Holler
by Alice Burdick

Reviewed by rob mclennan

Another book? Another book?

Once upon a time, next week,
I will light a fire on the stairs.
Three wolves in total will sleep
on or near the fridge. A piece of apple
will enlarge three times
due to cat hair and lint.
The blue jays will find a way
to balance on the windowpanes.
All the books in this house will
become human
and tear themselves apart, so what.

What should I feed the wolves
to keep them all at bay?

East coast poet Alice Burdick, a former “big-city dweller” currently living in a small town in Nova Scotia, has long been associated with a loose-group of Canadian surrealists that emerged in the 1980s. Centred in Toronto, where Burdick lived until a decade or so ago, the group would include Lance La Rocque, Gary Barwin, Stuart Ross, Lillian Necakov, Gil Adamson, Kevin Connolly, Steve Venright, Mark Laba and Daniel f. Bradley, among others. The author of two previous trade collections – Simple Master (Pedlar Press, 2002) and Flutter (Mansfield Press, 2008) – as well as five poetry chapbooks, Burdick’s new collection, Holler continues her exploration merging surreal aspects with her immediate, including her domestic setting on the east coast. A few years ago, editor Ross celebrated (and cemented) the loose-grouping of Canadian surrealist poets in the anthology Surreal Estate: 13 Canadian poets under the influence (The Mercury Press, 2004), an anthology that included work by Burdick, part of which would become Flutter, making this new collection, edited by Stuart Ross as part of his Mansfield Press “a stuart ross book” imprint, the second of her titles he’s been involved in.

In her statement “I HAVE EATEN CRUNCHY SURREAL” for the Surreal Estate anthology, Burdick writes: “I have I guess a tangential relationship with surrealism. For the most part, it is a subconscious connection.” She continues:

In general, the real is surreal to me. Accepted practice and behaviour take on a definitely strange hue when regarded beyond dumb acceptance. The world of structures is pretty wonky; the buildings I walk into and ride up and down; the media I gorge on that leaves me hungry in ignorance. Not to say that there is no beauty in all this. I see gorgeous things, speeding past. It’s just that dreams make things clear.
The poems that make up the collection *Holler*, more than her previous collection, focus on such daily matters as her children’s voices, toddlers and sandbars, focusing on the family and geographic immediate in poems that celebrate the ephemeral and question the certainties that everyone else might just take for granted. These are poems that write on television game shows and the ocean outside her kitchen window, as well as the joy and heartbreak that can only come from raising children.

**Toddler moan**

Down near the water,  
a sliced-open teddy bear:  
who did you hear  
crying up there?

Nope, nope, nope.  
Each square fits into a bright green cup,  
a box into a box,  
an animal at rest,  
totally yellow.

A fork into circumstance:  
where were you at 3 a.m.?

Blessing the fractures.  
Blessing the spiders  
mending the fractures.

Given her surreal gaze on domestic matters, writing the varieties of home, one could see connections to the work of Lance LaRocque, in his own recent trade collection, the debut poetry title *VERMIN* (BookThug, 2011). There is a soft subtlety to Burdick’s poems, composing straight, meditative lines that capture a series of moments, or a single moment, briefly held, far stronger in the shorter poems than the longer narratives.

**Body house**

Hazel stands in front of me  
and points to her eyes.  
They are windows, her ears,  
they are windows, and her mouth,  
she says it’s a door.

Her body is a house,  
and she’s home  
for now.  "

Buy *Holler* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781894469708/alice-burdick/holler?blnBKM=1#.T8UhyO2Qj0A