
A Something of Crows?

Neil Aitken

The Lost Country of Sight. Anhinga US\$15.00

Alice Burdick

Flutter. Mansfield \$16.95

George Murray

the rush to here. Nightwood \$16.65

Rachel Zolf

Human Resources. Coach House \$16.95

Reviewed by Crystal Hurdle

What do these four books of poetry have in common? Date of publication? 2007 and 2008. Publishers? Different. Origins of author? Burdick and Murray are Maritimers; Zolf lives in Ontario. Born in BC, Aitken resides in California. His *The Lost Country of Sight* is a first collection; Burdick's, a second; Murray's and Zolf's are third books. Three of the four collections speak of crows, this reviewer's favourite creature. So, what do they have in common? Each is good or better.

The cover of Burdick's *Flutter* features evanescent milkweed seeds. They float, prettily and precariously. The book features the quiet of small insects and animals (including crows), a sly subtle humour, a look at the quotidian. The text, devoid of separate sections, seems imbued with light. Many titles are kinky and fun: "The meat leaves, slowly" is followed by "Obsequious Bakery." Some intrigue by their form as questions: "Where are our tiger teeth?" and "Who wants to lose a tooth every day?" At the same time, somewhat insubstantial, they don't always stick.

The cover of Aitken's *The Lost Country of Sight* is a painting based on one of the author's photos. Through part of a boat's hull, a wreck/relic on a beach, is the small figure of a man, his father, barely in sight, almost out of frame. The initial epigraph on loss further sets us up well for the stunning collection, many poems of which focus on the father: pre-death, death, aftermath, looking to the future. The speaker, longing for home, explores various places in Canada, the USA, and Asia. The book deservedly won the 2007 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry.

George Murray's *the rush to here* features a photo on a helicopter pad (X marks the spot) done as a sequence of six (a sextych?)—the gaps reflected in the design of the section breaks, each marked by the same set of six small rectangles, in the shape of the images, but now rendered blank. It is as if the picture puzzle pieces have become interstices. The design is excellent. A very pleasant book to have and to hold. The poems have such a maturity of vision, many on the passing of time, that it's startling to note the author is still in his thirties. Some of the poems are allusive, with mention of astronomers, philosophers, literary theorists, muses, but well contextualized and engaging. "A Moment's Autograph" won the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovation in Poetry. The loose sonnet form allows much. Children, God, Loss, Memories are evoked through sneakily thought-provoking questions and insights, as well as arresting final couplets.

Zolf's *Human Resources* features a photo of what looks to be old stone work, ochre,

in the shape of a distorted male face. What appears to be an ear is suspiciously low, near the neck. Things are not as they seem. Each section (or long poem?) begins with a laundry list following a Human Resources/Business injunction. For example, "How to Write for the Internet" includes "2 write for peckers" and "8 Tell your visitor where to go." Weird juxtapositions meld literature, such as takes on "Leda and the Swan," with business.

Winner of the 2008 Trillium Book Award for Poetry, this is *Dilbert* for the avant-garde.

The four poets use machinery in novel ways. In Murray's "Automatic doors," the body is a machine: "Your mouth a chute // out which language spills past ellipses of teeth." Elsewhere, hinges suggest linking, movement. Aitken denounces with "Your body turned machine." In the wonderful "The Mortician's Bookkeeper," the titular character, addressed in the second person, "crunch[es] numbers," but reveals humanity and proves to be other than a machine, though even machinery has its place. Indeed, "The angel of machinery" is one of the host of different angels in "Litany." Burdick also denounces "Lean mean unconsciousness machines," people too busy to be fully engaged. In her notes, Zolf explains her use of WordCount™ and QueryCount™, as well as the Gematria of Nothing (GON). She also uses "Lewis LaCook's Markov-chain based Flash poetry generators." Impishly, she writes, "All other poems were made by the author's proprietary machine-mind™."

Zolf and Burdick poke fun at the branding of war. Zolf wryly asks of "'Shock and Awe' as it applies / to the new Porsche?" In "Notice," Burdick exposes: "Infinite Justice is really retribution," concluding,

Infinity has no answer,
but can death go on forever?
who do you kill
when all the world is dead?

Murray's "War Memorial" has kids skateboarding on it, desecrating it "with ass and

graffiti." It concludes, poignantly, "Near the street, a soldier in uniform sells poppies, / having long ago made his peace with the thistles." This poem comments further on the one preceding, "An Evolution of Injury," about proclivities for violence: "In just a handful of years / we have guided the open wound / from slash to slit to planned incision." In a love letter from a far away world, Aitken writes, "Even the bamboo has forgotten the napalm at last." There might be worse indignities than war. "Outside Plato's Republic, the Last Poets Wait for Departure" recalls "the experiences of the poets who left China in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre" (Aitken's note). However, there is hope, in this, and many other poems, including one about an earthquake victim who survives for so long only to surrender to death.

For Aitken, hope is found in language: "A cradle of words, candle, camera, / and pen." Throughout the book, letters are a form of communication, connection, solace. If "the pen has claimed / his tongue, rendered him speechless," one still has "the heart-ticking balm of silence." That people are "haunted by words" imbues the book with rich longing and wonder. Coincidentally, Murray titles a poem "Silence is a Dead Language" and says, "No gesture outside / religion seems uncluttered enough." Language, the code, reveals great truths: "There are lowercase letters that can't be / told apart from their capitals," metonymies for parents and children. Burdick playfully uses language, such as the pun ("Mordant twit"), and asserts "we don't want ethical / in air quotes." Zolf, by contrast, uses, abuses, spews language. Business language is ruse; she must reinvent it. "Money / makes words into alien things." Her opening poem called "Start here" begins "The job is to write in 'plain language.'" By the end, her poems are peppered with a series of numbers replacing words. One poem is all numbers, but for punctuation marks and an "ed" suggesting

a number is a past tense regular verb. In the last poem, she reverts to words: “Look for the hidden meaning use it as a lightning rod / more pokes at the communication.”

Language is not disappearing any time soon, as these four books of poetry attest in different, arch, pleasing ways. (Caw, Caw.)

Poetry’s Underdogs

William Anselmi, ed.

Mary Melfi: Essays on Her Works. Guernica \$18.00

Gregory M. Cook, ed.

Alden Nowlan: Essays on His Works. Guernica \$15.00

Linda Rogers, ed.

Joe Rosenblatt: Essays on His Works. Guernica \$15.00

Reviewed by Vanessa Lent

These books, selected texts from Guernica’s “Writers Series,” initially present a conundrum for readers: how are we to read them? And what sort of audience are they directed towards? Certain elements suggest this series is for academic purposes: selections from book reviews, critical literary articles, and bibliographies; while others suggest a more general readership: effusive praise and personal anecdotes from friends and peers, interviews, and creative responses to the authors. The lack of an index or any indication of the original dates of publication of each individual selection may frustrate some readers. In addition, an unfortunate number of typographical errors plague the series. The individual books offer no guidance and it is only when one searches the publisher’s website that we learn the works are “ideal tools for students and for anyone interested in the work of contemporary Canadian writers.” With this in mind, what at first seems frustrating to the academic eye evaporates as one reads through the collections and accepts their place as texts to read alongside the poetry of each author. Expectations shift from an analytical, precise document to a more personal sketch of the artists—their personalities emerge

from the texts as unique and engaging poets. Each book has a very specific way of approaching its author and the introductions penned by each editor (notably, each themselves a poet) clearly indicate what that focus will be. Gregory M. Cook sets up a reading of Alden Nowlan by addressing the tendency of critics to conflate class and region in his work, which Cook sees as a “disservice.” Linda Rogers focuses her collection on Joe Rosenblatt’s Jewish heritage as forming a poet who writes in an ornate, surreal style she identifies as “Canadian literature for European readers.” Finally, William Anselmi focuses on Mary Melfi’s ability to write skillfully across genres of the contradictions inherent in inhabiting particular gender, ethnic, and class positions. While each collection presents strengths and challenges, the free range with which each editor shapes the text results in portraits of the poets as individuals, achieving coherence to uneven levels of success across the series as a whole.

The Alden Nowlan collection presents the most challenging read in terms of how it has been structured. For example, the inclusion of Thomas R. Smith’s introduction and afterword to two editions of Nowlan’s collected poems, *What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread* (1993; 2000), produced for an American audience, cuts down on the variety of voices that the other two books achieve. The point of view of the collection clearly is one that desires to move beyond classifications of Nowlan as a regional writer, a term Cook identifies as “a critic’s mark for class-ism.” I wonder, however, if Cook’s emphasis on the damage caused by such labelling goes a bit too far. While he laments that reading Nowlan simply as a regional writer does his work a “disservice,” I worry that reading his work without acknowledging his identity as a Maritimer does a different sort of disservice. Considering that many people view Nowlan’s greatest strength as his ability to capture an