Welling
by Margaret Christakos

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Margaret Christakos, in the sixth poem of her “Evolution” series, declares that “My child is a child of the experiments / vested to evolve from her pointer finger, her clicking / iris flight” (58). These lines function as a declaration of her poetics, a poetics that has buoyed her through seven previous poetry collections and one novel. And it is this poetics that will carry us through the reading and analysis of this, her eighth collection.

But what distinguishes the above quotation from what would otherwise pass as verse? After all, it does exhibit a verse structure. It has a play of syllables and sound. We first notice this with the “v” in the phrase “vested to evolve,” which strikes us with its stark beauty. Then, we encounter the sound and imagery of “finger, her clicking / iris flight” with its parade of “i”s carrying us to the eye of the “iris,” to the eye of the hurricane that is Christakos’s swirling mind. But this “clicking iris” leads us into a questioning of the fragility of verse. Take the word “vested” as an example. What meaning do we ascribe to this word? The primary meaning implies that there is an unquestionable, inalienable right to evolve, an entitlement, if you will. But how does this move from “her pointer finger”? Is that the finger pointing upright, its back to us? It may very well be, for isn’t the thing it signals – that we should “go fuck ourselves” – a declaration of war and a call to be experimental, to defy the norm? But the word also takes us into the realm of fashion, be it religious or secular. So perhaps she is saying that this urge to experiment is a spiritual calling. And we still haven’t touched on “her clicking / iris flight.”

Welling consists of seven poetic series. The poems call to mind Erin Moure’s early forays into verse, the period of Empire, York Street, Wanted Alive, and Domestic Fuel, which preceded her revelatory text Furious. Moure’s early work strained lyricism, taking it to the breaking point. Christakos does the same. Examples abound, such as this from “Fortune,” the second instalment of her initial series “Barrel”:

Someone waves from a silver powerboat & happily
I slide my tonsils to the poplar grove.
His conveyor run of drum-waves
disturbs & a chickadee affirms
me: Be gone, goofball! (13)

That first line strains our ear and our credulity as we await resolution to which the second, with its “slide my tonsils,” doesn’t really respond. Note how the ampersand provides far greater tensility than would the word “and.” With the strained language Christakos employs, there is no question that this is the appropriate gesture. The final line introduces a sudden change in language register.

Lines run quickly in Christakos’s verse, so much so that we may miss the humour buried within. For example, in “Barrel,” we might miss this delightful pun found in “Cold compress”: 
How much raw energy does one need to guzzle from
that creek? Can’t you bathe off a rock with all the
lake gives you? (17)

The couplet form Christakos explores in this poem could be construed as a ghazal – a word that is
often pronounced “guzzle.”

Turning to “Evolution,” Christakos reveals her playfulness in a more overt fashion with “On a
jungle gym, children’s thumbs / ape evolutionary chains out of fashion” (54). The French would call
this “ape” a bon mot. Christakos just takes it out, leaving the world of “evolutionary chains” to arrive
in hyperspace where we watch the dissolution of the lyric:

Crass monkey girl, uncurl your knuckles.
Tic the button, pulse your hyperlink.
Travel to superior playfields bytside.
Hang with codes to joy, (54)

Syntax is a thing to use or abuse as the situation merits – we are “byteside” ourselves.

At the end, Welling arrives at “Wellington,” where an armoury of poetic weapons is stored. Take
the first part, written as a ghazal, where we find:

You can’t balk at walking, there’s nothing silently
mutterable. Your body aches all the way to the apex.

Descent is like a loose cannon, useless wheels amuck.
You feel as stupidly without control as a penguin.

Your hind knows it will hit asphalt soon. Slack chin
wags in front of you like a leash. You follow along (95)

Here we find rhyme, near rhyme, simile, metaphor. Each couplet is independent of the next which is
the nature of the ghazal. Christakos violates this with the enjambment at the end of the last stanza
quoted. She then fools us into thinking that part 2 follows suit, except that part 2 is not a ghazal:

How warm it is in this coldest of gorges from

one body to another. I see over the humps of mount no
solace. Nor lover. Other wounds on the tongue, caught

inside silence. But mirage is a love that is beyond each
curvature. It’s a curvature I cannot catch and for this (97)

Christakos effects a reversal here, as the enjambment becomes the norm

There is much in Welling to be read, considered, analyzed. It is worthy of reread after reread
after reread, which is the hallmark of good poetry as it explores the depths of language. Christakos
has pointed us in a direction that follows the clicking flight of experiment. ♦
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review, Arc, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the U.S. for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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