An Open Door in the Landscape
by Elisabeth Harvor

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In Elisabeth Harvor’s An Open Door in the Landscape, the poems “open” on moments of narrative and lyrical intensity and humour. The collection is divided into sections without titles to focus theme and category, leaving the reader to ascertain the order and balance among poems. Rather than strictly by chronology or subject matter, the poems or clusters of poems are arranged according to some more subtle choreography of image and story, with longer narrative pieces interspersed with short lyrical poems. The poems are at once sensitive and honest in the ruthless way of adolescence, but often with the ironic perspective of hindsight and maturity that adds something funny or at least satisfying.

In Part I, “A Voodoo Camp from the Planet of Never,” we witness the adolescent speaker’s experience working with disabled children at a camp. The speaker’s response, both acknowledging the handicapped child and empathizing with her predicament—that she may never be able to live her life normally, to enjoy “love and sex”—alerts us with its honest sympathy in an age when even the term “disabled” has been replaced by a euphemism (“challenged,” I believe). The speaker feels qualms about her caregiving duties, but she overcomes them after the child, with great verbal and physical effort, matter-of-factly directs her on how to go about dressing her roving limbs. The speaker’s pained response is immediate and eloquent:

On fire
from shame

I seize her hands
by the wrists,

plunge them
into their

sleeves (26)

An equally human and imperfect adolescent speaker is revealed in the mildly ironic “In the City I Will Be Free, I Will Do as I Please There.” Residing in the city with a doctor’s family, the speaker at first continues in a state of suspended living while waiting for the excitement and freedom that she supposes will come with adulthood. In the course of her stay, however, she discovers a silver evening dress in the closet and tries it on to discover the beautiful woman she will one day become. At this moment, however, she hears the doctor and his wife pulling into the driveway, and the moment of revelation turns out to be a crisis as well. A later confession scene is admirably depicted with drama and truth to character as we focus on the doctor’s wife’s response:

She’s stripped down to her slip,
her eyebrows more raised than usual,
she’s been creaming her face,
she comes into my room, she sits sideways
on the end of my bed, her nearsighted gaze

a gaze to confess to. (31)

To the speaker’s relief, the doctor’s wife remarks, “Oh, darling! She doesn’t even care about / that silly old black dress any more!” These few lines show the magnanimous character of the doctor’s wife, who had feared revelations of far worse calamities, such as pregnancy, etc., from the brooding teenage speaker. Not surprisingly, considering Harvor’s prowess as a short story writer, her narrative poems move dramatically with great skill but, unlike in prose, here they are restricted to a few slender and evocative lines.

In “The Boy in the Book” (Part II), the speaker is pre-adolescent and seemingly only slightly younger than in Part I. Here she endures a summer job as a tour guide at her father’s kiln in St. John’s, where tourists fulfill their travel dreams, when she would much prefer to read about “a boy in a book.” While she lies in the marsh grasses dreaming of “Neversummer Range” in Wyoming,” she is significantly only for “the one summer . . . the same age” as the boy in the book:

Horseless, but with
a rider’s guiding wince
drawn tight
up the insides

of my thighs,
my inner body, (42)

These elegant couplets carry the force of an implied adolescent orgasm, and the erotic again surfaces in Harvor’s sensual and sensuous writing.

In “From a Cousin in Denmark” (Part III), Harvor, with tongue in cheek, employs the voice of a cousin in a letter about the problems of writing a family history amid concerns of protecting family privacy. With mock fairy-tale effect, the “letter” discusses a family incident in which a man has killed his wife and then meets his fate with a beheading before the king in Copenhagen:

At his death he left behind three sons, three
orphans of both victim and her executioner,
three sons who went to Copenhagen to lose themselves
in the big city where they called themselves Grey, Green
and Blue because Grey always wore a grey suit,
Green always wore a green suit and Blue was
everally in a mood to wear blue. (68–9)

Harvor ends the poem on an appropriate note of ridiculousness when by remarking on the dangers of such technological tools as self-googling and “Heritage.com.” This poem is a fun treatment of a human issue that has worried writers since Henry James’s essay “The Art of Fiction.”

For a poetry collection that begins with adolescent ardour and romanticism, it ends on just the right note of self-irony. In “For: Dear Companion in Night Sorrow,” the speaker commiserates with a fellow sufferer in
a neighbouring room left lighted all night, only to find out later that the occupant was in fact out of town, and so the speaker’s sympathy was misspent. Nevertheless, through the power of the juxtaposition and its effect as a foil, the poem ends on a true romantic note with the speaker in her bed reaching for the letter that has caused her own sorrow and led her in this way to project her pain on a stranger “night companion in sorrow.”

This is a strong collection, romantic but never soppy, at times hard but always honest in feeling and sympathy, and sometimes even downright funny.

Gillian Harding Russell’s third poetry collection is I forgot to tell you (Thistledown, 2007). Her poems have appeared in many literary magazines, and her second chapbook, Poems for the Summer Solstice, is forthcoming in 2011 from Leaf Press.

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