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Hilarity, Wit and Tenderness

***Stowaways* by ARIEL GORDON**

Palimpsest Press, 2014 \$18.95

Reviewed by **GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL**

In *Stowaways*, Ariel Gordon reflects a feminist and often a mother's perspective in which zany metaphor and unusual collage are poised to startle and challenge the reader. And if this imagery and meaning brought about through juxtaposition are not enough to disrupt the reader's ordinary senses, surreal angles and surprise turns are guaranteed to dislocate sensibility and overturn old ways of seeing. At the heart of Gordon's postmodern view, comedy and cleverness and an intrinsically parodic inventiveness reign, as witness the slew of 'how to' survive poems that make up the last half of the collection.

Although the collection is not about nature, the prairie marks a backdrop to the poems themselves. In the title poem "Stowaways," the word "stowaways" doesn't refer to invasive species per se, but instead to a mosquito that has stowed away in the moving vehicle in which the speaker finds herself (mind you, the species of mosquito, *Flaviviridae*, that raises the spectre of West Nile was indeed an invasive species). In the opening stanza the appearance of the insects (mosquito and horsefly) and burrs from the outside world inside the speeding car create a dynamic and gleefully harrowing scene:

& if there were any horseflies
beating
against the windshield
where it narrowed
to the thinnest
slice of sky,

we ignored them. (21)

Here, the insouciance of the speaker as she makes passing comment on the tiny deaths of insects that strike the windshield above eye level enhances our appreciation of the intensity of this small scale battleground as presented from such a surreal angle.

Gordon never romanticizes nature but instead presents the prairie as it exists, as in "How to See Deer" we are introduced to "managed forest of aspen clones" and "re-introduced grasses / gone blond in the sun" (69). Nevertheless there is something endearing in her evocation of the doe "all weary ear / & ear & eye as we hop-step" (69). Similarly, in "Thump," a human imprint on the landscape is accepted as part of a larger nature where casualties happen at all levels in the natural hierarchy in which humans remain an integral part. After alluding to the boys' "knobbly spines under fabric pulled tight" in "spring's riffing fingers," the speaker points to the railway tracks as the scene for past accidents and those to come (18):

Under the trees, ragged mushrooms
& splayed ribs emerge from ice as
trains clatter by
& fat horses delicately cross tracks,
hooves
striking steel:
Thump. (19)

Here, as elsewhere in her poems, Gordon evokes a world through unwieldy juxtaposition and delicate detail—the boys so vulnerably presented with their "knobbly spines" and the implied road kill, past accident ("splayed ribs [that] emerge from ice") and future accident, with "fat horses" about to step across the track, "*Thump*" with fairy tale largesse (19).

As in the poem "Thump," the anti-romantic stance persists in "Herd instinct" in which "none of us believe in growth or re-growth" amid the messy garbage of spring; but in this poem, as elsewhere, a redeeming idealism, in this case distinctly feminist, saves us from the squalour. As in the title poem "Stowaway," Gordon is adept with surreal angles that impress an iconic scene on the mind:

When the calf is eight months old
its headbutts to my sister-wife's
udder will almost unseat her; she
will be almost as bruised as when
she presented herself to the prairie,
backside open and raw, the male a
dark cloud nearby. (39)

In counterpoint with this scene's culmination with the mothering cow, the speaker introduces her daughter who, in being carried by a stepfather, retains her loyalty and love for her mother to whom she calls back "Mum-mum! Mum-mum!" through the bushes.

An amusing anti-romantic love story that effectively inverts Grimm's frog prince fairy tale is recounted retrospectively in "Pond Scum," a poem in which the speaker has fallen for a "country western singer from Quebec." While she names herself "Queen of St. Malo Frog Follies" and describes herself as an "Anglo," her lover is introduced as "half-frog, half cad" as he sleeps with one-night stands between Flin Flon and Ottawa. While the speaker's mother warns against "his kind," she, with deadpan naiveté, believes that "I am his special princess" and that "having children will change him," so that it is particularly with the pinch-of-salt humour that follows that the irony of the situation becomes obvious: "Nine months later, my young are

/ squirming thoughts in my mouth & / he's still half-frog, half cad" (38). Finally, it is through these surprise turns and comic twists that the narrative rises above the ordinariness of situation to entertain us. The final two bloopers do not leave us feeling sorry for the speaker who evidently has her own safe guards: ". . . I keep my mouth shut so I don't blurt out my babies" and, later, "And my smile is a *caulisse* heart breaker" (38). Following Derrida's theory that words that sound like other words and remind the reader of an associated meaning may simultaneously carry equal weight in the reader's mind, the French expletive "*caulisse*" and the similar sounding word "*callous*" may conveniently be held together in mental association.

In conclusion, *Stowaways* is a clever and often hilarious collection with its occasional tenderness let slip amidst a clearly unromantic stance and matter-of-fact prairie landscape. With its freshness of metaphor and crazy juxtapositions, its ironic and often comic twists in narrative, *Stowaways* is a collection that will hold readers' eyes and play with their wits to the end.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL received her PhD from the University of Saskatchewan. She was poetry editor for *Event* between 1987-2005. At present she is Reading Manuscript poetry editor for *Event* and a freelance writer more generally. She has three poetry collections and several chapbooks published. A chapbook *Fox Love* is coming out with Alfred Gustav Press in 2017. In 2015, she won second prize in the Great Blue Heron contest, and her manuscript "Proud Men Do Not Listen" was short-listed for the Gwendolyn MacEwen award.