

*On the Material*

by Stephen Collis

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Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

Is it serendipity that I found this quote from *Eye of the Hurricane* by Rubin Carter on the note sheet I rummaged up for *On the Material* by Stephen Collis? “Because we are made to fear crime to an irrational extent, we learn to accept adolescents sitting in prisons until they grow gray beards. A system so weighted toward retribution and one so rife with error and injustice is a perversion of the natural brilliance of the human spirit.” Carter and Collis force us into a double take in their writing, while snowflakes come down like lead. “And cities go green/ From new ethics or old rot” (17).

People clutch pillows in the  
Stink of the Greyhound station  
Here we are all racially profiled  
Here we are taser armed ready routine (27)

You’d have to have been there or those lines would simply slink by you – the last two lines especially in search of a reader who knows with certainty, when s/he sits on those dirty, utilitarian plastic benches, of the levelling going on all around. On some issues Collis speaks out more forcefully than many of our poets are willing or able to do. For instance, he boldly asks, “How did we go from/ meeting our needs to/ excess and waste?” (77) while two national governments yet debate the Keystone Pipeline on *economic* grounds. “And every caribou knew/ When it was time to run/ Some relation other/ Than economic between them” (19).

This poetry burns straight into your thoughts with a third degree of truth. Words matter. They aren’t frilly or sentimental, hoity-toity or academic. Collis writes in a language unencumbered by tired cliché or overwrought descriptions. His is a direct harkening, devoid of affectation, expressing the gut endurance of each sparking woman/man capable of the “natural brilliance of the human spirit.” “Am I angry/ at products or production?” (76) Hallelujah! Someone – a poet at that – has asked such a piercing, impertinent question, and either answer undermines any creeping complacency to forget to believe again in *other possibilities*.

Collis’s poetry draws a direct line from Pablo Neruda and Nicanor Parra, from Enrique Lihn and Hans Magnus Enzensberger. “We ‘feel free’ because we lack/ The gears to shift down to/ The articulations of our unfreedom” (26). And later he rightly observes: “freedom/ Fighters forget – are we for or against ‘freedom?’” (38). This is one fine difficult book of poetry that calls out to a wide readership. Collis is a force, and vector in modern Canadian poetry. He writes in front of opinion, but never too far in front to lose engagement.

commodity makes us  
cancer when we think  
constant growth is  
the only answer (77)

This sentiment tucked inside the uprising against pathological corporate greed, and an ever-widening division between the haves and the have-nots, comes on the clear voice of a poet: genuine, necessary, intensely social, and deeply intelligent. This is writing our children will also read. ♡

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