

Robin C. McGrath. *Covenant of Salt.*

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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
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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-

ries-long bedrock of the Newfoundland economy, the now almost defunct cod fishery, with its intricate rituals of catching, killing, cleaning, salting, and drying the fish on flakes, those rickety skeletal structures that once stood like raised slatted bed frames along the shore of any coastal settlement. The poem takes as epigraph Deuteronomy 5:3 ("The Lord made this covenant / not with our fathers but with us the living / everyone who is here today") and sings a hymn not only to salt, that "will keep anything" even "a love letter," but more profoundly to what can and should be preserved and the covenant we enter into to do so.

Many of these poems place McGrath also squarely within the great Newfoundland tradition of story telling, but, as with the surreal twist to her meditation on the paper bag, her narrative poems, that seem on the surface mere retellings of old tales, have hidden depths. In "Jack's Sister's Song," for instance, the poem that opens the collection, McGrath engages, from a sister's point of view, with the biblical account of Jonah swallowed by a whale and the Newfoundland and Labrador nautical ditty "Jack Was Every Inch a Sailor" that relocates the events to "southeast of Bacalhao" and "straight for Baffin Bay." McGrath prefers the spelling "Baccalieu" and makes much of Jonah/Jack as a "jinker," i.e., somebody who brings bad luck on board a boat. The poem ends with an expression of sympathy with the leviathan who "regurgitated its bellyaching prophet," and who surely "has tales of its own" (3).

The book fairly brims with tales ("The Eke-names of Jerseyside," 5; "Nan," 11), old tales salvaged from historical documents and newspaper clippings ("Death of a Pedlar at Spoon Cove," 37; and "Rare Visitors," 55), or new tales taken from conversations McGrath has overheard or was a party to. All tightly crafted, the latter appear to reproduce conversational encounters in a disarmingly natural way but end as often as not, as does "The Basking Shark" (53), on an ironic note. These are poems that pay homage to family members ("Aviatrix *in utero*," 67) and to a vanished (or rapidly vanishing) Newfoundland of isolated outports, recipes for black currant jelly, oilskins made from flour sacking.

At the heart of the book is the exquisite chicken and egg sequence "When the Mister is Away." These poems are based on close observation of (and dare I say identification with and fondness for) the inmates of her coop. They are enlivened by nice anthropomorphic touches and by an indulgent awareness of the small brain size of her feathered crew. The roosters bear grandiose names like "Ulysses" and "Maccabee," who "Through the kitchen window ... looks like / Butterscotch ice cream topped with cherries" (23). The sequence includes a delightful chicken catechism, "A Coopie Triolet," a "Song of the Pullet," and "Clapperclaw: Madsong of the Broody Hen," with its refrain

Rooster on my back will climb,
Eggs are laid in summertime,
Sing cackle and calloo. (29)

Some of these ditties seem inspired by McGrath's compiling and editing of *Nursery Rhymes of Newfoundland & Labrador* (Boulder Publications, 2004).

The emotional register of the sequence is highly varied, starting and ending with tender expressions of love for the "Mister," while inviting laughs along the way with clever wordplay and witty jingles and not shrinking from a hard-boiled account of the killing of a rooster for food. Unsentimental realism also underpins her poem "When Rabbit Season Opens" (44) on the late life and death (through "Half an ounce of lead behind his ear") of a beloved dog. Indeed tonal variety characterizes the book throughout. As does also stylistic variety. Beyond the styles already mentioned, there is the smooth narrative flow and precise evocative details of the prose poem stanzas of "The Moss Garden" (39), the haikuesque "A Winter Without Snow" (45), and McGrath's flair for the celebratory, as evinced in "An Encomium on Eggs" (30) and her ode to St. John's, "The Holy City," with its incantatory recitation of the names of "More hills than Jerusalem" (56). Most startling of all is the raunchy, swaggering and defiant (yet ultimately tender) tone McGrath assumes in "Nobody Leaves Here Alive (with apologies to Al Purdy)" (43).

I cannot end this review without commenting on McGrath's descriptive powers — "The sun rises from the ocean like a pease-pudding / From a boiled dinner" (54) — and on the book's rich language. The book is peppered with Biblical references and lightly salted with Newfoundland terms like "witherod," "gads," "withies," and "dwich." I only wish I had the cultural justification to produce a wonderful phrase like "Gallinippers and stouts as big as birds" (14). My only quibble is that sometimes McGrath hammers home her point at a poem's end unnecessarily by telling the reader something the reader might have figured out on her/his own, as when she follows the line "An edition of David Copperfield" with "From which the sample exercise was taken" (8). And for further printings a small typo could be corrected in the German word for settlements which is *Ansiedlungen* (not *Andiedlungen*) (52). But this is nitpicking, and it should in no way detract from the achievement of *Covenant of Salt*.

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Tom Henihan. *After the Ritual*. Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Editions, 2006, ISBN 1-894800-89-3

THE TROPE OF THE ALIENATED artist, exiled from culture, burdened by the tug of absence and loss, is both common and enduring in the Western poetic tradition. Its masters, Shelley, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Rilke, found the courage to repeatedly mine the crevasse between presence and absence, redemption and loss. The beauty, potency, and violence of their aesthetic has lured many poets to the edge of a similar