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Gillian Frances Harding-Russell
University of Saskatchewan

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Seamless Language of Poetry

Sleeping in Tall Grass by RICHARD THERRIEN

University of Alberta Press, 2016 \$19.95

Reviewed by GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL

Sleeping in Tall Grass is an outstanding first poetry collection, seemingly the product of the poet's life experience: his French- Catholic background, living on the prairies, and his relationship with his mother, father, and brother. In "Water, Language, Faith," (first published in The Alfred Gustav Press's chapbook series), Therrien quotes Guy Davenport that "the work of the poet is continuous / while other ways of telling are wildly discontinuous" (11), and certainly the writing in *Sleeping in Tall Grass* may be seen as a poetic shorthand that gets to the quick of experience in seamless poetic language whose emotional impact is simultaneous with its thought.

In the opening long poem, "Nowhere in Sight," Therrien uses the physical experience of walking across the prairie as a metaphor for poetry while a walking rhythm sparks spiritual insight:

Walking the prairie is telling the
poem
its cadence rising matter-of-factly
from the swell and fall
of her great grass belly sharp
prairie light peeling syllable
from syllable – telling the poem
is stopping the sun
the narrative
in telling never told... (3)

Therrien's lines are hauntingly melodic and

philosophically beguiling. The repeated cadences "telling the" have an incantatory effect, and the poet's ability to locate an image that becomes the pivot for turning the narrative upside-down is uncanny: "Your heart is but a quiet place for the poor / wandering universe to rest its weary head" (3). Accordingly, the perspective is inverted so that we see the universe as the wanderer walking through the speaker's perception.

In the second long poem "Water, Language, Faith," the twin motifs that water "finds its own level" and the French-Canadian saying "tu pers ta langue tu pers ta foi" are thematically interwoven to suggest the transformation of faith to a personal level of spiritual understanding even as water finds its own level. As in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," Therrien interpolates intricately woven poetic idiom with snippets of conversation, for example during the speaker's exchange with his mother who undergoes chemotherapy to make her better that ironically makes her more sick. She knows that she has an appointment with a particular doctor, but is unsure what it is for, and this blind acceptance of her fate extends to her family life and her relationship with her husband:

*Your father doesn't like it when I ask
questions your father's
not bad when you're here when
you come to visit
but as soon as he's alone with me
boy
You wouldn't believe it. (14)*

In the disjunction between the speaker's father and mother, I am reminded of the pathos and irony in the tableau conjured by Eliot in "The Wasteland" in which the woman combs her hair into "fiery points" that "glow[ed] into words" and then were

“still” as she ponders what the speaker is thinking. A similar wasteland of lacking communication ingrained in a human reality plagues Therrien's world.

In many ways, *Sleeping in Tall Grass* is a poetry collection about coming to terms with death and death's legacy: first, the speaker's mother's death and then his father's, echoed by his brother's death, all by cancer.

My emptiness will not be
frenetic with the friction
of my father's silences

but still in the unmarked graves
of his many forgotten selves. (6)

Although the speaker offers glimpses of his disappointment in his father and honestly presents his inability to appreciate what his father holds important, the book is ultimately about redemption in spite of a prodigal (or enlightened) son's judgements about his father that may not include the whole man.

There is the poem, “Somewhere on the Carlton Trail, Saskatchewan 1963,” in which a small, homesick boy phones home collect and is chastised by his father for not writing a letter which would be cheaper (30), and then there is the young man's lack of understanding about why it is so important to his father that he buy a piece of land in “the middle of nowhere,” not even touching a lake or body of water (32).

To his father in “About a Mile from the Lake,” to have left “a piece of property / a cabin” was his “simple version of an afterlife / honouring a blood lineage” and a “clenched dream.” Insight, however, comes to the speaker as he views the dirt road cutting across the “riparian plain” whose waters feed a lake “a mile southwest of

here” (32). From “*I may never return to this place,*” the speaker moves to the following insight about his father, his own mortality, and the transience of the dream that his father wishes to pass on to his son:

*I may never again occupy
after all these years
the body of my father's dream. (32)*

In a moment of serendipity for the speaker, a deer “illuminated by the late afternoon slant of sun” angles into sight, followed by another deer and another, and his father's dream for an instant is brought to sparkling life in his son's eyes (32).

In the final long poem, “Heavenly Men,” Therrien presents a vision of mankind in an urban setting using a characteristically continuous poetic language that mixes an idiom of imagery supported with terse, often cryptic lines of the vernacular. After introducing a tableau of an old man in the Bow Valley Square on Sixth avenue who picks up a discarded bus ticket that reminds him of something lost “at the track / half a continent away” (75), the poem's title line that “the city is filled with such heavenly men” (76) moves toward the scene of another such old man that echoes his own father's situation in his urban living quarters following his mother's death:

Later in his room—up two flights of
piss-reeking stairs
— a sink, a bed, a table — wolves will
come out
from behind the calendar — *Stan's*
Autobody — and above
the days of the week numbered
through December
the glossy picture finger-smudged —
on the edge

of a small emerald lake under a
canopy of cedars
the impossibly pale voluptuously
virgin madonna
is lifting her sky-blue skirt dipping
her foot
into the mist shrouded water. (76)

Here, the “virgin madonna” simultaneously evokes the Virgin Mary of Catholic faith, the Lady of the Lake of Arthurian legend, and something that embraces the sacred and profane as the virgin figure “voluptuously” lifts her “sky-blue skirt” to dip her foot into the “mist shrouded water.” In combination with the calendar picture of a lake, these emblems embody the dregs of his father's dream of a legacy and a life not lived in vain and pettiness (as might have been suggested in his relationship with his wife and his son). The speaker accordingly has fulfilled the promise set out in the first pages of the book to understand in his yearning “the unmarked graves / of [his father's] many forgotten selves” (6).

Sleeping in Tall Grass is a wise book, erudite and philosophical at times but

foremost a spiritual and redemptive work. Such influences as Gwendolyn MacEwen (a verse of hers is used as an epigram) and T. S. Eliot who, as an idealist, also battled with faith and an imperfect society, may be seen in the often incantatory style and a tonally textured poetic shorthand that mixes imagery with snippets of the vernacular to reach meaning through language's faults and crannies, displacements and juxtapositions.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL is currently a freelance writer and editor working for a number of magazines, among them *Event's* Reading Service. She received her B.A. Hon and M.A. from McGill (1976) and her Ph.D. from the University of Saskatchewan (1986). She has had three poetry collections and five chapbooks published. In 2015 she placed second for a sequence of poems in *The Antigonish Review's* Great Blue Heron, and a manuscript “Proud Men Do Not Listen” was short-listed for *Exile's* Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook. A chapbook *Fox Love* is coming out in The Alfred Gustav Press series in 2016.