Newfoundland Studies

Wade Kearley. *Let me burn like this: Prayers from the ashes*.

Janet Fraser

Volume 21, numéro 2, autumn 2006

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds21_2rv09

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Fraser, J. (2006). Compte rendu de [Wade Kearley. *Let me burn like this: Prayers from the ashes*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, *21*(2), 406–408.

to underestimate what he is doing in any one poem. The peaks are so high that there is inevitably a sense of letdown between them. *Airstream Land Yacht* is a mesmerizing read, and it confirms Ken Babstock, once again, as one of Canada's finest poets.

Patrick Warner
St. John's, Newfoundland

Wade Kearley. *Let me burn like this: Prayers from the ashes*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2006, ISBN 1897174020

SOLIPSISM: THE VIEW that the self is all that can be known. Existentialism: a theory which emphasizes the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will. Baroque: highly ornate and extravagant in style.

I doublechecked these terms in the Oxford Dictionary in order to decide whether or not they are essential to an understanding of Wade Kearley's second collection of poetry, *Let me burn like this.* I do. Certainly, if you don't want to hear a solipsistic, willful poetic voice, and see/feel/taste a multitude of baroque images of Eros and lamentation, then this book is not for you. Asking Wade Kearley to quiet down and pare down would be like asking Dylan Thomas to write like Raymond Carver or Shakespeare to create a sequel to *Waiting for Godot.* It shouldn't be done.

Having dispensed with this caveat, I would like to say that it's refreshing to read Canadian poetry that speaks accessibly and authentically, with passion and compassion, about deep human experiences of longing, loss, rage, tenderness, fear, and aging. In its convictions this poetry harkens back to the moving and vigorously masculine poetry of Irving Layton, Milton Acorn, and Alden Nowlan, and in Newfoundland, Al Pittman and Percy Janes. Many of Kearley's poems echo these poets particularly in the placement of humans in the wilderness. In "Alpha Male," a hunter at night feels his failures like "wind-fallen tree trunks,... antlered shadows." A couple of dream-like poems outline the travails of rock climbers and the strange falling death of a young man: "I remember someone whispering / strange jagged words, telling me / to let go. Maybe I fell then, / broken at the devil's foot." Other poems revel in the confidence of a boy who lives in the natural world: "As a boy on this cape I defied rogue waves" ("Concert at Cape Spear"), and "I calculated the parabolas of flight, / mastered them on my swing set / until Grandpa plucked me / from the sky at suppertime" ("The Bell Island lightkeeper"). My favourite wilderness poem is the sexy fantasy "Seasonal Labourer":

> ... I want to lick your unhaltered shoulder.
> I want you to forget the foreman, forget

the empty baskets, forget our separate histories,
the drone of aeroplanes overhead. I want you
to take my hand, lead me to the small grove
of maples and crash there, among the savage ferns,
you hot as wreckage beneath me.

There are many erotic poems, some about a wife, and others about imagined adulterous lovers. The erotic poems are all tinged with sadness, some with the existential loneliness of a familiar yet alien spouse, "Strangers, brief shadows, / sliding obliquely / across each other's lives" ("Lunar Lament"), and a marriage that is always shifting ground, as in "Photo of torso with mole," when a mole is removed from the wife's belly ("I fling back the sheets to catch / the glow of your torso, / before the next cut and numb recovery"). Other poems explore adulterous love that is lost and/or unfulfilled. The poem "Explaining desire away" is especially moving:

You're no longer the first thought
on my mind when I wake,
or the last thought at night.
I've cut that barbed wire from my flesh.
I'm desperate to be grateful for that.

Kearley celebrates predatory lustiness, in poems such as "Shem at the Brothel" and "Pickpocket fantasies." Even while pitying and rejecting a teenage prostitute in "At the crosswalk," the narrator wishes that "we could have saved each other." But while "The women / he craves are somewhere between my wife / and my daughters," extra-marital lust loses out to marital commitment in "Everything I cannot surrender."

Domestic life dominates the first third of the collection. "Nurseryman" is a lovely poem about an aging father and his nearly grown-up daughter.

In the mirror this morning
the scarred face staring back was a generation older,
couldn't break the frown until
I spied the young man. He winked at me.

It's like that with her at night. A strange child
lies sleeping in my daughter's room,
but I recognize the warble.

> Sometimes, in the heart of the night,
> she carries the baby to me, slides her cold feet
> into the puddle of warmth, and melts my fears.

Always paradox and contradiction in life/poetry. So too in death, as in the final poem, "Let me burn like this":

> Let me lie here. Let the fiddles
> mourn with joy at my graveside.
> Let these words be my pyre.
> Torch them. Let them sizzle
> like marrow.

Janet Fraser
University of New Brunswick

Robin C. McGrath. *Covenant of Salt*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2005, ISBN 189429484X

AS A ONE-TIME COME-FROM-AWAY who is now a gone-away, I must confess up front that I would have been baffled by the blown-up paper bag tied, as summer's "first ritual," and hung by "an old bootlace ... in the door" to "Baffle the come-from-aways and keep out the flies" ("Summer Visitor," 4). Baffled or not, I love this poem, the way it moves through its 25 lines organized into two stanzas, the bag metamorphosing from an inanimate object into an animate/inanimate and from there into the surreal expectation that:

> One day it will grow legs, walk into the house
> And close the door behind itself.

With this her second book of poems, Robin McGrath takes her place squarely within the ranks of those Newfoundland poets (Mary Dalton comes to mind as well as Agnes Walsh, Patrick Warner, Carmelita McGrath, Michael Crummey, and Mark Callanan) whose poetry derives in some significant measure from place and celebrates that place's rich culture while lamenting the passing of the old way of life (as did, in the judgement of Charles Simic, the poetry of Robert Frost vis-à-vis rural Maine and as does some of the best of Donald Hall's vis-à-vis rural New Hampshire). "Henry Looking Out to Sea" (58), for example, captures the expectation-of-disaster mentality of those older men who lived "life on the water" in small, frail craft but who now watch nervously from the shore a younger generation working on bigger boats. McGrath's title poem performs a Kaddish for the centu-