

*The Porcupinity of the Stars*

by Gary Barwin

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Gary Barwin is one of those Renaissance men we often hear about but seldom meet. Poetry is but one of his creative endeavours. He is also a fiction writer, composer, and performer. As a poet, he is on the cusp of the experimental and yet, at least in this book, he is also at the intersection of tradition and the modern.

That latter statement may sound weird. And yet, how else can one explain this first stanza from the opening poem, "Planting Consent": "I carried my TV down the stairs / buried it on a hill / with a beautiful view" (10). There is an echo, as if rising from a jar placed on a hill in Tennessee, of Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." Still, one poem does not an intersection make. Enter the opening stanza of "Naked Stones The Whole Day Long":

shaman of the wallpaper  
headboard priest in boxers  
we wander the glad morning  
where the sighing future lies (14)

This calls to mind William Carlos Williams's "Danse Russe," in which the protagonist dances naked in the early morning hours whirling a towel about his head. However, reflecting the less tolerant times of today, the happy genius of the household has become clothed in boxers.

Barwin also employs some traditional effects which we recognize in the second stanza of that last poem:

a sweet flower surrounds us  
our fingers the dark plough of anxious hours  
sun falls on the melismatic bones of heroes  
each cup of clever sky clinging to  
the city like a snowflake in the mouth (14)

Note the flowering of 'r's in the first two lines, the boney rattling of 'c's and 'k's in the rest. Then there is the almost missed internal rhyme of 'flowers' and 'hours.' Yet, there is no mistaking the clearly contemporary sensibility.

Barwin abandons anything even approaching traditional in "Stay Here Warped Hypothesis," unless, of course, a Dadaist wordsmith happens to now fall into that category. The following is reminiscent of the games bp Nichol and Steve McCaffrey played when they were young and both alive within the dim recesses of Toronto:

I must remember to dismember  
the moribund hopscotch of my guffaw  
my cortical scrabble

the angelic bread-breeder wisdom  
that clouds the knees (20)

It is not necessary to understand what he is addressing, it is sufficient merely to enjoy the flow of syllables that emanates from his instrument of inscription. Humour abounds in this piece, and perhaps that is what the guffaw is all about. Take the first two lines in the second stanza: “Was there ever a time when / the mailbox was corpulent with spent fish” – ‘corpulent’ giving rise to ‘spent’ like a birth, ‘fish’ swimming in from unknown seas. Then there are those lines that appear to be compiled from random flipping-throughs of the dictionary, such as “stalemate boomerang fortitude clogging my arms?”

After the audacity of the first part, section “TWO” comes as rather a letdown. That playfulness has not been carried over, as can be seen in the first poem of this new section, “Glacier”:

I wake and switch on the bedside light  
there’s a glacier in my bed  
ice, it says  
snow, it says (32)

There still is wit here, it’s just not as frequent. We wade through forests and jungles of swampland before finally finding gems like the second stanza of “Fourteen Beautiful Dogs”: “a poem doesn’t have to have fourteen perfect lines / or else you’re spitting on graves” (34) But this floats in a pedestrian sea and so is flotsam on the surface.

Fortunately, “THREE” returns us to the playground. “Whatever-It-Was,” the first poem in this section, returns us to whimsy. I love the humour in the lines “the moon does not recall / whatever-it-was” (69) Or there’s “Brick”:

I will take care of the brick  
because it came through my window  
  
it is a damaged bird  
unable to fly (61)

Perhaps what I admire most about Barwin is his openness to his environment. This is exhibited in “Fourth Person,” a response to his daughter’s artistic endeavours. The poem is divided into four parts with the following being taken from “First Person”:

the person with the breasts  
the very long toenails  
the yellow rose  
  
then another one with breasts  
no arms  
a toenail taller than a tree (62)

You get the picture.

Barwin brings a delightfully refreshing reality to the page. He teaches us to see in new ways, even sometimes with the eyes of a child. In his world, words are building blocks. He uses them to erect monuments both to the mundane and to the maniacal. 🍷

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