Book Reviews

INTO THE BLIZZARD: WALKING THE FIELDS OF THE NEWFOUNDLAND DEAD.
BY MICHAEL WINTER.
TORONTO: DOUBLEDAY, 2014. VI. 326 PAGES. $32.00.

ON JULY 1, WHEN MOST Canadians celebrate Canada Day, Newfoundlanders think instead of a military action that took place during the First World War on 1 July 1916, decades before Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada. That day, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the Newfoundland Regiment fought at Beaumont-Hamel. Of about 1000 men in the Regiment over 300 died, most within minutes, and over 350 were wounded. For Newfoundland and Labrador, July 1 is Memorial Day. As we reach the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, we have also reached the end of living memory of the war.

Into the Blizzard is a war memorial for the 21st century, a time when we are skeptical of grand public gestures, of official monuments and the public discourses that accompany them. There is an official history of the Newfoundland Regiment (Nicholson, 2006); this is not one. *Into the Blizzard* looks at the soldiers who would shortly die, or survive to be veterans, as ordinary men. Winter presents their facts and stories, which start long before the battlefields, in their banality, uncertainty or humour. He reminds us of their sexuality, as traced through medical records (43). He presents them as tourists in Egypt. He considers the man who grew up next to his own house. Some stories are moving, some are absurd. By layering them he builds something of significance: a sense of pathos, a terrible sense of waste as we come to feel, not merely know, the effects of the loss of these individuals to their families, communities, and their nation—the Dominion of Newfoundland, as it was then. He is a Chaucer for the Newfoundland Regiment, focusing our attention not on the shrine (though he does get to the battlefield and the monument) but on the road stories along the way. He is a war correspondent amongst ghosts, getting the human angle beneath the press releases. By working on this scale Winter makes history accessible in the best sense of the word.

Moreover, a large part of the book is about the relevance of Beaumont-Hamel to us today, close to a century on. This idea, that the war ought

to be relevant to us, is something official voices worry over and trumpet. We are expected to bow our heads gravely and be thankful—and for the most part we are—but that gratitude is abstract and its objects are alien, ancient heroes. School children hear talk of sacrifice and squirm through a minute of silence. Winter takes up the difficult work of making history "real" by literally making the book about himself as a way of illustrating history to us, his readers. A skeptic who opens the book by observing the utility of the war memorial in St. John's as a skateboard park (3), Winter grounds his acts of memorialization in his own flesh. How can we understand the world of these soldiers and their sacrifices after a century of such swift change? How will we remember them? Winter answers with a contemporary pilgrimage: he travels their path; he finds the villages and fields they trained in, the pubs they drank in; he sleeps in barracks; he walks their battlefields. He tells us how these journeys feel to him today: the waiting, hunger, fear, grace or cruelty. Winter measures time using the scale of our own bodies, our senses and experience of space, our human needs and discomforts and dis/connections. The direct parallels he draws between his own peacetime travel experiences and those of the soldiers are often inadequate and unconvincing—waiting to deplane is hardly disembarking after a ten-day ocean crossing haunted by U-boats. But this is, eventually, the point: we fail to know them; their experience is beyond us, even as we try to feel it. It is a truism now that all history is subjective, but few approaches are so self-aware, so determined to highlight this subjectivity to readers, and use it to spark our own reflections.

Winter addresses the problems of memory and inadequacies of memorialization directly throughout the text, challenging conventional approaches to the war. He interrogates the truism that Beaumont-Hamel forged a national consciousness amongst Newfoundlanders, and reinterprets symbols like the caribou, emblem of the Regiment and subject of the official memorial in France, as an animal at bay, scenting danger, not as a proud part of military heraldry. He talks about the half-models of the caribou built for towns across Newfoundland, where children swing on them: "something monumental brought back to normal dimensions" (309). What ought to be normal, heargues, is a sense of horror at the senseless sacrifice of the young, instead of the platitudinous language of official memorialization that often uses war to propagate simplistic ideas of nationalism. Winter's tone moves from observational to angry and fearful as he contemplates both the war and our contemporary world through the lens of his own relationship with his son.

Winter is particularly suited to present his subject in this manner. He has been circling nonfiction for years: the fictional works for which he is still best known (*One Last Good Look*, *This All Happened*, *The Architects Are Here*) are autofictional, drawing upon and adapting his own life through the persona of alter-ego Gabriel English. 2011's *The Death of Donna Whalen* is "documentary fiction;" a found narrative, it is constructed substantially from reshaped transcripts of court hearings, statements, and other documents addressing the central figure's murder. The foreword of that text notes the model of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), a poetry collection that presents a small American town through poems written from the perspectives of its dead citizens. Masters' influence is even more clear here, in *Into The Blizzard*. Winter's work is always about the chime and echo between things, whether within lives or between eras. Here, his precise language and his careful, cadenced phrases connect us to the long-dead young men at Beaumont-Hamel, and ask us to consider the world being crafted for us now. Hours spent at this memorial are well worth it.

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SINGED WINGS.
BY LOLA LEMIRE TOSTEVIN.
VANCOUVER: TALONBOOKS, 2013. 112 PAGES. $16.95.

LOLA LEMIRE TOSTEVIN'S NEWEST collection of poetry, *Singed Wings*, is a quiet triumph. Inspired by the lives and works of "women who practiced their art under unfavourable social or physical circumstances, such as Camille Claudel and Frida Kahlo, or into advanced age, such as Louise Bourgeois and Betty Goodwin" (Acknowledgements 109), Tostevin creates a collection that is at once meditative, invective, wry and wrenchingly personal. To call *Singed Wings* an homage or 'portrait of the female artist' is to limit the intimacy and communion that the bilingual poet shares with her polyphony of muses: she visits Camille Claudel in the asylum "where memory slept" (19); she goes for drinks with Hannah Arendt; she takes "Betty Goodwin at her word" (27). Tostevin sculpts, photographs, paints, writes and dreams the female artists who died in the past but lived in the future, "The paradox of lives held / Between/*Hier- /Aujourd'hui*" (33). There is love in these poems—love for

the artists, love for the art—but there is also enduring pain.

At times Tostevin's poetry seems suspended on air, unfettered and effervescent, yet her lyrical wings fly only so close to the sun, close enough to singe but not to burn. The poet is tethered, weighted, by the body of language and the language of bodies:

> The body withdraws
> To rethink itself
>
> The spotted and wrinkled skin
> Slips like a glove onto the writing hand
>
> Touches on the strangeness
> Of this otherness (44)

Bodies are bound to their corporeal and temporal cells, to their assigned physical, social and linguistic territories. "How did age steal womanhood faster / Than womanhood stole childhood?" (40) the poet asks, equally bitter and mystified. She longs for the aged skin to slip off the writing hand as easily as it slips on, for words to touch something other than "this otherness" (44) of being. The artist ascends and descends, but never fully transcends: life and death are unavoidable—"the rest is painted bread" (97).

Despite the poet's anxiety about the "inherent impossibility of writing / Poetically about bodies and landscapes" (89)—which borders on a kind of post-modern neurosis—the tentative self-consciousness and reflexivity of *Singed Wings* plays well against its sharp and sudden humour:

> Standing in line at Union Station
> When a young man in railway uniform
> Tells her, "C'mon, move it up, granny"
> Livesay answers, "Fuck you, sonny" (49)

Wit is a rebuttal: it is the poet's defense against the young man who snickers with his friends when she tells him "He has beautiful eyes" (48); it is the ache of desire that pervades the "cracked nipples … brittle nails / Wet kiss a drool" (105) of an aging body that struggles to accept its place in "the matter of time" (105); it is the old women who "look at old men and conclude that / Not hankering is the gentler thing" (40). Wit is a rebuttal, but art is

a strange refuge. As the poet stands before Claudel's *Torse de Clotho*, she marks her allegiance to the decaying half-figure of Fate: "Old Woman, you are my guardian now / Let the damn body hang" (18), she declares, at once defiant and despairing.

Pained and desperately lonely at times, humorous and cutting at others, *Singed Wings* is a collection that thinks and feels deeply about "the thinking thing / the body thing" (50), the living thing and the dying thing. A beautiful and nuanced work by a poet of considerable skill, intelligence and depth.

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ALONGSIDE.
BY ANNE COMPTON.
MARKHAM, ON: FITZHENRY & WHITESIDE, 2013. 80 PAGES. $14.95.

THE FINE PRINT ON THE COPYRIGHT page of Anne Compton's *Alongside* categorizes the collection as "Love poetry, Canadian—21st Century." It appears that the cataloguer took the publisher's squib, which describes the book as "an unexpected love story," too much at its word. This is not love poetry. There is not much talk of a lover or a beloved. In fact, its most striking quality, which is decidedly uncharacteristic of "love poetry," is restraint. As Jeffery Donaldson puts it, Compton's language is "carefully controlled."

Indeed, Compton's word choices are extreme in their precision. For example, in a single poem ("Beatrice," 62), we have "a trestle table," "mirror carp," and "cheval glass," capped by this mouthful of a final line: "Seckel pears on a credenza, her only concession." Another poem contains a similarly conspicuous, decidedly un-English word: "ghazal," which is a type of Persian love poem. Such vocabulary is usually nestled within poems composed of simple syntax and few strong verbs, or poems that dispense with verbs altogether. In "Beatrice," for instance, the nouns and adjectives (quoted above) are bold, but the verbs are ordinary: "wants," "are," "can," "is." Another poem begins without a verb, opting instead for a carefully chosen adjective: "The vulpine light of a full moon in February" (39). What's true of the types of words Compton uses is true of the poems in a more general way: they tend to be weighty, a little opaque, and static.

It's obvious that a lot of care has gone into Compton's choices. And while precision is a good thing, it comes at a cost. Some of the lines are over-crafted. Their language is sometimes a dense net of weighty nouns and adjectives in which meanings get caught. So the reader has to work to remain inside the poems. Jeffery Donaldson calls Compton "a wonderful poet of word textures, language textures." But Donaldson is an English professor; he devotes a lot of time to analyzing poetry and is Compton's ideal audience. There is no invitation to the more casual reader, a creature at risk of becoming extinct.

The most interesting poems depart from the static and opaque modes mentioned above. For example, in "John and Me, Skating" (51), Compton pays homage to Gerald Manley Hopkins. The poem, which describes her and presumably her brother pond-skating as twelve- and fourteen-year-olds, "lank-limbed lovelies," "wonders of muscle and bone," is hyphen-filled, and bounces along with a rhythm uncharacteristic of her more syntactically simple style. The typical observational skills and controlled word pairings present in the other poems are here in a louder form, emphasized by the many alliterations and hyphens. "John and Me, Skating" still exhibits some of Compton's characteristic restraint, but its contrasting quickness of rhythm helps to maintain a sense of wonder without masking the poem's meanings.

While there is nothing wrong with difficulty in itself, the effort required to read a difficult poem should be rewarded. What I mean is illustrated by one of the more accessible poems, "Cab Ride, Paris" (54), which maintains a level of precision while being clear about the emotion it is trying to convey. In it, the speaker observes some boys walking their bikes along the sidewalk. The poem moves compellingly from casual observation to an urgently personal reflection on sons. She then addresses the boys, and in doing so produces this lovely last line: "the world a backdrop to your inscrutable bearing." The strength of this collection rides on poems like this, which exhibit restraint and humility, but which are also suffused with wonder. Rather than shut you out, these poems pull you in and catapult you up.

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