

Poetry

Leslie Vryenhoek, *Gulf*, Oolichan Books, 2011

Glen Downie, *Local News*, Wolsak and Wynn, 2011

Carleton Wilson, *The Material Sublime*, Nightwood Editions, 2011

Place is undeniably a recurring concern in Canadian poetry, a backdrop to which we constantly return. Perhaps this is an especially Canadian notion; so many of us are from somewhere else, it follows that our motifs circle themes of travel, loss and the subsequent search for home in its myriad meanings. And even if we are not ourselves displaced or itinerant, Canada has such an immense physical geography that we are impelled to try and make sense of the space, to reach across it, to contain it within the frame of the poem. Perhaps this delving into identity and place represents a longing for lost childhood, a search for 'the soul's address,' an endeavour to preserve, to claim. Poetry has a potential to do this, to be the vessel that moves between consciousness, time and borders, be they tangible or ethereal. We look to poetry to understand better where we're from, and who we are. In distinct ways, these three books address these questions.

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The cover image of Leslie Vryenhoek's first collection, *Gulf*, is taken from a painting entitled *Flying West Across the Atlantic*. It depicts lines stacked as if to suggest strata or various horizons. This is apt, given that the poems in *Gulf* speak of borders, travel, the traversing of lines (as here, from 'Failing Geography'):

How is it that some hold maps
in their heads—whole cities unfolding
in cranial creases, pricked
with push pins that stand out
in gray matter, directing them back
to every place ever been?

The poems arise out of an uprooted childhood and stay with the theme of displacement. They imagine the lives of earlier immigrants, ponder ways of trying to fit in: 'the craft of speaking softly' ('Conversion'), and how we employ objects and names to try and define ourselves, to track our own topography. In the last section Vryenhoek touches on ways that human connection can become an abode: 'I moved into you/like a desperate tenant...' ('New Tenant's Lament'). Ultimately, the poems convey a sense of finding a home through close engagement with a new landscape and the confidence that comes with a more sage acceptance of cultural difference. The book

maps the struggle to make sense of the past and arrive at an uneasy settlement.

I found it intriguing that the collection comprises separate lyric poems, arranged in four sections, when the theme of the work is so cohesive, so well explored, as to suggest a long poem. Although the individual poems do work separately, I glimpsed a more experimental book concealed within a traditional structure. A poem like 'Going, Gone,' that employs an auctioneer's voice to list objects signifying a family history, speaks to this tension; its commanding use of collage reaches for more various forms than the individually titled poem. Vryenhoek has an assured voice; the poems have a taut, precise clarity that demonstrates skill and talent. They particularly shine where they least employ anecdote, allowing imagery and language to work their magic. The poem 'Unspooling,' for instance, does not allow the narrative to dictate the image,

the peculiar sharp rubbery smell of a blue bathing cap,
its hundreds of tiny tentacles waving as if some anemone
had attached itself to your mother's skull...

and,

the hot *whump* of the kerosene torch/your dad lit

Here, the conjured pictures are vivid and sensory, leaving us with a sense of mystery and longing. 'Beacon,' too, has freshness and lucidity, though the final (over-explanatory) stanza modifies that effect. Several times while reading this collection, the creative writing teacher in me wanted to say, 'you might try cutting the last stanza' or 'nix the last two lines...don't tell us what it's about.' The language and imagery are compelling enough not to need autobiographic clarification. Why have the poem tie itself up neatly at the end and protect us from emotional discomfort, making the arcane stolidly reasonable? More mysterious and powerful are poems such as 'Gladiolus borealis' that let the music of the language perform itself,

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You reach

for what you relinquished:
the cottonwoods' summer blizzard,
a shudder of thunder, heat,
heat and Aurora Borealis,
her impatient fingers reordering
a turbulence of stars.

Gulf is a strong debut; it will be interesting to follow this poet's future direction.

Local News is Glen Downie's seventh book. Although diverging in its (prose poem) form, it nevertheless reads as a continuation of his previous collection, *Loyalty Management*, that won the Toronto Book Award in 2008. *Local News*, too, is rooted in Toronto (though does not name it), and engages with the significance of human habitats—how and where we live, and how this might show us who we are. The dedication, 'for my neighbours,' could be a warm welcome or a wise preemptive move, given that much of the content views the human condition bleakly.

Downie employs the device of 'poet's eye as camera,' roaming from room to room, then out into the outside world, to the neighbourhood shops and then to the mall. The first section, touring the interior of a house, is particularly inventive. It reminded me of children's stories in which the inanimate objects in a child's room come to life. Jangling with surreal vibrancy and suffused with a sinister edginess, many of these poems have a sting in the tail. For instance, 'Bedroom' concludes,

the barren desert of the unloved, the straw-strewn, smelly cage
of the wed-too-long, the unescaped, the suicidal.

Barbara Nickel's 2007 collection *Domain* is similarly organised around the rooms of a house. Whereas Nickel explores her family history and demonstrates various poetic formal structures, Downie's book is full of dark humour. The poems are dense, cluttered like stuffed rooms, the voice gossipy and shrewd. As in his previous work, an insightful psychological intelligence runs through the book—a sort of playful thing-theory meets Freud. Everyday familiar objects are placed under the microscope, their meanings re-envisioned and mirrored back to us. The lens is unflattering: we fill our lives with things we don't need, and our domestic detritus and rituals are poignant and absurd.

This is a fascinating collection—funny, dark, conflicted. It shines a merciless light on how we hoard—we need our homes, our possessions, our community, the big-name stores, even as we rail bitterly against them. But these poems are also compassionate and imaginative, deeply humane, political and brave in their protest, as evidenced in 'Toys ЯUs,'

Toys are not us. Toys are her. We're the job, the mortgage, the gastric ulcer, spiraling credit card debt. We're identity theft, kiddie porn, the cut-up parents of missing children. We're all the body parts or weapons you can cram in a gym bag. We're immunizations, all-hazard insurance, homeland security, micro-chip ID. We're the twin towers of western capital, more vulnerable than U.S. Steel ever dreamed. We're exploding sneakers and unclaimed luggage. We're high blood pressure, asthma, tainted water, mad cows in plague piles. We're AIDS and SARS and weapons of mass destruction, playground equipment made water-resistant with cancer-causing agents. Toys are not us. Fears are us.

The Material Sublime, Carleton Wilson's first full-length collection, is a handsome volume, its simple cover elegant and understated (reminiscent of the Faber poetry line in the UK). Wilson designed the book himself and clearly knows what he's doing; much care has been taken here—the paper is ancient-forest-free, printed with vegetable dyes, the fonts a classical grey. Several chapbooks preceded this collection and the poems are well-honed, each line working alone, the line-breaks subtle and elegant. The work is less about a subject than about reaching toward it—more meditation than message. Like the work of Mark Doty, Wilson's poems locate themselves in the everyday physical world: cities, parks, houses. They name places: Bloor Street, Granville Island and, also reminiscent of Doty, the language is unflashy. Yet, there is a close attention being paid that leads us to re-engage with the ordinary and think again about how we live.

The Material Sublime is book-ended by two sections that explore the Junction district in Toronto. 'Junction Sonnets' (previously published as a chapbook, which won the E.J. Pratt Medal for Poetry in 1998) is gritty, tight, crosshatched by imagery of train tracks and brickwork. 'Junction Elegies' consists of five prose poems with a potent sense of place—overlaid and changed by memory. Wilson works well with the long line; the poem takes on a feel of incantation, interior monologue.

The strongest pieces in the collection's longer middle section concern nature and animals. Entirely unsentimental, they carry an ominous, dark sense of danger, even violence. Wilson invokes Heaney but I was reminded more of Ted Hughes in some of these poems, as in this excerpt from 'Intelligent Crockery,'

I will just lie here in the cool grass
with the smell of freshly dug earth
rooted in my head
and feel fiendish for a while, be a badger.

Less effective is the handful of poems that employ religious language and imagery. They seem overly abstract and out of place in a collection so otherwise rooted in the mortal, the earthy. I wasn't sure if they were satirical or perhaps exemplary of the found poem, but alongside the rest of the collection they seemed incongruous.

As we read more on-line and as even the idea of the material book grows nebulous, it is deeply heartening to find physical books of poetry being made as lovingly as this. Poetry: possibly the last outpost of book-as-object, the material sublime.

— Miranda Pearson