

BOOK REVIEWS

Ian Colford, *A Dark House and Other Stories*

Halifax: Vagrant Press, 2019

192 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 9781771087643

What do you do with a short story collection when you've read tales by Anton Chekhov, Alice Munro, or any one of a number of literary giants who have mastered the form? At least one common answer is that a certain quality of writing can pull us beyond keeping score or the certainty of "been there, done that" into a fresh realm of response to any and all creative expression—no matter the genre. Ian Colford is a very good writer indeed, and the eight stories in this collection offer not only consistently memorable portraits of ordinary lived experience but also larger, deftly limned considerations of what it means, for better or worse, to be alive. The result is that it is not difficult to imagine the Russian doctor and the southern Ontario Nobel Prize winner, along with a host of literary readers, sitting up and paying attention.

Some might say Colford conveys a bleak vision of the humanity he obviously understands so well, as many of his characters make fatal decisions about their circumstances and find themselves in conflict with daily societal demands, fighting battles with others and themselves that cannot be won. This includes the father who kidnaps his son in "Stone Temple," the two academics in "The Ugly Girl" and "The Dark House" whose domestic woes magnify their professional insecurities, and the practicing Christian in "The Comfort of Knowing," who cannot forgive his younger sister for having an affair that may only exist in his fevered imagination. Then there are the comparatively innocent children in "On the Beach" and "The Music Lover," whose parents' limitations prevent them from breaking through restrictive familial fences via the as-yet-undiscovered gates in their heads. But in each of these cases there is a redemptive struggle not just to survive but to do so with dignity and even some sense of purpose wherein bleakness is replaced

or at least unsettled by possibility.

The gates open especially wide in two tales. In “McGowan on the Mount,” the protagonist, the lonely, jaded proprietor of a Halifax general store who has lost his wife to cancer and his son to murder, is given the chance to start again with an old flame in a different landscape that he senses will reshape his internal geography. The result is his asking a question that he has never allowed himself to pose before: “He had spent a good portion of his life utterly stationary, free of ambition or expressible needs. . . . His wife and son were dead . . . and he was standing beside the sea transfixed . . . standing on a tiny windswept island at the edge of the largest continent on earth. How was he supposed to assemble from these pieces a truth that he could live with?” But he does try to put this truth-puzzle together, and Colford’s blessing on him arrives in the form of a final question: “Who could say he was wrong?”

In the major story of the collection, and the most overtly political, “The Dictator Considers His Regime,” violence scars the inner landscapes of the characters to a degree that literally handcuffs any opposition to one-man rule and to the illegalities of all the subordinate efforts to keep *el Presidente* in power. Dignity and a nascent sense of freedom might be battered as they approach the gates, but they are accompanied by two extraordinary efforts to overcome what Bob Dylan has called “the danger . . . and morals of despair.” An army colonel in the service of the dictator refuses further complicity in suppression of those who question one-man rule, and a journalist, having escaped execution because of the colonel’s decision, lives to write another day in the face of unspeakable corruption and brutality. While Colford does not guarantee ethical triumph in these circumstances of adversity, he salutes its place in the world.

In the space of the few pages that each of his stories occupies, Colford portrays men, women, and their offspring in haunting descents into personal maelstroms where, despite the odds, they endure and sometimes even triumph over their misfortunes. His voice throughout is measured and wise, and we are fortunate to have his words among us.

—J. A. Wainwright

Marta Dvořák, *Mavis Gallant: The Eye and the Ear*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019

272 pages, \$60, ISBN 9781487505301

Drawing on linguistics, philosophy, music, dance, cinema, painting, and more, Marta Dvořák's study of Canadian writer Mavis Gallant is a cubist *tour de force*, and the book's colourful jacket featuring French artist Robert Delaunay's painting *Hommage à Blériot* (1914) illustrates much of what lies within its pages. That Louis Blériot was an aviator, inventor, and engineer finds its way into Dvořák's homage to Gallant in the forms of aerial perspectives, inventive interpretations, and the recurrence of "engineer" as a key verb. Delaunay's swirling circles also penetrated the author's eyes and ears to the point where she confessed that "my manuscript looked like a python which had swallowed too many meals," to which her editor replied that it is "a tad unwieldy."

Dvořák offer insights into the life and work of this esteemed author by dividing her subject into "Mavis" segments, which highlight her personal friendship with the author in Paris, and "Gallant" segments, which analyze the formal patterns in her fiction. She begins whimsically with an acrostic of "Gallant," where G represents, among other attributes, "gallantry," whose etymology of showy fun contrasts with the serious prose and drab settings in many of her stories; nevertheless, brilliant Delaunay colouring and satire run through Gallant and Dvořák's style. Assembling modernist pieces of art and music, Dvořák is a *bricoleur* whereas Gallant is an "engineer," fully formed and placed on a pedestal.

Between journalism's brevity and the novel's amplitude, the short story is Gallant's ideal genre, and one of her recurring rhetorical features is triple (or ternary) repetition, which has also been adopted by other writers commenting on her technique. For example, Michael Ondaatje observed that she "will have circled a person, captured a voice, revealed a whole manner of life." Francine Prose similarly noted that "no one writes more compactly, more densely, with more compression." Through osmosis Sandra Martin observed that "Gallant had a journalist's nose, a cinematographer's eye, and a novelist's imagination." Dvořák fleshes out the eye and the ear, expanding Gallant's triads until they explode with meaning in her cubist criticism, which captures Gallant in circles, spheres, and cylinders.

Dvořák scans lines of prose as if they were poetry, thereby exposing the

accents and stresses of Gallant's syncopation, and parallels these cadences to jazz and modernist music, such as the rhythms of Dizzy Gillespie and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). In addition to this soundscape, wherein phrases are considered and reconsidered, a visual landscape also informs her imagination, including the works of Delaunay, Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp, and others. At one point, for example, a character hanging over a banister is compared to "the coarse and grubby Degas dancer, the girl with the shoulder thrown back and the insolent chin" featured in his painting *L'Étoile* (The Star, 1876). This painterly character also calls into play narrative perspective, as pronouns and consciousness slide in and out of view. Dvořák analyzes these views from above and below, the heights and depths of style, until she becomes what French critic Michael Riffaterre refers to as a "superreader" of Gallant's fiction. The smallest detail of an "insolent chin" covers the rest of the portrait and resonates with the "in" at the beginning and end of the phrase.

Analyzing one of Gallant's stories, Dvořák remarks: "Ice Wagon' is remarkable for its sinusoidal structural convolutions—namely intermingling and overlapping circles (or more oval ellipses), complete with repetitions, parallelisms, and intersecting flashbacks and flashforwards caught in an unending tension-resolution spiral." This apt description applies equally to Delaunay's design and Dvořák's methodology, as her cubist reading moves vertically down the page to footnotes that impede the horizontal explication of the text. The book begins and ends in "left field," embraces many fields, breaks frames, and blurs borders. Along the way, parenthetical intrusions inform the reader that a specific topic will be discussed in a later chapter, and when we arrive at the later chapter we are reminded that the topic was introduced earlier.

Accompanying this eye-ful is an ear-ful of terms like characterology, acception, axiological, volatilize, ionation, hyperhypotaxis, deontic, paralepsis and paralipsis, stochastic, redhibitory, implicatures, syncopatingly, singulative, hypallage, musication, etc. Opposed to this lexicon is the ground floor of sock in the jaw, rice pudding, quasi puff-pastry, jaw-breaking, left field, and tougher than bulldogs, which cohabit the houses of fiction and criticism. In her *Paris Notebooks* (1986), Gallant describes academic interpretations as "the fleas of literature," and in an interview with Randy Boyagoda published in *The Walrus* in 2007, she complains that academics use her stories "to suit some purposes of their own, and I find this outrageous."

Against such warnings, Dvořák is courageous in her cubist criticism.

The technique of “metalepsis” or frame breaking is particularly useful in understanding Gallant’s transatlantic point of view between Montreal and Paris as well as the time frames before and after World War II, which occupy so much of her fiction. As part of this crossing over, Dvořák examines the word “preposterous” at some length—an example of breaking the time frame in which prefixes work to reverse temporal sequence. Similar attention is devoted to “The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street,” where ontological questions call to mind Wallace Stevens’ 1922 poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”: “Let be be finale of seem.” No mention is made of Gallant’s years of research on the Dreyfus Affair, which never came to fruition. Among other biographical details, Dvořák literally airs Mavis’ laundry in public.

Dvořák not only teases out the epiphanies and enigmas with which Gallant’s stories end but also focuses on the importance of beginnings. Consider Gallant’s first words in this book: “The beginning writer has to choose, tear to pieces, spit out, chew up and assimilate as naturally as a young animal—as naturally and as ruthlessly.” Dvořák’s python has followed this advice. From the biblical “in the beginning” to John Milton’s “of man’s first disobedience” to Gallant’s “the doctor could always start over and get it right” to Wisława Szymborska’s “every beginning after all / is nothing but a sequel,” we are obsessed with origins.

Gallant’s metaphor of the “folded thought” also reminds us of the fold in the French explication. Throughout her explications, which proceed from an intrusive “I” to an inclusive “we readers,” Dvořák unfolds and refolds the characters’ thoughts. Her prism’s house of language highlights dancers on steps; her cubist kaleidoscope captures swirling colours, sounds, and spheres of influence; and her “sublime clowning tradition” calls to mind Stevens’ 1923 poem “The Comedian as the Letter C.” This cubist poetics of style places Gallant on the top shelf of short story writers, alongside Alice Munro, Ernst Hemingway, and Anton Chekhov.

—Michael Greenstein

Seth Klein, *A Good War: Mobilizing Canada for the Climate Emergency*
Toronto: ECW Press, 2020

464 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 9781770415454

Seth Klein's recent book on climate change, *A Good War*, addresses the existential threat of our times—the climate emergency—and how Canadians can mobilize to combat it. His historical perspective makes complete sense. Klein is the founding British Columbia director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the brother of Naomi Klein, author of *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014) and *On Fire: The Burning Case for a New Green Deal* (2019). He is also currently the Team Lead for the Climate Emergency Unit at the David Suzuki Foundation in Vancouver. *A Good War* combines his public policy chops and his knowledge of Canada's wartime history into a compelling call for action.

“Climate breakdown requires a new mindset—to mobilize all of society, galvanize our politics, and fundamentally remake our economy,” he writes. Complacency is not an option. Based on all the science, the need to act is glaringly obvious, he insists. He also reminds us that we've undertaken massive economic transformations before. Both the mobilization for World War II and the reconstruction period that followed impacted every part of Canada.

“Let that sink in—the war effort saw the creation of 28 Crown corporations to get the job done,” writes Klein in praise of C. D. Howe's work as Canada's Minister of Munitions and Supply and, later, Reconstruction. “Today there are 47 Crown corporations in total, although ten of these are national museums or arts and culture organizations.”

Howe's emergency powers, combined with the War Measures Act, gave his department control over all provincial resources and manpower. Responding to the threat of World War II, Canada produced, by conservative estimates, over \$11 billion worth of ships, trucks, shells, artillery, tanks, and aircraft between 1939 and 1945. State control of war production played a key role in the defeat of fascism, and more Crown corporations were formed after the war as the economy shifted gears, including the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. The government's innovative tool kit during the war included accelerated depreciation for capital investments, a tax on excess profits, price controls, the integration of women into the labour force, the use of industry leaders (“dollar-a-year” men) to meet strategic production goals, and much more.

Klein argues that we need a full-scale all-in effort resembling Canada's war effort in order to halve our greenhouse gas emissions in ten years, which is the only realistic timeline now to address irreversible and catastrophic

climate change. His book presents key points for how a similarly innovative approach today could include new Crown corporations and agencies, which would be able to tackle everything from public information to comprehensive planning for forestry, electricity, transportation, construction, industry, technology, and labour. He also proposes the appointing of a Climate Emergency Cabinet Committee and the embedding of a Climate Emergency Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office and each premier's office. This would "ensure that all institutions and machinery of government are focused on this national task."

Klein's "can-do" list is impressive and includes conducting "a national inventory of conversion needs (just like C. D. Howe did)" to determine "how many heat pumps, solar panels, wind turbines, electric buses, etc., we will need." He also calls for the inclusion of key visionary people in the civil service, along with the use of "outside experts, civil society leaders and entrepreneurs" to oversee Canada's energy transformation. A critical part of this new brain trust would come from the integration of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into law at all levels of government. He also warns that the country will need to welcome "tens of thousands of climate-displaced people annually, so we do not repeat the shameful legacy of how Canada treated refugees before." We have to take responsibility for our negligent behaviour and its global impact, he says.

A Good War is a challenging call to arms. While it may not convince every climate skeptic of the urgency to act, it will give many Canadians a renewed confidence in Canada's ability to tackle today's climate challenge. The pragmatism that made "public ownership" work during the war and reconstruction period was not based on any social philosophy. Klein reminds us that it was based on the simple and overriding necessity to win a war. A sprawling, thinly populated country needed a strong central government—not competition between ten sovereign provinces with their own regional agendas.

Canada's economic mobilization did much more than just win the war. As a 1952 *Time* magazine cover story reported, Canada had boosted its standard of living by 50% since 1939, and the average Canadian family was earning \$622 more than the average American family. In 1952, the Canadian dollar was even on par with the U.S. dollar, prompting Wall Street's Lehman Brothers to pronounce Canada the biggest business story of the 1950s. The opportunities to develop new green technologies and industries are waiting

for us today too, says Klein. We just have to heed the science.

Klein's urgent message is that the climate emergency calls for a return to this same wartime pragmatism that avoided the ideological traps of the left or right, and his smart roadmap reframes the climate emergency in a way that everyone can understand. "The reality is that we *do* face an emergency, and we do indeed need a wartime-scale response," he states.

There is an irony about Howe's legacy that Klein appreciates too, knowing that his last nation-building project and Crown corporation was Trans-Canada Pipelines (TCP). Created in 1956 to transport natural gas from Alberta to eastern Canada, TCP was the longest natural gas pipeline in the world at the time it went into operation. Today, the mainly private-owned TC Energy is the same company that backed the controversial Keystone Pipeline, along with the government of Alberta, which provided \$1.5 billion in equity investment and \$6 billion in loan guarantees.

When U.S. President Joe Biden cancelled the Keystone Pipeline on his first day in office, he sent a strong signal to Canada that his administration is committed to fighting the climate battles ahead. The decision shocked the Alberta oil industry, but it's a signal that the Canada of Howe's era, with his science background and attitude about public ownership, wouldn't have waited for.

—Bill Dodge

J. A. Wainwright, *This Cleaving and This Burning*

Toronto: Guernica, 2020

292 pages, \$20.00, ISBN 9781771835664

The first record of a theory of twinship is from the Babylonians, who told fanciful stories about the Great Twins in the night sky. The Greeks later made the mythology their own, renaming the twin stars Castor and Pollux and assigning to them a complex parentage of one mortal mother (Leda) and two fathers (the mortal King Tyndareus and the mischievous god Zeus). The brothers, said the Greek poets, grew up together and were inseparable, one favouring horses and the other boxing. Ever adventurous, they joined Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. When a violent storm threatened to upend their ship, the brothers calmed the seas, becoming the patron saints of mariners thereafter. Their mortal ends came during a fam-

ily feud over a herd of livestock. Castor was killed, and a devastated Pollux begged his father Zeus to allow him to spend eternity with his brother. Zeus obliged by turning Castor and Pollux into stars in the night sky—the bright heads of the constellation we now know as Gemini.

Today, the modern science of astronomy explains that Castor and Pollux are identical twin stars, a rarity in the celestial sky. Likely formed from the same gas and dust mass, they burn brightly because they are so close to us. (Also, Pollux is not one but a small cluster of stars.) Despite the science, however, the Babylonian and Greek myths of twinship persist in popular lore, astrology holding that people born on the same day, celestial twins, have many similarities. They may never meet, but the circumstances of their lives endlessly repeat. Therein forms the context out of which J. A. Wainwright's masterful new novel *This Cleaving and This Burning* emerges.

The novel's scope is early 20th-century American modernism, and its principal subjects are Miller Sark and Hal Pierce, thinly disguised renderings of the actual Ernest Hemingway and Hart Crane. Miller and Hal (Hemingway and Crane) are celestial twins, each born on July 21, 1899 to unstable mothers who came from affluent Chicago households. (Those who know Hemingway will know that his middle name was Miller, and those who know Crane will know that his favourite whisky was Cutty Sark. Such are two of the novel's many Easter eggs.) Both real and imagined characters are estranged from icy fathers who have the same first name, Clarence, and needy, domineering mothers, each named Grace. Both boys also grow up in the middle of dysfunctional marriages that normalize manipulation and abuse. From there, the parallels are endless, even uncanny: Miller and Hal are musically gifted and artistically inclined, gravitating toward the avant-garde; each adopts a writing vocation early; each is a *bon vivant* and drinker, then a self-destructive alcoholic; each finds his greatest success in the early years of the 1920s; each becomes a member of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation" of ex-pat Americans living in Paris between the wars; and each comes under the embrace and occasional tutelage of Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, James Joyce, John Dos Passos, and Sylvia Beach, owner of the Shakespeare and Company bookstore. Finally, each follows similar trajectories across the Atlantic—moving between the American northeast, Paris, Cuba, and Key West—and each, of course, ends his life by suicide, Crane unceremoniously jumping off a ship into the Gulf of Mexico while Hemingway is fishing for marlin off a nearby Cuban coast.

The tantalizing question that the novel raises is whether the two flesh-and-blood writers, sharing the same pathways and friends, ever met. Hemingway and Crane, that is. Memoirs, letters, biographies, and assorted literary ephemera suggest they did not, yet the possibility that they did or should have is no doubt what captured Wainwright's imagination, for Miller and Hal do in fact meet as teens, cultivate a lifelong friendship, and have a profound influence on each other's lives. The novel is both an exploration of that influence and an examination of the lives of two of modernism's most unique stylists: Miller/Hemingway a master of inference via unadorned fact and Hal/Crane a master of inference via clotted, metaphoric equivalency. One a novelist, the other a poet, both are identifiably modernist in turning Pound and Eliot's formalist dicta to their own uses. Those similarities alone beg a fictional conjoining, for the impact that both writers had on fiction and poetry was profound.

This will all suggest that much of the joy of the novel is found in its rich, allusive tapestry. Students of literary modernism and admirers of Hemingway and Crane will delight in Wainwright's reconstruction of two famous literary lives and what their conjoining reveals. Bringing Hemingway and Crane together in the personas of Miller and Hal offers new ways of understanding how consequential events shape literary lives and how art, in turn, emerges. And so, while Wainwright takes many liberties with accepted biographical facts, he does not stray far from those facts as we know them. This is to suggest not that he has written a fictional biography but rather that he has re-sorted the biographical and creative records to gain new perspective into both writers. The wonderfully realized forest fire episode experienced by a young Miller and Hal in the north Michigan woods is a good example, which draws on Hemingway's story "Big Two-Hearted River" as well as his real-life scorplings in World War I and later on African safari. Wainwright's treatment of fire as the formative element in Miller and Hal's relationship also brings to the forefront a symbolism of suffering and constancy that is present but submerged in much of Hemingway's work.

Wainwright also offers new insight into Crane's short and volatile life through Hal's struggles to assert his own identity as a gay man while attempting to express the capaciousness of America in *The Bridge* (1930). That capaciousness, suggests Wainwright in a nod to the present, is at the centre of America's battles with itself, for in being inclusive of race, sexuality, religion, and personal choice, it inevitably and endlessly wars against the

difference it purports to champion. Hal's pain and death—hastened by his best friend's precarious virility—therefore implicate an intolerant America that always seems to be contradicting itself. Wainwright's prescience is to thrust two authors from a modernizing moment of the past onto the present, showing how lives construct culture, how culture subsumes lives, and how little has changed in a century. Only in the work of the best novelists do we find literature that meets the moment so aptly.

Buoying Wainwright's playful and revealing literary conceit is some superb writing. Readers of Hemingway will delight in Wainwright's use of sparse prose to carry the horrors of combat that haunt Miller like a nightmare. Likewise with the smothering self-doubt that paralyzed Crane's every attempt to find clarity, which Wainwright evokes in Hal's clandestine loitering and arduous periphrasis. The novel is a treasure trove of such subtleties, and it is the kind of work that rewards readers who know something of the subject matter under consideration. That said, what makes the novel so engaging is the lightness of touch that Wainwright employs. No wider knowledge of the field of American modernism is necessary, though it enriches the reading.

In the end, Miller and Hal, Hemingway and Crane, have more in common than the differences that define them publicly. Both spend a lifetime fighting in the trenches, pawns in an American morality play that is much larger than they are. The novel's end is thus a fitting if painful statement about the ambivalence of identity and the pain we inflict on others (and ourselves) to deny that ambivalence. For those who understand something of the tribulations of creation, that ambivalence will also reverberate as a larger statement about loss—or, more specifically, the disjunction of investment and return and the unceremoniousness that will likely greet most of us in the end. Wainwright's characters give their lives in preparation for that difficult learning.

After finishing the novel, I wondered how I would ever get Miller and Hal out of my head. Not wanting to let them go, I started the novel again, a rare thing for me but an appropriate response to such a highly nuanced piece of fiction. This is a work I will carry with me for a long time, then, not only because it is expertly crafted but also because it cements Wainwright's place among the first rank of Canadian writers. On par with the best work being produced in the country today, it speaks eloquently about friendship, vocation, identity, and the choices we make to enable what sustains us.