A Peeled Wand
by Anne Szumigalski, edited by Mark Abley, with foreword by Elizabeth Philips

Reviewed by Sarah Klassen

Since her death in 1999, two volumes of Anne Szumigalski’s poems have appeared, both edited by Mark Abley. When Earth Leaps Up (2006) contains poems unpublished at her death and A Peeled Wand (2010), poems selected from her sixteen collections. Both of these posthumous volumes are valuable in keeping alive the vibrant voice and wisdom of a major prairie poet in a time when new outpourings of verse threaten to push the work of earlier poets, even strong ones, into the background.

Not that Anne Szumigalski’s work will easily be forgotten. The first poem in the present volume, “Our Sullen Art” (13), is a kind of poetic credo that illustrates her command of language and imagery and her ear for sound, qualities that have always delighted readers and will continue to do so. A later poem reminds the reader: “How dear to her is the journey of the mind” (82). This journey, sampled in A Peeled Wand, is an exploration of life that seems to know no boundaries and engages the willing readers’ intellect, senses and imagination.

Tomas Transtromer refers to his poems as “meeting places” where “a sudden connection [is made] between aspects of reality that conventional languages and outlooks ordinarily keep apart.” In Anne Szumigalski’s work, too, such connections abound. In one poem she celebrates her breasts, “twin puddings stirred / by the hand of God” (30); in another she remembers “those sundays we spent / in a tent of sheets / testing our hold on each other / caressing with silky pinions / one another’s flesh” (38); and in still another “The gibbous moon in the trees is the head of / a child slipping out between sturdy thighs . . . ” (18). Szumigalski revels in the world’s earthiness, filling her poems with sensual details her memory has stored up like treasure.

But her fertile mind is just as ready to enter the domain of the spirit, a landscape that in her imagination is not so distant from the natural world. Angels, for instance, “roost in trees [] / not like birds / their wings fold the other way.” (74) and “Our first gods were fishes.” (77) In the latter poem she concludes:

Nothing for it but to look upward
  to our hope past the pigeons
  burbling on their ledges,
  higher even than the falcon’s gyre. (77)

  Undergirded by such hope, her poetry is a constant lyrical reminder that “earth leaps up / and sky descends / and the two meet like lovers . . . ” (50) Perhaps one needs a childlike mind to understand and bridge these two worlds. Szumigalski, though she aged like any poet, retained a youthful sense of wonder and curiosity, an appreciation of magic and a love of play that is as likely to be mischievous as benign.
Bring me an old plate
And set it under the tree
I want to arrange the crabseeds
So as to resemble
Some kind of disorder (31)

A child – one of the many who inhabit these poems – is captured at play, “Stroking caterpillars, probing drains / stirring pond ooze, scratching / her hot little bum.” But underneath that innocence lurks a “desire for the death of her brother / conceived in your bed last night” (20). The task of the poetic eye is to see beyond surfaces and to embrace the whole of life hesitating to idealize and refusing to sentimentalize.

The humour and insight evident in the poet’s celebration of life are equally present when she turns her unabashed attention to its darker aspects: aging, loneliness, war and death. In “On Singleness” a lonely woman counts her modest possessions: “In the crock a half-loaf, in the cupboard / Cheese wrapped in its vinegared muslin.” (51) The poignancy of this homely inventory is heightened through the question posed by the “Old Woman in Winter”: “which / of these days was first / Which will be the last?” (55)

That question is echoed in one of the war poems, “Shrapnel” (42), by a dying soldier who “ask[s] the earth / is this my final place my own place . . .” Anne travelled in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War and memories from that time act as counterpoint to memories of childhood. The poems written out of war’s destruction do not dwell only on its ugliness and brutality. The dying soldier who asks the above question “wants to curse his enemies but cannot / for he sees them as striplings lying in the grass.” He observes “a small patch of empty sky” and recalls sex and his dentist’s praise of his teeth. Szumigalski approaches her subjects with insight but also with a light touch.

Readers will savour and reread these melodious, fresh and probing poems, and will agree with Elizabeth Philips, who writes in her helpful foreword that Anne Szumigalski’s work is “deeply abidingly humane” (9). ॐ

Sarah Klassen writes both fiction and poetry and also edits and teaches. Her most recent publications are A Feast of Longing (stories) and A Curious Beatitude (poetry). A new volume of her poetry will appear in spring, 2012.

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