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I'd Write the Sea Like a Parlour Game by Alison Dyer

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***I'd Write the Sea Like a Parlour Game* by
ALISON DYER**

Breakwater Books, 2017 \$14.95

Reviewed by **YVONNE BLOMER**

The opening poem of Alison Dyer's *I'd Write the Sea Like a Parlour Game*, "Bones of Paradise," is set in a wild place, hectic with descriptions. The characters, some of whom we will meet in other poems, appear here: son Ezra and daughter Ella; the town, which is a short walk away; the weather; and the chorus that resounds from the "occasional ATV. Save the off-key clamour of gulls decorating the crab-plant roof" (8). "Bones of Paradise" lets us know where we are as we enter the book: a place that is isolated, windy, verdant, and likely full of characters.

This debut collection is a celebration of language and imagery, of noisy sea-spirited metaphors that often show the natural world through the objects of the chaotic human world. They are rich with metaphor, but I'm not sure the poems move beyond description into a new or different or deeper way of seeing or understanding.

"Erosion: A Sonata in C Major" is a poem full of sound and metaphor where Dyer blends her knowledge of geography with musical language. From the "Waves" section:

In a quiet sea, kelp gardens below
the cliffs sway in lullaby, beach
cobbles tap arpeggios, and sea caves
belch in timpanic splendour. (11-14)

This is a cacophony, and this section reminds how relentless the sea is in changing the shoreline: that this symphony is endless. This further reminds me that not all changes in the world are part of the

Anthropocene; some just exist and wave-based shore erosion, perhaps, is one of them. This three-part poem reminds readers of the past and how ice and massive land shifts created this coast and how wave and wind have reshaped it.

In fact, the more I read, the more I begin to wonder if her smashing of natural and human together has to do with geological and geographical evolution: a kind of extended metaphor that carries through all the poems in the book — land moved, moves; people change, corner grocery changes, kids age, things change. "The old corner stores carried things in ones and twos" (1), Dyer writes in "Lament for the Groc and Conf."

The book is broken into four sections: one section is a long, linked poem called "Apostles of the Boreal" that likens each tree to an imagined disciple, such as "the boisterous," the "moon child," and "the trustworthy." As I read these poems, I imagined the trees like standing sentinels along coastal paths and nearby forests. The Maple is "flamboyant" and the Poplar "capricious," as it,

like a light rain starting, slither[s]
up in a field of grass,
where you weren't last week. (2-4)

The poem to "Alder (the socialite)" is full of close, internal rhymes, as in "alder's base," "four-footed races," and "glossy pages." The language playfully enacts a kind of busy, wind-in-trees party. The alder, I learn from a quick bit of research, enriches the soil in which it grows, which does make it seem the "best places to eat" (8) kind of apostle.

Poems here remind and remind again how intertwined we all are. Set in Newfoundland, the village must be small,

everything close in town or miles away along rugged paths. Because Dyer layers descriptions and metaphors between wildlife and humans, I get lost between real and metaphor.

Take the poem “The Foragers,” wherein perhaps human foragers pick berries. Are the “tin and plastic bellies” (6) buckets they carry or a reminder of plastics? Are the purple fingers they lick part of a metaphor for a foraging animal? Does it matter if I’m not sure? What else should I be understanding in this comparison? I’m being shown a different way of seeing the natural world,

like a pack of wild animals
grazing the spine of the hill:
quiet, focused, and shaking off
flies[.] (2-4)

But what should I take away?

I’d Write the Sea Like a Parlour Game is Dyer’s debut and it sings with metaphors that overlay the natural world with the human. Detritus of net, chair, and tarp appear both as they are and also as seaweed and drift wood. What I take away is a noisy coast, a busy world of human activity echoed in gull song, all paralleled by a kind of constancy set against continuous change.

YVONNE BLOMER is Victoria, BC’s Poet Laureate. In 2017 she released a travel memoir, *Sugar Ride: Cycling from Hanoi to Kuala Lumpur* (Palimpsest Press), and edited *Refugium: Poems for the Pacific* (Caitlin Press), a collection that she hopes will draw awareness to the plight of the Pacific. *As if a Raven* (Palimpsest Press 2014) is her third poetry collection.