

Apologetic for Joy

by Jessica Hiemstra-van der Horst

Fredericton NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2011, ISBN 978-0-86492-631-9, 118 pp., \$17.95 paper.

Reviewed by rob mclennan

**In British Columbia I took long showers, soaked**

in the tub when a painting got ornery. Home,  
the one I know, is water: you and my coast,  
mostly rain. The drought here has lasted 10 years.  
Trucks cruise the highway with water tanks,  
yellow ratchet straps. There must have been  
a blue pail sale: shower stalls are equipped with cobalt  
and a red handle to irrigate limes, new potatoes.  
I try to rinse without wasting but it's impossible,  
isn't it? I tell you I love you when you're not here  
and yesterday you dragged me out of the house  
to show me the sky. *Look*, you said, and I didn't  
care enough, which meant my love was inadequate.  
I want the excessiveness of love without catchment—  
where do all the words we mean to say go? (69)

The first striking thing about Canadian artist and poet Jessica Hiemstra-van der Horst's unassuming first trade poetry collection, *Apologetic for Joy*, is that it is made up of a series of small, carved formal studies. Predominantly known as a visual artist, Hiemstra-van der Horst's poems are meticulously crafted, less a diamond-cut than porcelain, and shaped into small semi-narratives of packed attention. Crafted into seven sections – Anatomy for the Artist, Eating Quince with Musicians, Bad Things Erased by Oranges, Notes for a Dying Amaryllis, Lists for the Small Brown Bat in my Heart, Slum Kidneys and other Domestic Runaways, and Confessions – as much as poems, one could easily call her understated short pieces sketches, empathic in the way her lyric lines flow with fantastic ease.

**Across from the tram stop, the wall says**

"*Therèse, I really am sorry.*" I imagine a 2 a.m. Banksy,  
a penitent sinner. I'm going to scribble in the night,  
request an update: *Therèse, did you forgive?* Did you find  
your lover in an alley clutching a bouquet of regret,  
did you believe the scrawl offered on concrete  
in East Brunswick? My father burnt the maple syrup  
when I was small, smoked us out with scalded sugar  
and curses. He flung my mother's favourite pot into snow,  
hard black mesa. She wasn't home so he proclaimed in felt tip  
on our wide white Crokinole box: *n baran nyina, I'm sorry.*  
My mother forgave him before she opened the door,

before the char filled her nose. She scoured the pot  
with sand and water and love. This is the only grace  
I know: my mother choosing to forgive my father. Agape:  
love so broken open the self falls out. When he left  
I searched for the Crokinole box, hoped  
to make everything all right. (90)

There is something compelling in how Hiemstra-van der Horst seamlessly marries the genres of writing and visual art in her poetry, a theme throughout the collection that she doesn't shy away from, even highlighting it, given that the first section appeared as a chapbook under the same title with Jason Dewinetz's *Greenboathouse* in 2009. These are poems that celebrate detail without dwelling or artificially inflating, working their way through the essential smallness of moments, words, memories, emotions, things and even breath, such as in the slow and halting two-part "The long slow abdomens surface in the night," that includes the line "I discover my snail is a metaphor for everything." In these poems, there feels something important to be savoured, below the surface, something personal and emotionally open and requiring strict attention. Just listen to the cadence of the first stanza of "Eadweard Muybridge captured motion by making it still":

and so I am painting rain on my parents' roof. Some things  
cannot be silenced. A running horse is never still, rain  
is always landing. My parents were always moving away  
from each other. What, exactly, do we do when we paint?  
Are we cartographers of memory, are we painting ourselves  
freeze frame, documenting what we wanted, one thought  
so still it is impossible? Lately I have been wondering  
what we lose when the people we love stop loving  
each other. (111) ♡

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