The Last House
by Michael Kenyon

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

The poems in *The Last House* hover very close to despair, the scenes and tableaux drawn from personal memory, ancestry, and contemporary culture. The collection is held together by the encompassing metaphor of the “last house,” whether that “house” is a corner of a deserted shopping mall or a memory of a childhood cottage. The introductory section includes glosas on poems by Rumi and Rilke, among others; the three main parts include “I The Last Countryside,” “II Tenement,” and “III The Courtyard,” followed by a closing section, “Chorale.” The poems in this fallen world range from the rawly sexual and disturbingly predatory series “Trace” to the troubling memories – not untouched by nostalgia – in “Broken Roof,” the psychologically layered and complex “The Cellar,” the lyrical love poem “The Stars,” and the touching elegy for a deceased pet in “Géza.”

“Trace” begins with an elderly damaged speaker watching his ex-partner walk away from him towards a shopping mall, a direction that implicitly represents a move from the pastoral to the urban setting. In watching her receding figure, the speaker notes her seeming “otherness” after familiarity that makes her appear almost desirable in his eyes:

. . . In tight jeans her ass cheeks
crowd every quick step away while I rub
my hands together like Grandfather did
when he’d forgotten who we were, his hands
squeezing his fingers, then hiding themselves
like small feral creatures, half-asked questions,
beneath the sheets before we had a chance
to respond. (23)

From here the poem descends into a nightmarish world in which the same female figure is seen staring into a sporting goods window. In a kind of trance, the speaker envisages young boys
voyeuristically gathering around “the reflection / with a magnifying glass to study / the path light takes through cloth” (24). The security cops patrolling the mall, identified with increasing stylization as Defeat, Revenge and Victory, prevent the boys from acting out their projected violation of the woman. They, in turn, take action in the following telling ways: the first cop “arrests the boys,” the second “leans into the woman” and the third uncaps his ballpoint pen in a sexually suggestive way. This is an intricate and disturbing poem that makes powerful statements about society and fallen human nature.

In another phase of the “last house” motif, “Broken Roof” of “III Lost Countryside” depicts the speaker’s childhood home and evokes a kind of lost paradise in even that countryside retreat inside another country. While his mother is associated with “hedges with leaves” and growing things in spring, the speaker finds himself looking for his father “in the face of strangers.” In the cold winter that characterizes the new land, he watches his mother grow “pale” and die:

. . . Candlelit,
Dad sat vigil, then rose up the stone wall
under the timbers my great-grandfathers
used to truss our roof when the valley was
full of trees big enough to fashion masts. (50)

With complex representation, he describes his father’s wayfaring nature in contrast with his mother’s closer association with the pastoral and home. The poem is bleak but beautiful in its suggestion of a lost childhood world, and a ship-building father with wanderlust.

Not even this pastoral childhood home, however, is without vexation: using implicit pastoral imagery and house metaphors, the poem talks about the “branching of time” and “an old door” that opens “each midnight on Mum and Dad fighting.” That the fight is “their fight, not ours” further emphasizes the powerlessness of the children to set their own course in life. “Christmas” was not theirs, nor were their houses “(though the gardens were lovely)”; but this world is not without love as the line “all those times we loved and were loved back” attests:

the moment we made a child out of
almost nothing, what you came with
and I gave away, a child we don’t
know yet. We wait by shuttered cafés. (86)

The sonnet “The Cellar,” in the section “Tenement,” with its connotation of meagerness
in a bare holding, is psychologically complex and elegant. The speaker uses the metaphor of a cellar with a view of inaccessible starlight above to express the experience of old age:

And alone and cold so dying takes
ages while people up top come and
go, send down a bucket on a rope,
send down a question, and are always
fine with my answer. (52)

In time, however, the world “flips” and “I” (the speaker in identification with an old person) “am shucked / and don’t want to go.” Faintly absurdist, the poem includes references to a “pink umbrella” that resists the rain with magical properties, and a pair of mallards, birds known to mate once only. The closing lines echo a conversation between two such “old birds” who half recall desires that once drove them: “I used to talk a lot. Bridge. / The last hot sticky taste of. Yes? Yes?” one speaker encourages the other to continue the conversation to stir his own recollection.

In the vaguely deterministic but not fatalistic “The Stars” of “The Last Courtyard,” attraction between the speaker and the one with “fox brown eyes” proves no accident. In “see[ing] what works” in the loved one also works in the speaker, there remains a strong affinity that cannot be controlled since “It is useless to / choose a direction: current must find us” (95). Paradoxically, the lovers must swim apart “to make the storm less jealous” and not tempt fate. Rather than being providential, this capricious view of destiny touches us with its elusiveness.

Consider the muted but no less moving emotion expressed for a dog that dies in “Géza”: “I loved you / then as I loved the world, for you / were in the world and I was by your side, / and all else was to come or in the past” (95). Here is an honesty of everyday emotion that captures nuances of meaning within agile turns of phrase.

Altogether, The Last House makes for an engaging read, its range and virtuosity are impressive and the collection as a whole unified while it is structured on the concept of a lost pastoral world which, however, is not without love and the possibility of redemption.

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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