BOOK REVIEWS

Elana Wolff, *Swoon*
Toronto: Guernica, 2020
85 pages, $20, ISBN 9781771835077

The title of Elana Wolff's sixth collection of poetry, *Swoon*, does more than double duty. In the first place, the onomatopoeic monosyllable invokes a whisper or *sotto voce* of muted sound. In the second place, the motion denotes the emotion of falling or fainting. Aural and visual elements combine synaesthetically in the title and in the poems that follow. From the swirls of colour on the book's cover (Wolff's own painting) to the four epigraphs (from *The Living Torah*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Walser, and Franz Kafka), swooning sounds and (e)motions inform the cadences of the poems in this volume.

The first epigraph is from the Book of Genesis 24:64: "When Rebecca looked up and saw Isaac, she almost fell from the camel." What is noteworthy about this swoon is the looking up that accompanies a falling down, and this rise and fall pattern recurs in myriad forms throughout Wolff's work. A biblical archetype appears in the first poem, "The Months of Flooding": "Rain came down, the river rose." Assonance and alliteration amplify the flow, which is modulated by the punctuation and the poet's careful placing of caesuras that alternate with enjambment. The caesuras and enjambment also contribute to the sense of flooding: "More rain fell than could drain. Rain filled up the riverbed / and people brought their vessels out." Biblical proportions and archetypes run through her prophetic "mantic" and "*Lord*, the inundation and the floods." Instead of a singular Noah figure, she turns to people bringing their vessels out and the repetition of a "mom in trouble" coursing the waters. To her question "the promise and the covenant: of what?" the reader answers birth and postdiluvian rebirth. Maternal instinct breaks the waters: "She'll hold a little son to her chest, / both will sweetly cleave." The double cleavage of clinging and cutting courses through her

scattered words and water, ending with the swoon of "heaven stretching down" and a "glint," another visual sound.

The biblical becomes more overt in the poem "Fate like That," an extension of matriarchal swoon: "Bland sand of a long light land, / the firmament split by ancient edict, / common waters lapping in the depths." Internal rhyme, alliteration, and horizontal/vertical dualism re-enact Genesis. After rhythmic creation, "Imagine a girl, a jug on her shoulder, / meeting a man at the desert well. / *Drink, my lord*, she says, and lowers . . ." She lowers her jug, another vessel of survival, in the downward direction of swoon, as ancient gives way to modern: "This one tends to this direction, that one / bends to that." The bending of ancient and modern directions prepares for the narrator's intrusion, "May I angle forward," and the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, "a fate like that." "Like" is also a reminder of the associations sounded in Wolff's earlier collection, *Everything Reminds You of Something Else* (2017).

The second epigraph, from Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856), not only recalls things past but also forms part of Wolff's swooning dialogue: "But slowly, as one in a swoon / To whom life creeps back . . . slowly, by degrees, / I woke, rose up." This upward awakening recurs in Wolff's poems and carries forward to the third epigraph from Walser's story "Trousers" (1911): "I would die of delight, or at least hit the floor in a swoon, if ever such a transformation occurred." Transformations pervade the poet's verse where everything reminds her of something else, the swoon of association in a dialogic imagination.

The fourth epigraph, "swooning counts as believing," is from a letter Kafka wrote to Milena Jesenská on July 31, 1920, and several of Wolff's poems engage in a dialogue with Kafka. "Traffic" offers directions from Toronto to Prague: "Berthed in the middle of things, it's up to us / to redirect. We of the fraught begotten bodies." This poem rearranges birthing with an epical beginning *in medias res*: the alliteration and homonym of berth tie up and into begotten bodies, while the sound of fraught implicates the plights of poets and fellow creatures. She bridges, bends, and connects Toronto's tragedies to Kafka's river in his story "The Judgment" (1913). The sinking of Kafka's character is a tragic swoon, and the poet identifies with his sinking fate and circulating global traffic.

"Surfacing Behaviour" begins with a pond in Czechoslovakia where fish are leaping in an upward swoon that needs to be captured in a photograph.

She repeats "It's possible I've never had an accurate sense" of distance and mystery, but through the camera's lens and her own soundscape she secures accuracy of mystery in the flying fish and nature in general. She concludes her couplets with Kafka's visit to his uncle in Triesch, where "he fell for a short-sighted girl . . . and went to temple." Kafka's swoon completes Wolff's surfacing and angling.

"Ottla Kafka" portrays Kafka's sister in 1917 as having wings to bear up her brother during World War I. In her affinity for Kafka, the poet tries to identify with his favourite sister, who presides over pots and fields—the domestic and natural spheres in Wolff's poetry. Her portrait of Kafka continues in "What More is There to Say of Hearts": "I saw the man in the dream—that Franz—on a bench in the park." These monosyllables open to "consuming fruit: 'Fletcherizing' it," as Wolff's rhythm grasps and tastes the slow act of eating. Kafka "rose from the bench . . . / converted the dream-scene / to red—probably through the homophone 'rose.'" Rising and colouring characterize this ekphrastic verse of sculpted hearts in Chotkovny Park. Poet, painter, sculptor, and precursor converge in Prague: "Of dreams: that they conflate and animate. / Of red: that it's the colour across from green." Belated iambic pentameter adds meaning to the earlier hearts and dreams in a confluence of colours.

Wolff connects not only to Kafka but also to nature, especially in her aviary, "Messenger Suite," which contains eleven bird poems. "Goldfinch" is "fulgent, / then the colour of curative music"—a synaesthetic messenger of meaning. "Gull" reveals "two voices at work"—a double correspondence between speaker and creature. The "diving flight" in "Dove" recaps swoop and swoon, recalling the emerging birds in her swirling cover design. At times she fuses birds to poetic technique, as in "Junco," which ends "through ellipsis / & caesura."

Wolff paints and composes with ampersands (&) of conjunction, tildes (~) of approximation, and greater than signs (>)—punctuation that exceeds the sum of its parts. Branches tangle in "Lunula" to loop with "blue love" from C. D. Wright's "Imaginary Morning Glory" (2016). Wolff's title poem, "Swoon," avoids the actual word "swoon," but circles around it through proximate words: "Swallows / swooping out of the blue / and dipping, / diving their hearts out." The stanza's shape imitates the flight of a flock, while imitative harmony paints and sounds the swoon, "swaying sillily from the middle." Wolff's flights of fancy move from middle to edge and back again,

circumscribing a sonic and pictorial world. The poem ends surprisingly with "Circumcise / this mind"—a roundabout cleaving and splicing whereby she connects to the world.

Wolff moves in multiple directions, layering sound and scene with central and peripheral vision, as in "Sidewise," where the poet at her window is "looking inside out." Her imagination and glass get tapped, and ornithology pierces her stanzas: "Hear deeply, deftly, hear like a pigeon. / Ear serene, pinna hidden—." This auditory flight is followed by "lobe, a little buff dove-breast poking out, / angled sidewise." Her verse angles forward and sidewise, painting sounds and voicing colours. Her chromatic scales encompass polyphonic hues and cries of lament, rhapsody, flora and fauna, in a precise interplay of self and others.

—Michael Greenstein

Alyda Faber, *Poisonous If Eaten Raw*
Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2021
104 pages, $19.95, ISBN 9781773101798

Alyda Faber's second full-length collection of poems, *Poisonous If Eaten Raw,* is a work of unusual imaginative power. An exploration of the poet's mother and of the mother-daughter relationship, the book's emotional centre is a longing for a mother who is now absent in death and was often felt as distant in life. The majority of these seventy-one poems are entitled "Portrait of My Mother as . . ." and portray the mother variously as an animal or bird, a work of art, or another human being. This book delighted me with its sheer imaginative abundance, as it offers so many unusual and unexpected ways of seeing the mother. By presenting such a variety, Faber poses the question, "Who is my mother?" In "Portrait of My Mother as a Black-Capped Chickadee," she reflects: "Mother / and daughter not enough for each other, / but might have been, / had we looked at each other more." This book is the looking more. Two key words that occur most frequently are "hidden / hides" and "stiffen." Major themes of intimacy and distance, knowing and unknowing, dwell in the tensions between hiding and becoming visible, stiffening and breaking free.

In the first poem, "Portrait of My Mother as a Funnel Spider," the poet moves from considering the spider in her hurtful tendencies, felt by the

daughter as her mother's toxic bites imposing guilt, to her vulnerable moulting. She observes the spider in a series of states of being, with verbs that include "hides, unwinds, creeps, bites, molts, pumps blood, and crack(s) open." At the end, there is an evocative image of transformation: "As muscles quiver, she breaks out from the inside, / wrenches her legs out of a bone dry body double, / wrests free, and huddles till the callow skin stiffens." In these last three lines, which so well evoke the mother-as-spider's vulnerability, we also see a foreshadowing of the daughter, who, as the book unfolds, will be continually breaking out and wresting free. Though presented as single portraits, these poems thus have surprising ways of breaking free of their titular frames and becoming double or multiple portraits.

The doubling of images and layering of looking particularly occur in some of the ekphrastic poems. For example, in "Portrait of My Mother Looking at Eugène Jansson's *Hornsgatan by Night*," the poet imagines what her mother is seeing and hearing as she looks at Jansson's 1902 painting: "As if the painting wears the face of departure— / on the platform of the station, bird chitter / snows down from iron girders . . ." The sensual details of bird chitter and the texture and cold of the snow and iron help us to feel the world of the painting and its incarnation in the mother's inner being. As the poem continues, the mother sees "this beloved person about to step through / a doorway." We are aware that she herself *becomes* the beloved departing person for the daughter. The poignant image doubles to include the daughter and the reader—shapes that transform into one another as we read.

In another innovative poem, Faber takes us into a baby's primal consciousness in a poem based on psychologist Edward Tronick's "Still Face Experiment," which demonstrated the importance of the connection between infants and their caregivers. Here, a baby experiences looking up into the mother's eyes, which are at first "a boat that carries baby across the Atlantic, / after years apart. / Her eyes a lunchtime murmur, a ringing cloudlight. A slipper shuffle / on the way to a whistling kettle. A skiffle of ice chimes falling . . ." Later, the baby encounters painful separation, as "Mummy turns away, looks back at baby, stock-empty eyes," and the poem ends with the line: "*I'm here*. Eyes don't lie. She didn't say that."

Faber herself, though, does not turn away; indeed, the poems are a way of her saying, continually, "I'm here." Some of the portraits present us with extremely painful sights and sounds: a portrait of her mother as a cow being beaten or of her mother's "fox scream," which as a child she wanted to

answer but learned instead to “sit still until she turns away.” These poems bear powerful witness to her mother’s suffering and her kinship with the afflictions of other animals and the Earth. Throughout, the poet explores her mother’s spirituality and her ambivalent awareness that “the Lord leads us to green pastures and still waters, / but walk up a ramp, turn a corner, / and you could find yourself on the slaughterhouse floor.” She refers to her mother’s “unknowable prayers” and mentions that she “bowed to unmarked death-sites.” As she questions her mother’s “papal” authority and what her mother was able or not able to choose in staying with an abusive husband, the poet refrains from judgment and offers instead the empathy of compassionate imagination.

As in her earlier collection *Dust or Fire* (2016) and her chapbook *Berlinale Erotik* (2015), Faber shares her love of Frisian—the language of her mother’s homeland—and her beautiful English translations, which are perhaps another way of drawing closer to her mother. Yet she also portrays the difficulty of translation, in the wider sense, between experienced realities, whether between the mother and husband or herself and her mother “talking so much, / and staying so hidden.” After her mother’s death, the daughter watches for messages from her mother, seeing her fleetingly in a loon or a black-capped chickadee: “Your / roundish body writes erratic signatures / in the fence rows.” That so many poems portray the mother as another living being—spider, slug, moth, chickadee, loon, house wren, elm, pine, Saint Felicitas, Diane Arbus, Neil Peart—suggests a kinship between all living beings, whatever shape they may inhabit. As we read these poems, we begin to feel that “my mother” could be any of these creatures and, reciprocally, that any of these creatures could be “my mother.” With her visceral and compassionate imagery, Faber evokes a responsiveness in the reader and a flexibility of mind and heart.

—Barbara Colebrook Peace

George Bowering, *Could Be: New Poems*
Vancouver: New Star, 2021
120 pages, $18, ISBN 9781554201785

The biography printed on the back cover of George Bowering’s new collection describes him as “the author of 37 previous volumes of poetry.” This

figure almost certainly doesn't include Bowering's poetry-adjacent or transgeneric works, and it can't possibly include many of his chapbooks. Am I missing anything else? Oh, right: a letter from New Star Books enclosed with my review copy notes that Bowering's *Soft Zipper*—a memoir constructed from short, object-oriented "stories" that could just as easily be called prose poems—was also published in 2021 and that it was launched alongside *Could Be* via Zoom in June of that year.

In short, Bowering publishes a lot. I haven't read all his books, but I doubt any reviewer has. Here's what I can say in terms of context: *Could Be* is divided into five titled sections, and it indeed consists of lineated, often page-long things that just about anybody would recognize as poems. But there's also the premise of taking an object and considering it as such, with all its inherent paradoxes, which I've seen across many of Bowering's prose-ish poems, including 1988's *Errata* (another collection of prose poems that's sometimes described as essays or even criticism), one section of 2010's omnibus *My Darling Nellie Grey*, as well as the pieces that make up *Soft Zipper*. One might cautiously say that this book is an unabashedly lyric reiteration of his broadly situationist, object-oriented interests. Or, to cop out, it's Bowering.

The book's opening poem, "Baby's Breath," renders poem-making as habitual or as part of the quotidian actions and cycles that make up living:

> First thing in the morning you wake up enough
> to shove the poem back down into its container,
> vacuous as it may seem, is that where they all
> come from, or just the good frightening ones?
> That's why you get coffee into you fast as you can,
> to wet the poem, get it into the chute,
> back down to where it will never try that again.

This present-oriented, bodily poetic practice is also evident in "An Oblate Sphere": "When we fall in love, we do not tumble / for perfect features, not for the ideal neck, / not Max Factor, guy got everything wrong." The penultimate poem in the second section, "Our Words," is a brief, charming reiteration of object, its animate version, living, and time. It opens with the premise that

> It's what we all want, our words
> to live longer than we do, yet
> we would envy them
> that they go on to see things we
> never will.

The poems in the third section, "I Know All Those Tunes," are comparatively long-winded, referring to some writers by their full names and others more familiarly: "Years later, when he was a Toronto prose writer, he hopped on a plane to Vancouver because Robin was leaving us." Although names like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Donald Trump also appear, this section is another indication of how firmly ensconced Bowering is in his local literary world. The "new poems" subtitle might seem a little unnecessary for a writer who aspires to sell books outside his circle of admirers; for someone with so large a circle and such prodigious output, however, it may be a useful marker of exactly what's being thrown into the mix.

The book's fourth section, "Combustible Paper," features near its beginning a long-ish poem about Ireland called "Mandatory Sod." A more curious moment in this segment is "I Didn't Think I'd See This Again." The straightforward complaint at its centre matches the somewhat uncharacteristic anger that crops up in the book's final long poem, "Sitting in Jalisco." But where the latter's ire is directed at figures like "shouting jackasses" in a "beer joint / across the square," "I Didn't Think I'd See This Again" declares,

> When I was a boy, Nazi thugs and Alabama parsons
> murdered books. Now publishers themselves,
> even knights of the brave poesy houses
> turn out the lights over open pages
> for fear that a new hire carrying combustible paper
> from the far stock room might feel her sensibility
> triggered by impolite nouns in 12-point Baskerville

However tongue-in-cheek it may be, one gets the impression that only someone of Bowering's stature could get away with this complaint—at least among the Canadian writers who are considered as being on the experimental end of things. Then again, coming as part of a stream of output steady

and assured enough that a collection of new poems requires a subtitle indicating them as such, that might be exactly where Bowering is.

The book's title poem, "Could Be," dismantles binaries via the question "Have I dreamed my life or was it / a true one?" and quibbling quasi-philosophical inanities: "Was it / Athens or a dream of Greece, and who / was dreaming, was I not the dreamer." Its almost-paradoxes are similar to those in the pieces that make up *Errata*, even if they're lineated and more straightforward. The effect is enhanced, or maybe undercut, by a subsequent poem, "My Best," which reads in its entirety, "advice is: // don't believe anything I said on page 63" (this being the page on which "Could Be" is printed). It's a playful inhabitation and manipulation of the poetry-book format, just like "George & Kevin" is made of punning dialogue, "Signs along the Road" is literally these texts replete with grammatical errors and goofy typefaces, and "I Didn't Think I'd See This Again" voices a complaint the author must know will be beyond unpopular with at least some of his several Vancouver publishers. I'd guess, from the work I've had the chance to read, that maybe all of it is just Bowering.

—Carl Watts, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

María Rosa Lojo, *Free Women in the Pampas: A Novel about Victoria Ocampo*
Edited and translated by Norman Cheadle
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021
280 pages, $37.95, ISBN 9780228008613

> "What men do not seem to understand, apart from a minority whom I bless, is that we are not at all interested in taking their place, but rather in taking our own place completely, which until now has not happened."
> —Victoria Ocampo, *Woman, Her Rights, and Her Responsibilities* (1936)

Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979)—writer, pioneer feminist, and cosmopolitan patron of the arts and literature—was a larger-than-life figure in Argentina and a significant force on the international scene thanks to her epoch-defining journal *Sur* (South, 1931-1992), which helped Jorge Luis Borges and other Latin American writers achieve fame in Europe and later in North America.

The globe-trotting Ocampo was a superlative networker, cultivating personal friendships with dozens of literary and artistic celebrities, maintaining a rich epistolary correspondence, and hosting her friends in Buenos Aires. Among others, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, Baltic-German cultural geographer Hermann von Keyserling, and French writer Pierre Drieu La Rochelle all stride through the pages of María Rosa Lojo's novel *Las libres del sur* (Free Women of the South, 2004), translated by Norman Cheadle as *Free Women in the Pampas*. But it was the New York-based writer Waldo Frank who, with his fervent Pan-Americanism, arrived in Buenos Aires in 1929 and challenged Ocampo to create a literary/cultural journal grounded in her American rather than European roots. Lojo's narrative frames the crucial years of 1924-1931 when the impetuous Ocampo emerges from naïve literary-artistic fandom and from the shadow of a domineering father and sexist aristocratic society to take control of her destiny and become a fully independent and self-confident woman with the publication of that first issue of *Sur*.

Beautiful, wealthy, theatrical, Ocampo is the kind of person whose mere presence in a room commands attention. So observes Carmen Brey, who arrives in Buenos Aires in 1924 from Galicia, Spain's Celtic northwestern province. University-educated and fluent in French and English, sweet and respectful yet perceptive and skeptical, Brey is made to take Ocampo's measure, as Luisa Valenzuela has noted about the novel's second, fictitious protagonist. Come to look for her brother, who disappeared in the pampas, Brey discovers the deep Argentina that lies outside the bauble of Buenos Aires, even as Ocampo goes gallivanting around Paris, Berlin, London, and New York. Their respective trajectories stand in counterpoint, and their characters perfectly complement one another.

In Brey's journey southward with the young Borges and Leopoldo Marechal, future author of *Adán Buenosayres* (1948), we confirm Valenzuela's judgment about the wisdom of Lojo's authorial choice of creating Brey as the principal lens through which we observe Ocampo. By bringing Brey to the little town of Los Toldos, built by its respectable founders alongside the already-extant community of tents (*toldos*) belonging to Mapuche Indians and other of society's outcasts, Lojo introduces the reader to a small portion of the vast expanse of Argentina's marginalized backcountry, where some of that population still live in rudimentary houses. That is a world to which Ocampo, in her persistent orientation toward Europe, could not be made to

pay serious attention. Brey also encounters a little girl, Eva Ibarguren, and takes her to meet her mother, “widow of Duarte,” who helps her to find her brother, who has made a new family with a Mapuche woman.

All of this is entirely credible, as the pampas are littered with mixed families with blue eyes and Irish, Galician, or other European blood. So is Lojo’s treatment of the future “Saint Evita” (as Juan Perón’s wife would become known to her adoring public), the child Evita whom Lojo describes, through Brey’s eyes, as not “especially pretty, and perhaps not all that intelligent either. But something set her apart from the regular run of children. She seemed to live at a greater speed, moved by her fervent will to anticipate events, as though her dreams, desires, and earnest efforts had already reached fulfillment in those dark eyes of hers, more intense than those of other children.”

We are fortunate that Lojo’s work as a poet, novelist, and scholar is gaining a greater foothold in the English-speaking world. Winner of the 2018 Grand Prize of Honor of the Society of Argentine Writers (first awarded to Borges in 1944) and numerous prestigious international awards, Lojo is best known for her historical novels and short stories, which are largely based in the 19th century and which bring back to life such figures as Manuelita de Rosas, daughter of authoritarian ruler Juan Manuel de Rosas, and the unjustly sidelined writer Eduarda Mansilla, who is in some ways a precursor of Ocampo. *Free Women in the Pampas* explores a pivotal moment connecting the women writers of Mansilla’s day, who considered themselves co-founders of the national literary tradition, with the immense flowering of women writers in the latter half of the 20th century.

Above all, however, it is a pleasure to read. Cheadle’s accessible translation is designed to be read without scholarly accoutrements, though it does come equipped with an excellent introduction, incisive endnotes, a glossary of Spanish words, and period photographs of its principle actors. The book should help make both Lojo and Ocampo more familiar, which can only enrich anglophone cultures.

—Brett Alan Sanders