

The Rapids

by Susan Gillis

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Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

When I pick up a book of poetry I do not read it the way I read a novel. The requirements are different. Poetry is not sit-back entertainment while the author does the spadework for me. There is an input needed, an immersion, even. Poetry is the smelly child demanding attention. Reject the child at your own peril because under the caked dirt that child is really your own and communicating in deeper ways than merely the meaning of words.

Susan Gillis refers to poetry as “Anecdote dressed up with lyric. / All this *feeling*. / The illness of the self writing the illness” and concludes “As for poetry, it lurks, / whatever the poets say –” (42). And for that this book hangs around in the shadows, itching to be called out into glaring light and sniffed. “And who alert to arrivals hasn’t heard a shadow?” (79) That’s what I’m writing about.

Gillis asks the question while making an anything-but-rhetorical statement. I sense, in retrospect, that much of her poetry is of expectation. “On the Station Platform” – an interesting everything-and-everyone poem – for instance, simply waits for a train to arrive. Instead of a gutsy, bluesy “Hear My Train Comin’,” the action here is in expectation: first a silent image of the train far down the track, then the physical hulk devoid of noise rolling into the station until finally, “our hundred exhalations willing open the doors” (21). Gillis is patient, and the last line of the poem puts it to rest with a collective action of shared singularity.

This isn’t irony so much as simply the human condition. I find this such an endearing aspect of her work: “the swarm / calling without cease for your answer, / your movement, the hum” (35). This hum catches her attention and propels her writing: “all capacity,” “ready for anything,” “cheering ourselves on” – not random noise, but activity percolating like water over the rocks of rapids. The lightness of the rush of water through the rock garden belies the force and volume before the descent, and contrasts with the quiet calm at the end.

Gillis writes poetry the way a river flows. Her diction attracts our ear to rhymes, off rhymes, and intelligent spins. Listen to the end-line play of these words, all from “Spring Pries At Me”: cities, leaves, aperitif, pepper, together, apart, ports, tracks, and box. It’s an evolution of rhyme. Whether she writes about making coffee, reading Russian novels, celebrating the Winter Solstice (“We’re burning / everything we have” [20]), the Lachine Rapids, even an auction, she writes observing all the angles with her peripheral vision, welcoming our trust that simplicity isn’t simple, nor that she is performing magic. “There is no training for love, only love” (26). ♡

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