The Book Collector
by Tim Bowling

Emergency Hallelujah
by Jason Heroux

Reviewed by Jonathan Ball

It happens now.
As, the businessman in the café declares
“it’s a new world,” blowing on his green tea
to display his globalism, it begins,
another salmon run to the Fraser River.

(“It Happens Now” 7)

These lines, the first lines of Tim Bowling’s The Book Collector, display the book’s overall project. Bowling attempts to rehabilitate conventional poetic images, such as this salmon run, despite seeming awareness that such imagery has little relevance in this globalist “new world.” Let the twain stand together, the poet suggests, and illuminate one another. But they don’t.

Of course, the book cannot be reduced to the above summary, and Bowling succeeds with wonderful lyrics and lines on occasion. One deft line, which occurs later in the same poem, describes these running salmon as “Metaphors for the absence of metaphor” (8). But are they? The suggestion here is that salmon have their own alien lives, ones that do not reduce to imagery.

That may be, but this doesn’t tell us anything about the businessman blowing on his green tea. Unless the businessman lives an inauthentic life, and the salmon represent some sort of authenticity, in a simplistic opposition. But this interpretation reduces the salmon to something simply “poetic” and at odds with the above statement that connects them to the absence of metaphor.

What Bowling attempts here is to sketch out a complicated interrelationship that he simply cannot, since he lacks the willingness to vary his compositional strategies beyond the conventional where appropriate. In a basic sense, this is the flaw of The Book Collector. Its lyrical approach claims a social and political relevance that its lyrics do not have, for a variety of reasons, often because as Bowling attempts to stretch as a poet he stretches only on the level of content. Bowling is better when not attempting so much, and hewing closer to tradition. He’s a craftsman, pure and simple, and capable of great elegance:

Men in black oilskins scraped the invisible hull.
They wore the faces of men from my childhood,
men I knew were dead, they whistled songs
found at the bottom of wooden radios.

(“After Arrival” 20)
Not only does Bowling offer up the vivid “wooden radios,” he does so along with the stunning image of wraiths whistling through the possessed workmen. There’s no need for Bowling to try out any new tricks here, because the old ones work, whereas in the previous example he might have fruitfully ventured into floristic experimentation.

This is not Bowling’s especial failing, but a common problem of poets. They pre-claim allegiance, consciously or unconsciously, to some school or program, and forget their allegiance to poems. Bowling does a better job of making more traditional tactics work for him in other instances that still see him pushing at edges:

Somewhere a child is growing into his magicianship,
scarves, coins, cards, the rabbit of one word
pulled from the hat of another.

(“Somewhere a Child Is Growing Into His Magicianship” 46)

A more “avant-garde” poet would have here harangued us with a reference to Jacques (Lacan or Derrida, not recognizing the two as enemies), where Bowling gets the same point across with a stunning, easily understood but not simplistic image. Bowling’s no spring chicken, and he knows how to strut. For the most part, The Book Collector is filled with wonderful lines, although the poems have a stylistic sameness that (as indicated above) can work against the poet’s apparent purpose.

In the odd instance, though, Bowling feigns sophistication and produces drivel. Some lines, such as “What do you want? I hear the universe ask” (“Our Lives Since Moving Away” 18), are unbefitting such an accomplished poet. On occasion, a poem proceeds from an unfortunate conceit:

I couldn’t get out of bed this morning.
It isn’t what you think,
not illness or a hangover. Simply,
I’d become a tributary of the Fraser River.

(“The Return” 29)

This is pseudo-surrealism at its most awkward. Overall, though, Bowling commands his language even if he could do more with his ideas, which would benefit from technical expansion and formal experiment.

For pseudo-surrealism at its most elegant, see Emergency Hallelujah. Jason Heroux’s second collection is less raw and vivid than his first (Memoirs of an Alias, also published by Mansfield), but more accomplished and assured. Heroux does not always work in a pseudo- or quasi-surrealistic mode, but is best when he does, with a knack for gorgeous, moving, lush, dark imagery:

A small forest
walking through us
has lost its way.

We should find the leaves before they forget about us.
Every evening in the city, clocks eat from their troughs
and our shadows lengthen in the street
like dark receipts from a concrete cash register.
As if this life can be returned to the store for another.
But there is no other life. There is barely this one.
We feel the lost forest inside us closing its eyes.

("Lost Forest" 42)

The conceit is established with none of Bowling's hemming and hawing ("It isn’t what you think . . .") but bold declaration, and exhilarating turns ("We should find the leaves before they forget about us"). Heroux masterfully develops the poem's strange conceit and takes it into bizarre places while still maintaining a poetic logic (notice how adeptly Heroux moves us from shadows as “dark receipts” to the sidewalk as a “concrete cash register” and then develops this into an epiphanic insight).

Heroux even manages to revitalize the soap opera cliché of us having only “one life to live” by noting that we “barely” have this. To some degree he can accomplish these resuscitations because his images, like that of the “lost forest,” are struck through with a melancholy that can combat cliché. Many poems forego the richness of somewhat surreal metaphor for simpler imagery, but retain a certain pathos. It’s worth quoting a short poem in full to illuminate this:

There is a sorrow in the world no one owns.
It is dark and early, a quiet Sunday morning.
The snow has fallen where it doesn’t belong.
And a heavy snowplow is clearing the roads.

("A Heavy Snowplow Is Clearing the Roads" 11)

What this poem lacks in richness it makes up for in brevity — where Bowling overcompensates for his salmon with green tea lattes, Heroux remains satisfied and moves on. Should we thus chide Heroux for a lack of ambition? Bowling often manages more than Heroux but Heroux’s effects are more consistent, even if his range within this book is broader. Bowling’s consistency of style makes for a more coherent and fully realized, but less exciting collection.

Heroux often makes strong use of repetition, as in “Next Door,” where he writes “My next-door neighbour is dying next door / . . . It saddens me / four times a month to see how little garbage the dying have” (16). Again, Heroux heightens a simple image (like that of the snowplow) through careful presentation and well-chosen repetitions. Bowling does manage a richer and more musical line, but Heroux has a stronger sense of what style best suits his more varied content.

At times, Heroux also marries this penchant for repetition and minimalist-leaning precision to his powerful imagery. Although heavy-handed, the poem “I Desire a Normal World” packs a punch:

I desire a normal world
full of normal
atomic bombs
to make us feel safe
at night when we’re dead. (39)

Heroux knows when to end a poem, and is more content to let an idea sit on the page without forcing its elevation. In his prose poems, Heroux attempts more fruitful complications. One of his best poems presents a playful, twisted, and disturbing metafictional nightmare:
The dog woke up and stretched his legs. But I’m not a dog, the dog said. I’m a human being. The dog took a shower, ate some breakfast, and drove to work. Please stop calling me a dog, the dog said. You’re giving people the wrong impression — it’s not fair. After work the dog drove home, watched some television, and then prepared dinner. Listen, whoever you are, for the last time, I’m not a dog, the dog said, and looked a little sad. The dog started to cry. But I’m not even crying. This is ridiculous, the dog said, with tears in his eyes.

(“The Dog Woke Up” 18)

Although funny, the poem contains a real sense of terror – the frustration of this “dog” borders on panic. While meditating on our daily dehumanizations, the poet dehumanizes his (lyrical) subject – a clever and complicated approach to both the material itself and the problem of treating these very questions as material. ✷

Jonathan Ball holds a PhD from the University of Calgary in creative writing and Canadian literature. He is the author of Ex Machina (BookThug, 2009) and Clockfire (Coach House, 2010). Visit him online at www.jonathanball.com.

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