Pain-Proof Men
by John Wall Barger

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

“Pain-Proof Men,” we are informed in the back cover blurb of John Wall Barger’s first collection of poems, is a literal translation of the Arab word *fakir*, meaning a Sufi holy man, a common street beggar, or a torture king (absorbing, not administering, torture). That about covers it. Take your pick. From first poem to last, *Pain-Proof Men* presses hard into the senses. In spite of or perhaps because of wading into wacko imagery –

I stood a silent hour
in a broken elevator holding hands
with a lady whose face
resembled a heart left overnight in snow. (81)

the poems sing through a maze of faceted opalescence that tends toward brilliancy.

“Pachelbel’s Canon” provides a good example. The dénouement comes about halfway through as the poet stitches the two halves of the poem together with the statement “What they did for seven minutes,/ we failed at for seven years./ To improvise.” (74) “They” are a Taipei dance troupe doodling through Pachelbel’s Canon, and the same piece provides the background music to his wedding ceremony. The quoted failure contains the real action in the poem. The shaved dancing bodies, the marriage and spoken vows, the big rigs ripping along the TransCanada, and a dog “licking / a nasty lump on her paw” (74): all these point knowing fingers at the young couple’s inability to improvise.

Barger leaps to the particular with his sly commentary in the poems: “I’ve heard the interpreters of happiness on channel five / & was unimpressed” (58). His humour is quick, sure and lasting. In the poem “The Quickening” an adolescent boy shoots hoops in his backyard, aware of being watched by his “gorgeous neighbour.” The ball bounces
astray; chasing it, the boy bangs into his dad, holding a bag of dripping garbage the boy obviously should have taken out earlier. Not content with fashioning an Aw, Shucks poem out of this raw material, Barger brings the neighbour back into the scene – her glasses glinting over Dad’s shoulder. The last lines are charming and mysterious, referring as they do to the title. “I’m not impatient, but/ breathe, harbouring the feeling” (15).

In “Fat Boy” a child deals with the dying though still forceful presence of his grandfather.

Next morning Grandpa is in a box!
I tear down Auntie’s curtains.
I run without my socks.
I run into the forest.
Wind and silence in the branches.
I yell What am I to do.
I watch these yells in the branches.
In the silence.
They seem to float. (77)

Even Barger’s asides and diversions in the poems provoke attention (e.g., “into the mighty silence / behind the video store” [65]). The book reads like a rousing whoop-up, and never breaks stride – a grand accomplishment in our fractured lives.

Andrew Vaisius is a writer and childcare worker living in Morden, Manitoba.

Buy *Pain-Proof Men* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):