

Pneumatic Antiphonal

by Sylvia Legris

New York: New Directions, 2013, ISBN 9780811220408, 48 pp., \$11.99 paper.

Reviewed by rob mclennan

This spring, New York publisher New Directions announced the return of a “reincarnated version of the ‘Poet of the Month’ and ‘Poets of the Year’ series James Laughlin published in the 1940s” through the return of a reincarnated version of their Poetry Pamphlets series. The first four to appear are *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker* by Susan Howe, *Two American Scenes* by Lydia Davis / Eliot Weinberger, *The Helens of Troy, NY* by Bernadette Mayer, and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan poet Sylvia Legris’s *Pneumatic Antiphonal*. Constructed as an accumulation of shorter pieces, *Pneumatic Antiphonal* is a poem that opens and builds, containing multitudes. There is a language in Legris’s work rarely seen in Canadian contemporary poetry. With the glut of poems referencing birds, Legris seems to be the only poet who includes such a rich and detailed language of birdsong. The first poem in the collection reads:

Lore: 1 (premise)

The theory of corpuscular flight is the cardinal premise of red birds carrying song-particles carrying oxygen. Erythrocytic. Sticky. Five quarts of migration.

Through her three previous trade collections of poetry – *circuitry of veins* (Turnstone, 1996), *iridium seeds* (Turnstone, 1998) and the Griffin Prize-winning *Nerve Squall* (Coach House, 2005) – Legris’s writing has long explored a detail of space and sound, and in this new collection the two are densely packed. Throughout the course of her writing to date, Legris has moved from death, cancer and bulimia to bird sounds and Latin. Writing of Sylvia Legris’s work in *Open Letter* (Eleventh Series, Number 7, Spring 2003), Steven Ross Smith provides a lengthy (uncited) quote from Legris:

Of her book-length work, Sylvia Legris has written: [My] “poetry has gone through several shifts: from expressing, in *circuitry of veins*, profound disquiet in relation to disease and imminent death to, in *iridium seeds*, articulating, by increments, those places of relative quiet lodged within the language and experience of grief. In contrast to *circuitry of veins*, in which there is a rather conspicuous tangibility of flesh and in which death has an immediate, unquestionably harsh presence (corpse and all), the poetry of *iridium seeds* radiates from a deeper place, of body, mind, and imagination; death here inhabits more ghostly territory – glimpses of insight hovering on the periphery or poems that are now more obviously meditative and musical in tone and pace. The poetry of “leaf margin” [unpublished, but which led to *dysrhythmic sky*], further removed as it is from the actual experience of death, from the materiality of body, has as its starting point a place that is relatively contemplative. The movement of this work is deliberate, fugue-like in its considered repetition . . .” This is an accurate description, primarily from the perspective of content – although formal considerations are implied. It is in the formal and material mode that Legris stands on new poetic ground.

According to *Wikipedia*, “pneumatic” refers to “the study and application of pressurized gas to produce mechanical motion,” and “antiphonal” refers to “any piece of music performed by two semi-independent choirs in interaction, often singing alternate musical phrases,” suggesting that her title refers to a sequence of propelled binaries. In *Pneumatic Antiphonal*, Legris composes a series of odes that bounce between flight and injury, and between heady song and the collapsed, failed or depleted lung, from “Flight Song of the Old World...” (16) to “Almost Migration” (21). With each poem comes another opportunity for air, and the lack of it. One of Canada’s most underrated and possibly underappreciated poets, Legris writes the complex simplicity of birds, through individual poems between a sequence of lores that run through the collection like a thread, or tether, from the opening poem in the collection to the closing:

Lore: 14 (mirror call)

Quick-striking bittern with a bill like a clapper. Head-bobbing
rhythm-keeping Rock Dove. Rapid-taping sapsucker, red-
naped, nasal. Birds hitting below the belfry and lungs

are two-octave carillons. Fan-arteried. Campanulate. The left
pulmonary veins carry a 25-bronchi clarion from the left lung
back to the heart. Ventricles in a mirror dance of call and call
and call and call . . . ♪

rob mclennan’s most recent titles are the poetry collections *Songs for little sleep* (Obvious Epiphanies, 2012), *grief notes*: (BlazeVOX [books], 2012), *A (short) history of l.* (BuschekBooks, 2011), *Glengarry* (Talonbooks, 2011) and *kate street* (Moir, 2011), and a second novel, *missing persons* (2009). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), *The Garneau Review* (ottawater.com/garneaureview), *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics* (ottawater.com/seventeenseconds) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual *ottawater* (ottawater.com), and he regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmclennan.blogspot.com.

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