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## The Lost Letters by Catherine Greenwood

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## A Collage of Letters

***The Lost Letters* by CATHERINE GREENWOOD**

Brick Books, 2013 \$20.00

Reviewed by **VIVIAN HANSEN**

This collection revolves around the lost letters and love between Heloise and Abelard, twelfth-century lovers whose passion for each other was unrequited. In “Notes,” Greenwood gives a brief account of the lovers and their unfortunate directions:

By most accounts, Abelard seduced the teenaged Heloise, and after the birth of their son and a secret marriage, Heloise’s uncle Fulbert punished Abelard by having him castrated. Abelard continued his academic pursuits, while Heloise reluctantly joined a convent.

This is the stuff of great story, and Greenwood approaches her specific poetry by retelling the letters between Abelard and Heloise as they rediscover each other later in life.

However, the more compelling part of this work is Greenwood’s range of diverse poetic style. Thematically, the range of the text encompasses small things that are overlooked and re-examined. The “eeny-meany-est” details venture into snapshots of our contemporary world and enable the reader to look beyond the story of Heloise and Abelard. Greenwood honours one-word poems: “kernel, liquid, snooze, a bat,” words which suddenly hold discursive power within the lines of a poem. They hold imagistic nomenclature that allows us unique engagement with the referential points of our human

experience.

Narrational observations encompass rhetorical questions: “How many sets of hands / does it take to open hope, unscrew / the lid tightened on that jar of misguided longings?” Greenwood delivers a set of kennings about a mermaid: “shy sea nun,” the sibilants slipping easily into the sand of the poem. Greenwood’s considerable nod to the masterful Don McKay and his book *Vis-à-Vis* allows for a reworking of the concept of the “nest,” the vis-à-vis of origins; just as McKay refers to nest-building as a bonding ritual, “an attempt to summon something out of nothing” (102), Greenwood describes it as “broomstraw, cornsilk / culled from the compost box.” The meaning-nests she creates are sometimes offered in fragments:

Fragment 52

]

]

- ] and potatoes! [

-

] thoughts [

]

Buried under the ground

]

Cultural clichés are re- and defamiliarized: “We are weary of pondering / the long and short of it all—buy high, sell low?” Greenwood’s attempt to describe the moment:

Sentimental music makes my nipples itch. Despite / determined twiddling of the dial / I still pull in the same curdled

signal, / shaggy as the ecstatic tussle of  
interplanetary dust / bunnies breeding  
beneath the bed.

There is the exquisite muscle of simile that  
snapshots the image: "The other leg / is  
hooked over your knee / like a carefully  
latched gate." This strategy of poetic links  
is an open letter to form and content, a  
delightful nest and a collage of sequence  
and consequence.

Moving back to Heloise and  
Abelard, thudding rain is heard in "Another  
Day in the Scriptorium:"

Downpour. Dreams dissolving  
in a denture mug. Snug oblivion  
breached by the carillon alarm,  
a cruel harpoon of light drags me  
from the shallow refuge sought  
in my cups each soul-dark night./  
Sloshed

How can someone experience too much  
alliteration, when its arrangements induce  
such entry into the moments shared  
between the two lovers? A rhyming  
sequence and internal rhyme is also well-  
placed:

Here lies a matchless passion igniter/  
extinct as a spark without a lighter  
From lack of love the Lusty One  
succumbed to spontaneous  
combustion.

Greenwood demonstrates a flexible  
but strong poetic ability, which allows the  
reader to maneuver between the re-telling  
of Heloise and Abelard and the worlds that  
are too small for us to see. Greenwood  
reveals her gift of poetic magnification in  
*The Lost Letters*, projecting a renewal and  
restoration of the senses.

#### Works Cited

McKay, Don. *Vis-à-Vis: Field Notes  
on Poetry & Wilderness*. Wolfville,  
NS: Gaspereau, 2001. Print.

**VIVIAN HANSEN** is a Calgary poet and  
activist. She has recently released *A Bitter  
Mood of Clouds*, (Frontenac House), a story  
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