

Tom Henihan. *After the Ritual*.

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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

precipice. It is dangerous territory; most return with little more than maudlin caricatures of a tragic poetic disposition.

It is into this territory that Tom Henihan wanders in his latest collection, *After the Ritual*. Once there he finds firm poetic ground in spite of a somewhat misleading prose opener entitled "Moving to an Island" that recalls Rimbaud's recollections of ocean passages, or less sympathetically, Quoy's journey to Newfoundland in E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*. Pronouncing his "passage to the island ... a kind of severe verdict on his life," the narrator quickly lapses into the clichés of Romantic exile by lighting a cigarette, recognizing that there is "something heroic in the bow of a ship" and waxing about the inherent loneliness of his poetic disposition: "The impulse to move had cost him everything. His only fraternity were the misbegotten ones driven by a vehement impulse coded in the blood like a distant star: the ones with a perpetual sense of loss and the distance of the world in their eyes, burning with the weary desperation of maverick planets" (10). Fulfilling the trope of the alienated artist, Henihan's maudlin prose awkwardly lands his protagonist on the rocky shores of exile.

What is perhaps most jarring about the poet-as-tragic-hero conceit conveyed in this prose précis is the skill and beauty with which the densely metaphorical, elegiac, and often strange poems that comprise the rest of the volume map the contours of the exile's terrain. Throughout the collection, Henihan crafts somber and anguished lyrics that seem to tread along the edge of a singular and traumatic wound. The source of this wound is made apparent in poems such as "Leave-taking":

Just as we were learning to live
 death kissed her cheek
 and a new frontier appeared in her eyes.
 All clouds became attached to her burial.
 Her nervous hands became leaves
 dallying with their shadows....
 All day long, just like the ocean and the sky
 moving relentlessly in their caves,
 the prow of her sadness
 rose and dipped in strange waves. (15)

In this stirring elegy, Henihan constructs a series of metaphors, each aimed at conveying the act of a slow death as an austere and atavistic process transformation. The turbulent, restless "prow" of his subject's sadness, still caught within the cave of the world, evokes both a desire for transcendence and a fear of what lies beneath the surface of the "strange waves." For Henihan, the desire to reclaim what has been lost beneath the thin and violent surface that divides life and death compels his eloquent and often painful poetic investigations. His habit of layering poems with dis-

tinct metaphors is itself an act of groping towards the edge of annihilation: as one metaphor proves insufficient, he begins anew. The result is a dense tapestry that continuously lulls the reader towards intense moments of violence or solitude and then “drift[s] away in a turbulence of snow” (18), only to start fresh with the next sequence of metaphors. In “Succour,” for instance, his metaphors intensify both his longing and his relationship with loss: “You have left a wound on the world. / The mouths that you kissed are thirsty / while the moon passes its cup above their heads” (39). In “The Murky Universe” they attest to his roving desire for a clearer ontological perspective: “I left the briery winter roads in a place purged of colour / where the future was soaked like a rag / in the murky lamp oil of the past” (26). In both instances, Henihan confronts his loss and longing for redemption by attempting to poetically extend himself beyond the limits of the possible. However, his anguish repeatedly leads him to “see with head down and eyes closed, / the same enormous God, the same murky universe” (26).

The compulsion to transcend the murkiness of the universe, and the ultimate impossibility of doing so, is central to Henihan’s aesthetic. While in some poems the density of his metaphors complements this sense of ontological exile, in others his longing abruptly changes to a frustration that manifests itself in forthright, often incisive, declarations, as in “Nightfall,” where he needs “the bitter astringency of alcohol tasted in hunger” (28). Here the metaphysical crisis that resounds throughout the collection is replaced with a physical, human voice. The desire for transformation through alcohol is repeated in the volume’s titular poem, “After the Ritual,” where Henihan declares “there is no repose in drunkenness: its prize is an odyssey / through fractured light, the keening rain and other people’s comfort” (61). Drunkenness becomes another form of ritual aimed at delivering the drinker from the burdens of the world only to supplant him firmly back within its confines: “When I wake again, to the verdant flower of addiction, / the radio sounds like a star in crisis / as the stone angel of the day fades towards visibility” (61).

Like the radio in “After the Ritual” many of Henihan’s poems are tuned to the pitch of personal and spiritual crisis. While this thematic repetition imposes limits on the range of Henihan’s subject matter, the poems stop short of lapsing into static. The fact that they remain rewarding throughout the collection is testament to Henihan’s comfort writing at the limits of absence and loss. For this is a compelling collection, at once haunting and alluring, in which Henihan seduces readers to join him in his own strange territory of exile at “the edges of the festival / where the night approaches dressed as a nomadic woman” (48). It is worth the journey.

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