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## Devotion in the Darndest Places

***Summertime Swamp Love* by PATRICIA YOUNG**

Palimpsest Press, 2014 \$18.95

Reviewed by **CHRISTINE LOWTHER**

This book is funny and moving, shattering and hilarious, intelligent, deep and a swinging good time. With nimble skill and a pen that's red in tooth and claw, Patricia Young makes us animal and makes us in love.

It is a beautiful *looking* book. The front cover is a 1904 richly coloured and shaped rendition of wildflowers by Ernst Haeckle. His *Art Forms of Nature* closed the gap between science and art, and Young's poetry makes art from biological fact, makes swooning poems from all manner of mating rituals discovered by science.

Like Haeckle's art, Young's way with words reminds us of the staggering variety, beauty and harshness of our singular planet. Initially, as stated in the book's introduction, she had worried about exploiting already over-exploited animals, but in the end composed many of the poems in the voices of the animals themselves. The last tigress on Earth must allow a brutal male tiger to mate with her in order to protect her cubs from him, only to foresee her death at the hands of human villagers who will soon dance on her black and gold pelt. An angler fish must physically fuse with his mate—permanently, as a parasite; all that's left of her numerous mates are testes here and there along her skin. With gorgeous alliteration he ponders her, "lurking the abyss, dangling your bitter bulb/ of bioluminescence" (19). Doling out hyphenated descriptors that satisfy like a hearty meal, the "party-girl . . . toe-nipping,

scruff-grabbing, snort-cussing . . . libido-crazed, un-/ mounted" female ferret will actually die if she cannot find a mate after going into heat. (39) Male porcupines fight each other for three days under a tree holding the female. "How ends the brawl?/ In needled snouts and bodies scathed. / . . . through dark the night of wild Alberta's thrashing" (42, 43). This is a planet of thieving crows' "rot-gut cuisine" (40), snake-eating jackals, and mate-devouring preying mantises.

It is also a world of passion, romance, surprise, and teen angst. The male mantis spends most of a poem complaining of his fate, praying for deliverance, only to surrender to first-sight ardour in the last line: "Too late to unlove my lovely butcher" (26). In the poet's imagination, even a koala bear can suffer from "bison-big lust" (35). The most unlikely yet consuming passion is found between a pair of field mice, one of Earth's relatively few monogamous mammals. Their post-coital tenderness is rivalled only by a jackal contemplating his marriage, and perhaps by the sweet, shy smile of a somnolent sloth lover. But it's not what you think. This is not cutesie anthropomorphism aimed at winning members for PETA. There is nothing preachy here. The jackal serenely rhapsodizes, "Our marriage flows like a river lined with acacia trees" (36). Beauty flows from Young's research. Poems are prefaced with quotations that triggered her responses. "The *Diplozoon paradoxum* is the only species . . . in which there seems to be 100 percent monogamy. —*New York Times*" (53). (Yes, the only completely loyal creature is a flatworm.)

We're not laughing *at*, but *with*. We're delighting in surprise, which is also a way of being educated while entertained and moved. Young had been alive more

than fifty years before happening to stumble on the fact that whiptail lizards must reproduce by cloning because there are no male whiptails. She was dubious of writing about her fascination with such facts and the poems didn't emerge until she imagined the lizard's voice through its profile on a dating site. From her introduction:

. . . what held my interest was the infinite and ingenious strategies nature's males and females employ to cajole, bully and even deceive each other into mating, strategies that resonate with endearing, troubling and sometimes hilarious familiarity. (8)

Young's ways of seeing are a gift. Bats are "a multitude of roof-danglers, / lustrous and webbed" (24). She is honest in wondering how to explain God at the moment of the platypus' creation, and I wonder, chuckling, whether anyone else, poet or not, has ever imagined God as a stoned clown? On the other hand, "Betrayed" and "Advice for a Lesbian Albatross" broke my heart as two of the most grief-stricken and loneliest poems I have ever read. From seahorses to elephants' summertime swamp love, this work is brave, rapturous, graceful.

**CHRISTINE LOWTHER** is the author of three books of poetry and a memoir, *Born Out of This*.