

POETRY

George Fetherling, *Plans Deranged by Time: The Poetry of George Fetherling*, edited by A.F. Moritz, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2012

Patrick Friesen, *A Dark Boat*, Anvil, 2012

Anne Szumigalski, *A Woman Clothed in Words*, edited by Mark Abley, Coteau, 2012

I should begin with a personal confession: Despite having seen George Fetherling's poems in journals, I was unaware until this book of the quality, the volume, or the range of his work, which came as a revelation. His poetry is not easily categorized, as it blends qualities that do not so often co-exist in Canadian poetry, such as wit, informality and broad social awareness. For despite his editor A.F. Moritz's downplaying of this aspect, Fetherling is a public and political poet. Like Gary Geddes or the Dennis Lee of *Civil Elegies*, he takes on major issues such as the individual in the community and our ignorance and neglect of history, albeit from a decidedly subjective perspective. He is no casual bystander, but a concerned witness.

Yet his stance is resolutely unrheterical. His plain, informal and laconic language has Audenesque overtones, but is not self-consciously 'street language.' Thoughtful and contemplative rather than intellectual, Fetherling is self-taught: as he writes at the end of 'First Signs of Wartime Spring,' 'whatever I know I've learned by/eavesdropping.' Thus, though it sometimes feels as if he is manipulating abstractions, and he certainly does not avoid large generalizations, they come across as findings, the result of inner argument rather than impositions of grid-like predigested meaning.

This is partly because such conclusions are anchored in very precise imagery, as here in 'Memorandum for the File':

another such day long ago
when morning was finally revealed
once silence reached a
crisis then broke like a fever.

Notice how that last line break before 'crisis' *enacts* the meaning—a tiny detail perhaps, but indicative of true poetic skill in cadence and verse movement. It is apparent, too, in the superb timing at the start of 'Ancient Beliefs':

Here we do
not worship ancestors
we treat them
for what they are,

part memory, part
parasitic affliction.

He finishes with this:

It is also our belief
that what's not paradox
is allegory.

This ending feels more than a neat dictum because of the argument and the imagery that have preceded it.

The images are not simply precise and evocative; they are also witty. While broad humour is rampant in Canadian poetry, not to mention the current fashion for high octane whimsy, Fetherling is one of few Canadian poets—Susan Glickman, Don Coles, Don McKay and Gary Geddes are others—who could be termed witty. Many of his poems tend toward aperçu or epigram. The reader is constantly surprised by an unexpected analogy. This sometimes begets an incidental felicity, as in 'Radio,' where the poet sees multiple couplings:

...too many vacancies and embalmed businesses
and railyards where the only sound of life
is freight trains having rusty sex...

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But often, as in excerpts from 'Singer,' a book-length elegy for his father, the wit provides a way of encapsulating a hard-earned disillusion that is central to the exploratory nature of his work:

I think of him photographing a buddy of his
then turning the camera on himself.

A click rings out.
An image falls to the ground.

Such lines give us the bracing verbal equivalent of a cold shower. Especially when combined with his implicitly ironic stance and the way he handles the longer line, his methods recall more the meditative Don Coles than Auden, enabling him to sinuously embody and articulate the twists and turns of his thinking and feeling.

Though A.F. Moritz in his erudite and densely allusive introduction rightly notes that Fetherling's 'melancholy awareness' displaces any overtly political engagement, he seems to me to spend too long discussing the social role of the contemporary poet or man of letters rather than focusing on details in the poetry that might add to the reader's understanding and enjoyment. He does, however, bring out those elements of Fetherling's critical self-examination that underlie

his empathy for members of the similarly disillusioned wider community, and makes a good case for recommending Fetherling's poetry to the expanded audience it deserves.

Patrick Friesen's *A Dark Boat* maintains and expands upon the qualities we have come to expect from his poetry: an interest in the elemental combined with a gift for brilliant, intense simplicity, the kind that cannot be faked, such as this from 'Balcony':

god only knows and
blesses them the way
a still wind unnerves
the leaves

The title poem ends with

the fadista sang
of a dark boat

you make do
with the night you have

And in 'Rua Azul' we find a 'satanic cat infesting a doorstep.'

116 Unlike the Canada of his earlier books, these poems inhabit a familiar sunstruck Iberian landscape dominated by song, especially the Portuguese *fado*, mules, blood, guitars, Lorca, love and death. There are many details to admire, but unless I have overlooked some major unifying theme, these poems, interspersed at times with black and white photos, build to a series of discrete images, declarations and situations that are remarkable less for a shared context than for a common atmosphere and tone. Like ghazals or some Imagist poems, *A Dark Boat's* poems are to be read, heard and accepted rather than to be argued with and analyzed: They make declarations and affirmations and conjure vivid scenes that I can admire for their colour and musicality even while they do not touch me emotionally.

Anne Szumigalski came to Canada as a young adult, one of a relatively small number of British poets who have contributed to recent Canadian poetry. The others include Robin Skelton, Peter Stevens, Christopher Wiseman, Patience Wheatley, John Thompson and Mark Abley, who is Anne Szumigalski's literary executor and editor of this volume—but when set in the Canadian literary mosaic among, say, Italian, Greek, Japanese, Chilean or even US poets, their work might seem small and inconsequential. Some linguistic and cultural transitions are easier and therefore less exciting than others: While re-

taining much of her Englishness, Szumigalski takes on, and in her poetry embodies, crucial aspects of the Prairies.

Abley makes the best case he can for these chronologically arranged remains, but even he concedes:

Like so many writers, Anne had long struggled to find and fine-tune her voice. The poems published in the first section of this book may not always be successful, but they are always interesting—and the interest derives partly from the hard labour they reveal. The disappointments and false starts that she suffered made *Woman Reading in Bath* possible.

Unlike some of her male counterparts, Szumigalski wears her role as poet lightly. Speaking in 1974 of the sense of community that she found in Saskatchewan, she says,

I write mostly about people, their tragedies and loves and quirks. I am happy with the various groups and individuals with whom I have written; whom I have helped; who have helped me. I suppose, that in a place of great spaces and few people, every person is more important than he is in the crowded countries of the Old World.

Whether true or not, the first drafts assembled here, along with some hitherto unpublished and mostly untitled poems, certainly display a bracing directness and a determination to communicate, as in 'People of the Bog':

As I stood by and watched
a leathery grandfather
was brought up out of the peat
the third that day
they lay
in a row on the stiff heather

they in their tattered skin
and thongs, shackled by rings
to their rusted broken dirks

Here and especially in the later prose pieces, such as 'Story of the Heartberry,' which is attractively told, as well as in the early versions of plays, one wonders about the intended audience for this book. The repetitiveness of the 'Litanies,' for instance, can perhaps be valued only by those who share the poet's religious faith. Those who had met or already knew the author may well find this volume an endearing addition, but because of its lack of inner coherence I doubt that it will serve for others as a good introduction to her work.

— Christopher Levenson