The Reinvention of the Human Hand
by Paul Vermeersch

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

This is Paul Vermeersch’s fourth book, his other three being Burn (ECW Press, 2000), The Fat Kid (ECW Press, 2002) and Between the Walls (M & S, 2005). This is the first of his books I’ve had the opportunity to read, and it has taken me into new poetic terrain. Vermeersch bills himself as Ted Hughes’s antithesis in the sense that

I’m coming at the topic of the human/animal in a very different way than Hughes did. I’m more interested in the human-as-animal than the other way around. . . . But creatively, I didn’t want to set out to arrive at a predetermined conclusion with the poems in [The Reinvention of the Human Hand], so ‘feeling out’ is a good way of putting it. I don’t like writing poems that exist merely to illustrate a theory. Like animals, poems have their own life; that is an idea I share with Hughes.

(books.torontoist.com, interview with Jacob McArthur Mooney)

If you’re going to write about the relationship between beast and man, what better place to start than the caves of southern France such as Lascaux. Vermeersch does just that in his opening poem “The Painted Beasts of Lascaux.” Following the traces of the Jungian archetype, he begins

Their discovery has been a kind of homecoming, too.
Part of you has been here before, germinal, hidden.
A painted hand resting on the stone, a molecule,
a memory of muscled, brawling bulls entombed
deep within, their horns goring the darkness
locked in the rock of ages. These yellow ochre horses (3)

Within these scant few lines lies an incredible amount of poetic wisdom and artistry. Vermeersch is not satisfied merely with alliteration, which he uses well in the proliferation of “m”s and “b”s but, at the end of their series in the third and fourth lines, mummifies them in “entombed” where they come together as one in the “mb” of that last word. The image of the bull’s horns “goring the darkness” is what poetic sensibility is all about. And then there’s the “rock of ages,” which locks this resonant Christian prayer through its Jungian antecedents into paganism. He concludes the first stanza with an enjambment leading it inexorably into the second, which talks about centaurs and starships. As if that were not enough to demonstrate his mastery, take a look at that opening sentence. It wasn’t necessary to add the final word. The stanza would have been fine without it. But he places it at a pivotal position. Without precedent, it still strikes home. We, the readers, can accept it even with the lack of foundation, for we recognize that it refers to us. And just to make certain that
we receive that message, Vermeersch rhymes it with the word “you” in the next line. Addressing the reader in this manner in poetry, in the second person, can smack of arrogance. And yet, when we read “part of you has been here before,” we are intrigued, read on and respond with a resounding “YES!” when we reach the end of that stanza. We are the painted hand.

Vermeersch is mercurial, able to change moods abruptly and so, in the third poem, “Bosch Landscape 2010,” he shifts to an understated humour which we find in the first line of the fourth stanza as well as in the surrealistic landscape he creates:

The fires of ignorance, Bosch says, they say,  
are burning all around us, and their smoke  
conceals the corruption. They cannot explain,  
however, the significance of the lemurs  
riding the horses, or the warthog driving  
the blue convertible Eldorado, or why  
the statue of Charles Darwin holds a knife. (7)

The alliteration of the third line attains the soprano’s high C and then is gone with the smoke “conceal[ing] the corruption.”  

He turns to irony at the beginning of section II with the poem “I am Happy to Live in an Age of Plenty,” where he writes “There are more non-prescription painkillers now / than when most of us had jobs that were strenuous / or fatal” (27). In the second stanza, he talks about “rounds of ammunition” and “meat” before returning to Genesis in the last, which reconciles the first two:

And there are far more children now than when we lived  
in the desert and suffered from such loneliness we sang  
our psalms to the empty sky for a little bit of company,  
so many children born, filled with painkillers and meat,  
there is now one child, they say, for every round of ammunition. (27)

I have one difficulty with this poem. If the intent is to lament the decay of society in all its present ills, that first stanza raises a question. A possible interpretation of the first lines quoted, as a result of the line breaks, is that it actually praises contemporary society and its loss of “strenuous and fatal” jobs. If the line break occurred after “jobs,” the addendum would serve to increase the irony due to the ambiguity created. As it is, the existing ambiguity is buried too deeply.

Vermeersch returns to humour in “Last of the Blondes.” He has displayed a fondness for the sonnet in this section while wrapping it around new and bent (in a good way) offerings. This one is no exception, in that it is a sonnet and yet a love poem, but to an amorphous, legendary being – the blonde:

. . . Golden Ingrid,  
before the Valkyries abduct you to Valhalla,  
afterworld of the blonde, will you weave your curls  
into keychains for keepsakes? Will you secretly bleach  
your children’s hair to ensure their passage after you? (39)
Vermeersch has decanted new wine into old bottles with his fresh subject matter or new approaches to the same old same old. I’m including his first three books on my “must-read” list. *
