

Book Reviews

HAPPY YOU ARE HERE.

BY AYAZ PIRANI.

WASHINGTON, DC: THE WORD WORKS, 2016. 75 PAGES. \$21.95.

Ayaz Pirani's *Happy You Are Here* takes the reader on a non-linear narrative through 41 poems that appear as scattered glimpses of the world. Whenever places, people and encounters are shown we always arrive partway through the events unfolding. The speaker struggles with the internal conflict that comes from perceiving his poetry as part of a transcendent holy tradition, and the inescapable self-deprecation caused by the numerous limitations he possesses as a mortal human in a world too big to grasp. The poems fluctuate between sharply rendered observations about self and place on a global scale as they relate to war, tragedy, love, weather, the past, death, grief, faith and poetry. All the while a history of fellow prophets haunts, encourages and evaluates the speaker's every move.

This is one reason that the speaker condemns himself rather than presenting himself as an omniscient narrator. He wants it known he is a reluctant, ill-equipped messenger of God. In "Immigrant Astronaut" he explains that an outside force in the form of a hummingbird has made him its mouthpiece. With this concept in mind, we are introduced to the speaker's vernacular of metaphors, which include dark-haired beauties, the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania, and a mysterious lover most commonly referred to simply as "her" (19). These ideas are woven into the observations he renders in each poem and they help the reader string together a narrative of love and loss that is both uniquely personal and crucially shared. The old adage 'misery loves company' is certainly evoked by the speaker's accounts of wrestling with empathy and seemingly incommunicable loss in "Girl Without Limbs" and "Space for Grief." But it is more appropriate to say of Pirani's poetry that misery can transcend the boundaries of our confined subjective experiences and bring disparate souls together in "this world / of diminishing returns" (16). We see this reflected in each voyeuristic poem, but this conclusion is not so easily reached. The speaker is not always

confident he has found the means to “make it to the Ngorongoro Crater,” his self-prescribed stamp upon the world that he must fill. Furthermore, the speaker is all too keenly aware of what his poetry *cannot* do. In “Holiday in Necropolis” he is plain spoken in regards to how “it won’t help to look / at the big picture. / We’ll ask each other, we’ll ask ourselves. / The answer won’t satisfy” (46). It is this inability to escape the confines of his subjective experience that defines Pirani’s narrative and poetic struggle (41).

Pirani’s poetry indirectly asks a very specific question: in the face of children with their limbs gone or your baby dead in your arms, what can the poet be expected to accomplish? This depression of the spirit is most evident in “Gift Shop” where the speaker positions himself and his partner—the descriptively illusive “her”—as people who have found a way to escape the negativity and darkness of the world around them. However, they almost immediately realize that to the tourist kids they appear at best fake and at worst lies to trick them into thinking there is hope. Only at the conclusion of the collection does the speaker start to find the answers to the purpose of poetry he seeks. In “Poem by Leigh Hunt (1784–1859)”, the speaker writes a poem about the memory of his stillborn child. In doing so, poetry’s role in the face of grief and death is to write something that lasts; human beings may die but poetry lasts forever. Of course, this is not a new idea. In fact, the speaker is subscribing to *the* tradition of poetry. But it is in the grappling with more personal horrors that Pirani’s poetry makes its mark.

So many of Pirani’s poems deal with a sense of disassociation. The speaker feels as though his voice is disassociated not just from culture or country but from the Earth itself, as seen in “Immigrant Astronaut.” To tether himself both in time and identity, Pirani seeks camaraderie, assurance, and a curative for his existential crisis, by appealing to the voices of poets through history. He looks backwards to find his place in the present, calling on numerous historical poets in poems such as “Poem by Joseph Joubert (1754–1824),” “Ghalib” and “Kabir.” He seeks to elevate himself—and help us to elevate ourselves—above the limiting view that individuality affords. For the speaker, this is the challenge and the task of becoming part of “an infinite precipitation” (42) of poetry. The speaker seeks a cure for his disassociation in his fellow prophets; the history of poets’ voices together forms a united voice greater than any individual. In a way, the speaker seeks comfort in the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Pirani's speaker is both a prophet on a holy mission and, he assures us, definitely not responsible for the message that he brings. He is not even a voice, merely a vessel or a conduit. The hummingbird has lodged itself in his mouth and he can only claim so much responsibility therein. And what exactly the speaker's responsibility is in all of this is difficult to ascertain. He goes out of his way to put his own work at arm's length. He informs us "I mean no harm" (17) and points his finger at the hummingbird, accusing it of making him dispassionate on the outside but filled with a sacred purpose on the inside. In the final part of the collection, the speaker informs the reader right away "I'm not choosing my words / [...] If my words are / penetrating / they're on their own" (55). Pirani and his speaker exist as two separate entities, distinguished from one another. So too do the speaker's words and the speaker. It all serves to disassociate and render each poem as its own autonomous entity. Yet, Pirani's fictional alter ego is not anonymous. In both "Kabir" and "Ghalib" the speaker refers to himself in the third person as Ayaz. As important as the disconnect is to the speaker it is not a complete separation. The idea of the hummingbird is only a metaphor, one invented to absolve him of culpability. But it can only do so much, and Pirani does take some responsibility even if his speaker cannot.

In the end, these poetic glimpses are a personal exposure by Pirani. Poetry is an intensely vulnerable undertaking. But Pirani cannot be said to be ungrateful to the reader. For, as the speaker says, "I'm so happy you are here" (52). The resulting self-deprecation—and the sometimes contradictory struggle to end his existential disassociation while simultaneously reaffirming it—creates an atmosphere of authenticity throughout the collected poems that is *Happy You Are Here's* greatest virtue. The speaker's struggles come across as genuine, his intentions confused but real, and "his" voice uncertain but undoubtedly authentic. Graced with beautifully woven language, this poetry collection takes us inside and outside ourselves as necessary. It is, as the speaker hopes, a veritable stamp upon the world.

ROSS CHIASSON
TRENT UNIVERSITY, PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

YOU CAN'T BURY THEM ALL
BY PATRICK WOODCOCK
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Patrick Woodcock's new collection of poetry, *You can't bury them all*, travels across three landscapes with complex geopolitical histories: the Kurdistan region of North Iraq, Fort Good Hope in the Northwest Territories, and Baku, Azerbaijan. As Woodcock underlines, each of these territories is currently caught up in a crisis that demands our attention. While the Kurds in northern Iraq defend themselves against ISIS, the indigenous people living along the Mackenzie River attempt to defend their traditions from the forces that threaten to eradicate them. Situated between Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Iran, Azerbaijan is a former Soviet republic positioned in the crosshairs of numerous global conflicts. Woodcock brings together these diverse regions through poetry that often gives over its lyrical "I" to individuals from each region as it attends to the crises they face and the beauty of their environment. In the last of six "Landscape Portraits" of the elders at Fort Good Hope, the poem's speaker reflects, "I learned all my skills from being observant" (49). Here, the elder's voice merges with Woodcock's, as the acknowledgement describes his project and the power of a poet skilled in careful observation.

In fact, Woodcock's poems set out to illuminate what often remains hidden in these environments, to observe the bodies that the "you" in his title "can't bury." For instance, in "I would burn them all," the speaker watches a cellphone video of men "envenomed by faith" attack his Kurdish friend and burn his family's restaurant (19). In contrast to the image of the fire—"hundreds of flames in hundreds / of shapes"—the speaker recalls "burn[ing] music for months and listen[ing] to Atmosphere / and Broken Social Scene as he played them for the first time" (19). The speaker resurrects his friend through the memory of their shared interests and his family's kindness: "They sent food by taxi to / my guardhouse. They translated for me when I was questioned at / checkpoints [...] They were proud and gentle Muslims" (19). Throughout this collection the poems emphasize the kindness and dignity of people in the face of the violence they suffer.

Of the four sections in the book, those on Fort Good Hope, "Skyward Antlers," and Baku, "Flame Towers," are the strongest. At the centre of each is a series of visual poems that "observe" in two ways. These poems witness the losses experienced by the people of each region and also visually replicate

their physical environments. As mentioned above, in “Landscape Portraits,” Woodcock lends his poem to the voices of elders from Fort Good Hope. As he explains in his “Notes,” these portraits use “edited information from the Elder’s Calendar” he received when he arrived (119). In each of the six portraits, an elder recounts a brief personal history, mostly focusing on their family and education, and ending with a piece of advice to the youth. As the elder in the third portrait notes, the continued existence of their traditions relies on their ability to share stories like these:

... Our elders in the past
 never gave up and they worked until they could
 no longer work, without complaining.
 My granny taught me to set snares. Today the elders need to promote
 traditional knowledge, or the young people will lose their identity.

(46)

Woodcock’s lineation visually transcribes the testimony of the elders onto the shorelines of the area. In this way, his skills in poetic “observation” emphasize the connection to the land that the elders wish to preserve for future generations.

The images of burning in “I would burn them all” are amplified in “Flame Towers,” the section about Azerbaijan, whose national emblem is the flame. Woodcock ends “Flame Towers” with a three-part poem of the same name. This poem is dedicated, as is the whole collection, to the memory of Zaur Hasanov, a veteran who died from self-immolation in 1995, after the government demolished his restaurant in order to build the three Flame Towers that are now the centerpieces of the Baku skyline. The lineation in each of the poem’s three parts traces the footprint of one of the towers:

Tower I:

Self-
 immolation by veterans
 is best done on Christmas Day,
 in front of the ATUC.

But before you ashen
 the body you must fend off four lines, two
 bulls and a few of the statues begging you not to blacken
 their marble linen. There are those

who fire, and those who are fired upon. And there
 are those who, enwrapped in these rubescent lives,
 search for a new type of fuel. Power cables
 upon you when you burn one gold
 for you were denied the other. Bread
 and skin don't blaze like
 oil. (111)

Woodcock again mirrors the life of his subject through the physical environment in which he lived. While “Landscape Portraits” celebrates this connection, “Flame Towers” mourns the loss that makes these towers a monument to Hasanov’s death. As the poem incorporates other national images, such as the lion, it calls out the hypocrisy of a government that sacrifices its citizens to build monuments to its own success. Woodcock resurrects Hasanov in his images of the towers and concludes on a note of purgation, willing Hasanov’s memory to “consume those / who commissioned and kindled his / flame” (113).

While many of the best poems in *You can't bury them all* illuminate the human suffering in these places, Woodcock remains doggedly hopeful that poetry may revitalize the “hard ghosts and soft ghosts” (“Wells” 37) that geopolitical conflict has attempted to bury. In the first poem of the collection, “28.2°N 34.1° W (le),” the speaker reflects upon his quest for poetry, his “pursuit of that sound— / voice—victorious spark” (2). This collection confirms the fire in Woodcock’s poetic voice; skilled in observation, it is a flame that his readers can both see and hear.

KAITLYN PINDER
DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY