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Adjustments and Middle Age

Realignment by RUTH ROACH PIERSON

Palimpsest Press, 2015 \$18.95

Reviewed by GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL

In *Realignment*, Ruth Roach Pierson writes poems that speak about middle-aged adjustments, a self-questioning about self-critical habits and doldrums. Although these poems breathe the air of living rooms with pianos, draw inspiration from film and painting, nature is uncovered at a base layer of the poet's experience and simple joy or sorrow.

In the title poem, which unusually (for a title poem) appears first in the collection, the poet depicts a piano stool whose function has changed over the years from a stool on which she practised Czerny exercises before a "second-hand upright" to its present use as plant stand or extra stool for guests:

Spiralling up, the piano stool
dissolves
into my pillow, transition as
seamless
as a practised cinematic fade-out
fade-in, done in black and white (13)

Very smoothly the image of the cultivated yet domestic piano stool becomes a metonymy in the poems that follow for the adjustments that the poet has had to make over the years.

Along with these modifications that have come about, self-examination becomes a common theme in this collection, and no more so than in the second poem "Not fog or Wasteland." Here the poet tries out a comparison between her shadow self (marking an insufficient self rather than an alter ego) to a "fog or

wasteland" (connoting uncertainty on a gradient with depression), but finds the analogy itself lacking. "What name should I give you, you/ who have shadowed me all my life," she asks this "shadow of self," then summons the word "shadow" in various languages, including the Latin "*umbra*," the French "*ombre*" and the German "*shatten*." "Does Language matter" she quips, unable to resist an erudite pun on "matter" and the Latin *mater*. Retrospectively she looks back on an earlier also neurotic but perhaps not so self-aware self, whom she sees in terms of a rainforest that is not quite glorified since the trees are "necklaced in clammy moss":

Once I named you rainforest,
picturing
trees necklaced in clammy moss.
Once I named you "it" -- a
preposition
without antecedent, un-
signified . . . (14)

Pierson's wordplay and careful nuancing of meanings as she toys with language and connotation in the first etiolated stanza of the poem with its decrescendo of lines that reads like a prayer, and the further reification of that self as alternatively a "rainforest" or "it" (the latter reminiscent of the Jungian ID but removed from its association with libido?) extends the meditation into a realm simultaneously more concrete than language (in the case of the landscape tableau) and perhaps more abstract (the psychological "it").

In "Yakima Apples," Pierson's finely chiselled triplets start with one homely proposition—the scent of apples baking in a wood stove and caramel apples at the Puyallup fair—and then wander in their

association with apples into a yet more folksy realm:

The Johnny seeds scattered,
patents bought, genes modified
local varieties disappearing
the suspicious wax of green sheen
on Granny Smiths. (15)

From Edenic version, the "apple" here takes a journey into a more contemporary, commercial variety of apple that may not always appear as it seems. As a last reminder, the postwar child who holds the apple by the stem and eats the fruit to the core reinforces a guilt that the poet seems to share almost constitutionally.

On a more personal note, Pierson in "Gains and Losses" speaks about her aging parents, fears her failures in memory in consideration of her family history and her mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis. With admiration for her father, she recalls how he, diagnosed with bone cancer, insisted on "bundling his Alzheimer's-addled wife/ out of the retirement home's infirmary" so that he could drive her around the neighbourhoods where they had lived during happier times:

So he could drive her one last time
to the neighbourhood to view both
the house
they lived in for over thirty years,
and the new one
they later built on the land where an
apricot tree
once bloomed every spring. (24)

As quite frequently in Pierson's verse, a return to nature marks a base of sanity and delight and escape from the abstractions of mind and anxiety.

A variation on this touch base of sanity associated with nature occurs in "In Memory of Jenny Morrison." Here, the poem begins with the speaker relishing the beautiful colours and textures in nature—the leaves "turning ginger, marigold and kidney bean"—when she comes across an accident in which a pregnant woman on a bicycle has been killed in a traffic accident (72). As the speaker views the police cars and corpse under the tarp, she finds herself horrified at her own unthinking pleasure in having walked through the leaves on her way home:

later mortified
the effrontery of my feet
stomping through fallen leaves,
my pleasure in their brittle
scrunch and rustle. (73)

In this poem, again, the self-punishing speaker is evident, but here more ironically her joy and self-censure are directed at the nature that allows her stability elsewhere in the collection.

A review of Pierson's *Realignment* would not be complete without mention of *ekphrasis* as it is applied to paintings, videos and films. In "'A Woman's Crowning Glory'/ John William Waterhouse's Eulalia," Pierson notes the female saint's white dove flying from her mouth on her execution when an unseasonable snow arrives:

A crowd gathers on steps that lead
to the site of the execution—
woman
on her knees, head uncovered in
mourning,
a young boy pointing excitedly at an
airborne dove . . . (66)

The dove motif, introduced at the beginning of the poem, reappears during the final stanza with the three doves (reminiscent of the holy trinity) taking flight above the bystanders amid the "clutter of pigeons" and "indifferent" "spear-bearing legionnaires." As so often in Pierson's work, nature—here in the form of the dove as a bird of nature as well as in its role as a traditional typos for peace—becomes associated with redemption. Altogether, *Realignment* is a subtle work—though fairly traditional in its tastes and fondness for nature and art—held together by the conscience-driven voice of a speaker whose

periodic glimpses into nature seem to provide momentary relief to her soul.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL received her PhD from the University of Saskatchewan and has taught as a sessional at both the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina. She was poetry editor for *Event* between 1987-2005. At present she is Reading Manuscript poetry editor for *Event* and a freelance writer more widely. She has three poetry collections and several chapbooks published. A chapbook *Fox Love* is coming out with Alfred Gustav Press in 2017.