts of Afghanistan. The novel is worth reading for the description of this dinner alone, a nightmare of epic proportions. For example, the do-gooders decide that the local homeless people should receive the leftovers at the end of the banquet, a themed meal of goat, baklava and other foods that the women wrongly imagine are Afghani staples. When the homeless men arrive in tattered clothes, the media cameras are turned upon them:

Dorothy was beside them now. 'Come right in,' she said. If anything could save the situation, it might be these three ragged intruders. She turned to the guests. 'These are some of the people we are trying to help.'...

At that moment, a man with a camera on his shoulder came in... The camera was turned on the homeless men as the older one said, 'Who eats this shit?'

'Act like we're not here, everybody,' the woman said.

People began to talk again. Politely they watched and didn't stare as the unexpected guests stood up, each taking a bottle [of wine] from the table, and went out into the street again. There was applause, as if it truly had been a staged scene.

106 All three of these older women are equally deluded about the nature of love, a theme reflected in the lives of the younger characters as well. Wyatt has a gift for developing characters who use humour to respond to otherwise dire situations. This is one of the strengths the women have developed in old age, along with the wisdom to sustain friendships over a long course. One of Wyatt's perennial ideas is that, no matter how introspective we are, we seldom understand the true nature of our relationships, even those with our oldest and dearest companions. Some of her themes emerge most poignantly through the letters penned by Dorothy (of which we could have had more in the novel). Here, for instance, is how Dorothy sums up her observations in a missive to the Queen: *'I have to tell you that, wonderful as old friends are, they are not always perfect or even reliable. In fact, they don't always listen.'* But it is the company of old friends that provides the pleasure, and most especially the laughter, that allows us to gain perspective on the nature of charity both at home and afar.

—Liza Potvin