Inventory
by Marguerite Pigeon

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In Marguerite Pigeon’s Inventory, each poem is centred on an image that refers to heterogeneous objects in a world that is chaotic but still seeks and finds absurd and paradoxically meaningful analogies, indulges vagaries of fancy and bursts of logic with wit and tongue-in-cheek or (occasionally) wicked humour.

In “Apartment Block,” Pigeon compares the apartment block to a “novel” with “carefully plotted brick and mortar” in which we might find a “strange story of strangers” and (Pigeon is not above using puns) “in storeys.” From a voyeuristic point of view that reminds us of the poet’s stance, Pigeon lists some of the everyday dramas that characterize people’s lives:

Its locked doors yield scenes: now hysterical,
now dull as dishes, pastoral window sills,
halls of deception, her baking, his music
thumping, their divorce, everyone’s sleep,
and the peaks of sex, always so public. (11)

With knotty truth, Pigeon remarks “All mourn / but find, eventually, peace in the common” which encapsulates what it is to be human and torn between risk and the desire for security. Pigeon further develops “novel” and “drama” metaphors in application to the “apartment block” while the speaker playfully “run[s] a finger / down the occupants’ list” to discover “the characters’ names.” With nonchalance, the speaker closes, “But who cares? / They’ll live this story, then they’ll move on” (11).

As in “Apartment Block,” the poem boldly entitled “Cock” brings unexpected metaphors into play that recall the 17th-century metaphysical conceit. By yoking together dissimilar images through a shared point of similarity, the poet opens up new ways of viewing an object and its conjured subject matter more largely:
Once, you were a dog’s tongue, pleading
at my leg, palm, and mouth for gentle skin
you could not hope to interpret. (20)

That “your panting was faithful and false,” through paradox encapsulates the driven nature of
sexual fidelity when that love is simultaneously selflessly and selfishly driven: “My letter ‘I.’ My
number 1. Wherever you / wander, you bring your drum.” Careful to overturn expected feminist
cant, however, the speaker in the last lines writes, “With some pity, some enchantment, I let / you
lead.” (20)

In the poem named after herself, “Marguerite Pigeon,” Pigeon only tangentially invokes
herself through whimsy and self-banter. “We worry when she speaks of herself / in the third
person,” the poet gently mocks herself. The metaphysical conceit linking Marguerite Pigeon’s
“tongue” to a hammock string that is stretched during leisurely lounging and indulging flights of
imagination is droll to say the least. A note of self-irony in the following lines delights:

She fell in love with her tongue,
but it was a one-sided thing. (44)

Growing ever more preposterous, the speaker prosaically informs that reader that she “cut” her
tongue out and “pounded it, / pulled its fibres into durable thread.” That her “tongue grew back
pointier” and “moved of its own accord” no doubt refers to Pigeon’s growing prowess as a
fashioner of fantastic metaphor and to that phenomenon experienced by many writers, that the
poem, once started, often may seem to write itself.

In “Mirrors,” an image associated with poesy and art as “holding the mirror up to
nature”(to quote Hamlet’s advice to his players in Act III, scene iii), Pigeon allows her subject
free range to write a kind of nonsense verse in which random meanings all the more poignant for
their improvised ease arise. Here, indeed, the “tongue” moves of its own accord, as suggested in
the meta-fictitious “Marguerite Pigeon,” but these lines also represent a co-ordinated discussion
of the nature of art and literary expression:

the mirrors are watching;
telling stories,
distorting, bent backwards to please
or, bellies thrust forward, fat
and laughing at us,
mocking our rooms,
mocking the human eyes (46)

That the “mirrors” also seek to “link” together “images from unlike days,” “selling seats to such cruel dramas/ as the creep of grey hair” or “the retreat of gums,” however, suggests through metaphysical conceit a more expressionist art that goes beyond simple imitation or representation or idealization.

In Inventory, the specificity of the images focused upon as the title for each poem entry leaves the reader with a sense of chaotic multiplicity and interconnection, a postmodern vision that does not seek to discover patterns that reduce, but, more anarchically, to imply an ever extending source of analogy while this slender book could hypothetically be extended to infinity. This collection of poems carries the appeal of something that resembles nonsense verse’s pre-conscious recognition of congruence combined with pithy statement and recognition of the truth in all its paradox and incongruity. One or two of these poem nuggets, as I would like to call them, might even make it into an anthology for children-for-all-ages; who knows?

Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown Press, 2007).

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