

*Burning House*

by Richard Lemm

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Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In *Burning House*, Richard Lemm makes gentle fun of the naive heroism of childhood, reveals the shortfalls of social expectations of heroism in a gender-related context, and finally extends this scrutiny of heroism to its natural conclusion on a national and patriotic level. The collection is divided into four sections, including “Heroes,” “Patriots,” “What I Wanted To Be” and “Berlin Follies.”

In the poem “Heroes from the Burning House,” Lemm treats childhood idealism with good humour while the child’s point of view in retrospect is revealed by the reminiscing poet:

My warrior heroes wore spurs  
and cowboy hat, perhaps a cape,  
usually a gun or sword,  
a godspeed talisman – a plain  
bandana from a rancher’s widow  
or a noblewoman’s indigo silk scarf –  
sometimes a mask that let the eyes  
insinuate vengeance. (18)

“No need, no use for armour,” the speaker with tongue-in-cheek avers. On the one hand, these enemies are imaginary and on the other hand, an absence of armour renders the hero all the more brave in his vulnerability. Evidently these childhood rules change, however, for in the last stanza the speaker recalls his childhood self with “trash can shield” and “broomstick spear” and “water pistol” about to waylay his adversary. With high comedy, the speaker imagines his childhood self contemplating the rescue of his grandmother (“napping” in the upstairs bedroom) from the “burning house.” (19)

Lemm’s adult anti-war sympathies come through in the ironically titled “Eulogy for the Draft Board.” With a play on the term “conscientious objector,” the speaker turns the phrase on its head so that the draft board in the United States (Lemm spent his childhood in Seattle) “nail[s] / my conscientious youth with objections” (34). Introducing a tableau that borders on the cartoonish, Lemm describes his heroic self as escaping conscription in Vietnam by “vot[ing]” “with my feet, for a north-of-y’all address” in Canada.

Down south, this year, a high school teammate,  
wounded in Nam, tells me over rum and Coke,  
he’s warned his sons he’ll take his baseball bat  
and break their legs if they’re sent to Iraq. (35)

The speaker’s convictions are strengthened by this expression of his Vietnam veteran ex-schoolmate’s opinion.

“Retribution,” from the second section, “Patriots,” reveals the false vanity and delusory visions of conquerors as they drag the unsuspecting into their battles. In this poem we are led to empathize with Hannibal’s elephant who, like the mighty warrior, is flattered and cajoled into battle against better judgement:

Hannibal’s favourite elephant  
hates the snow, the wind’s icy needles  
piercing his ears, the white howl  
smothering the sky. (62)

That is not “what/ he crossed the vast undrinkable/ turquoise pool to endure.” Tricked with megalomaniac dreams into believing that he was royalty, Hannibal’s elephant is convinced that he is worthy of conquering such a landscape that resembles his “mountainous” self. With the famous elephant, Lemm here creates an analogue for the deluded warrior and an icon for such “grandiose” military failures.

In the third section, “What I Wanted To Be,” Lemm returns to childhood dreams and misconceptions or at least conceptions that turn out to run counter to limited social mores.

A dandelion and buttercup bouquet  
on grandmother’s vanity, the wasps  
in the pears, the long white  
jet plane’s tail in the blue-eyed  
Sunday school Jesus sky, a cavalry  
bugle, anyone with spurs on a palomino, a nurse  
before my best friend called me a sissy. (71)

From the deceived speaker’s assumption that, in giving his grandmother “a dandelion and buttercup bouquet,” he is flattering her “vanity,” to the suggested encroachment of modernism on religious faith with jet in the “blue-eyed/ Sunday school ... sky,” irony is at play. That his best friend calls the speaker in his remembered childhood a “sissy” after he expresses a desire to become a nurse – a career traditionally occupied by female – encapsulates the young speaker’s misunderstood ideals. The stanza is also rife with humour and rattling, unforgettable imagery.

In perhaps the most intriguing poem in the collection, “Actaeon,” the speaker retells the story of the hunter with whom the virgin goddess, Diana, has fallen in love with, but in Lemm’s version, she is not a virgin. During her rape of the hunter, she rubs her own blood on the hunter’s thighs:

I tell you this from a rocky island cave where the priests  
won’t find me. Where my father won’t choke me with incense  
and poison me with more lies. Where my friends won’t insist  
  
that the scar on my chest was from wrestling a wild boar  
or a jealous Thracian whore. Or self-inflicted in my madness.  
That the stains on my thighs are birthmarks, and always there. (113)

Here Lemm undercuts the suggestion of heroics and heroism for a kind of stoical dignity as a birth rite. That the “blood stains” came as the result of no negative experience that may have changed the hero or perverted him in any way may also be seen as a plea for better understanding of the child-speaker who wanted to be a nurse against then accepted social norms and reflect an alternative sexual and personal identity that must be sanctioned on its own terms.

This is a rich and cohesive collection that treats heroism in many forms and guises without apology and with much exuberance and good humour. Lemm has an ear for cadence and by drawing allusions from social culture and history he creates a resonant verse that bursts with energy and personality. There is no doubt about it: the poems “Hannibal” and “Actaeon” should be anthologized for posterity. ♡

Gillian Harding-Russell has published three poetry collections, most recently *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown, 2007). A chapbook, *Poems for the Summer Solstice* (Leaf Press) and a “holm,” *Stories of Snow* (Alfred Gustav) will appear in 2011 and 2012. Poems are forthcoming in two anthologies, one with the theme “Poets on Poets” (Guernica Press) and the other “The Not Forgotten North” (Hidden Brook Press), both to be published in spring 2012.

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