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Review Article
Four Canadian Poets

Zembla's Rock. By Louis Dudek. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1986. Pp. 141. Paper, \$9.95.

Waiting for Saskatchewan. By Fred Wah. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1985. Pp. 96. Paper, \$7.95.

The Night the Dog Smiled. By John Newlove. Toronto: ECW Press, 1986. Pp. 78. \$18.00. Paper, \$9.00.

Piling Blood. By Al Purdy. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984. Pp. 144. Paper, \$12.95.

Zembla's Rock (1986) is Louis Dudek's first major collection of lyric poems since *The Transparent Sea* (1956) and gathers together previously uncollected work from the past three decades. The volume is divided into three sections—"The Air We Breathe" contains mainly lyric poems, "The Progress of Satire" mainly satiric poems, and "The Cosmogonies" what might loosely be called meditative poems. Despite this attempt to give the collection a definite shape, however, *Zembla's Rock* remains something of a grab-bag, and at best a kind of poetic miscellany. There are imitations of Whitman, tributes to Williams and Pound, two memorial poems on Robert Lowell, a sort of Audenesque pastiche, and several other pieces on literature in general. There are also love poems, poems on old age, others on politics and Canadian culture, and a number on nature and/or animals. In another poet such variety might very well indicate range and versatility, not so with Dudek, who treats each of his subjects in an equally prosaic manner, so that one poem looks and sounds very much like another.

Dudek's standard method is to begin with some incidental observation from daily life and through contemplation to translate this observation into something that looks like a philosophical statement. Often,

and of the price they paid "for a little truth." For Dudek, whose emphasis is upon the morality of art, poetry must be truthful if it is to be poetry at all, and this truthfulness can only be obtained by rising "to a new generality / out of the blinding bog of particulars." If Dudek himself were less obviously hindered by his own at times uncritical adherence to the generalities of his masters, and more willing to explore the moral and the aesthetic implications of their "new-old forms" of thought, it is possible a greater number of poems in this collection would equal his "Snow Sequence" in its economy and its suggestiveness. As it is, we must content ourselves with the handful of good poems in *Zembla's Rock*, poems like "From A Train Window," "Cats In The Snow," "Late Autumn" and "For William Carlos Williams," and hope that in the future this poet becomes a better critic of his work.

In *Waiting For Saskatchewan* (1985), Fred Wah has in his possession both a serious subject and a poetic style suitable for its treatment. The volume consists of a series of inter-related lyrics and prose poems which document the poet's search for his father and his origins. Although the poems in the first two sections have been drawn from earlier volumes, some from *Breathin' My Name With A Sigh* (1981), and others from *Grasp The Sparrow's Tail* (1982), *Waiting For Saskatchewan* contains a coherent narrative, largely because of the thematic and formal concerns that unite the individual poems. Through accounts of a trip to China and Japan, and through recollections of his childhood in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, Wah constructs an image of his father, and of his life as a Chinese immigrant in Canada. In tracing the influence of this man upon his own life, he moves from incomprehension and despair to a recognition of the similarities and the differences that finally unite father and son, if only in the belated embrace of memory and desire. Throughout the volume, Wah explores the relation between poetry and prose and the possibility of a common syntax based on the musical phrase and on human breath.

If this volume has any weaknesses, they are in its cultishness and its occasional obscurity. The poems in the first section and the last seem to me to suffer from both of these vices, although to varying degrees. Although the poems in the first section, *Breathin' My Name With A Sigh*, relate Wah's principle themes—the search for the father, the influence of genealogy, the centrality of home—the poems themselves often seem shapeless and too much involved in the flux they are meant to define. This is true of the first poem in the volume, which begins:

Waiting for saskatchewan
and the origins grandparents countries places

beauty, especially in those lines describing the imagined encounter between father and son at the Buddhist caves near Datong.

Waiting For Saskatchewan is not only the story of a man's search for his father, but also of a poet's search for a uniquely expressive language. This is, of course, a familiar problem, at least for poets since Wordsworth's time, yet it is particularly vexing for Wah, because of his mixed racial heritage. Moreover, it is a problem he shares with his father, who, being neither Chinese nor Canadian, was ill at ease with both "mother tongues." Rather than fall into an angry silence as his father had done, Wah attempts to bridge the gap between the two languages by drawing upon their very different resources. In certain poems, he demonstrates the difficulties involved in making an exotic oriental sensibility "fit" into English:

Tokyo
windy is
wind out in the ryokan courtyard
all night noise in the trees is

In others, he writes from a haiku sensibility, concluding each prose poem with an informal haiku line. There is, as Wah knows, no way to actually bridge the gulf separating the two cultures, just as there is no way to retrieve his father from his death, yet he has faith in the processes of writing and remembering, and in the value of "getting the language out." As a result of this faith, he has produced something real, a poem that is both mature and optimistic, and for this rare combination of graces we can be grateful.

John Newlove's *The Night the Dog Smiled* (1986) is a much less positive work, having as its subject what Newlove calls in one poem "the disease of life." Newlove is well-known for his relentlessly pessimistic view of human existence, and for his wry self-deprecating sense of humour. It is not surprising, therefore, that in his diagnosis in this volume of what ails modern man he is frequently either brutally honest or ironic and self-mocking, often both in the same poem. In "Insect Hopes," for instance, he writes of modern civilization and its discontents:

This whole civilization is noise
we are not wholly beasts yet
but the politicians roar at us
until civilization is minor

Yet no matter how sick he is himself, he says, At least I know how lovely "we are / Enduring—." Newlove regards history as a record of

our endurance, one generation after another, but when he observes that "we are the stars of this show," the stale cliché alerts us to the fact that this record need not amount to much.

Newlove's vision of the depravity of human experience is occasionally mitigated by his very strange sense of humour, which serves to remind us that his "turbulent music" is sometimes only rhythmic grumbling. In "Dried-Out Insects," the poet sits paralysed on the toilet, afraid of turtles in the bath-tub:

I'm just trying to be clean,
afraid to move. Can turtles fly?
I know they can't.
But they might try.

In another poem, "Big Mirror," he recounts a visit to the dentist in grossly hyperbolic terms which deliberately parody the metaphysical terror that he treats seriously elsewhere. Finally, in "The Candy-Maker's Song," Newlove pokes fun at his own propensity for pessimistic verse, noting that after a time even disillusion becomes mere habit:

All day long
 in my factory,
I sing the same song,
 grumbling, refractory

While these poems may not be the best, or even the most representative poems in the volume, they do suggest something of Newlove's range, which is greater than his subject matter would suggest.

Among the finest poems in this collection are those which address themselves to the "disease of life" not with irony or cynicism, but with something like compassion. There are a number of such poems, including "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home," "from Yukichi Fukuzawa," "The Green Plain," "Syllables," "The Light of History: This Rhetoric Against That Jargon," "White Philharmonic Novels" and "The Weather," and all of them have in common the desire for some quieter existence, free of the anger that comes of despair. As Newlove says in one poem, "I'd like to live a slower life." Yet this is difficult because, as he says in another poem, "Life gets more extreme as it goes on." There are hints in such lines that Newlove is mellowing as he grows older, but he is not so mellow that he can overlook the terrible loneliness of man's isolation in an alien and indifferent universe. As he writes in "The Green Plain":

Small human figures and fanciful monsters
abound. Dreams surround us,

preserve us. We praise constancy as brave,
but variation's lovelier.

Rather than dismiss these dreams that preserve us as mere lies, as he often does, pointing to man's capacity to deceive himself no matter what the cost to his psyche or to the world around him, Newlove occasionally attempts to participate in them, and in the sense of expansiveness that they provide. Thus, he concludes the same poem with what is perhaps his most affirmative assertion, that we must accept "this only world" as all that keeps us from nothingness:

Thank God: this World
and its wrapped variations
spreading around and happy, flowing,
flowing through the climate of intelligence,
beautiful confusion looking around,
seeing the mechanics and the clouds
and marvelling, O Memory...

"The Green Plain" is an exceptional poem and, to my mind, the single most impressive piece in this entire volume. Published separately in 1981, it is more affirmative and less guarded than any other poem in *The Night the Dog Smiled*, and ought to be considered separately and at length. There are other poems which deserve special mention, among them the very beautiful and haunting lyric "Driving," as well as "The Cities We Longed For," sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 of "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home" and "White Philharmonic Novels." The last of these is the most ambitious piece in the volume, and incorporates a number of separate lyrics from elsewhere in the collection to form a kind of polyphonic tone-poem in which Newlove meditates on history, private and public, and on the possibility of escaping its crippling influences. The language is cryptic and extreme, and the sequence disjointed, made up of fragments the poet has shored against his ruins. Although it is too long and complicated to quote effectively, "White Philharmonic Novels" deserves special mention, as it is more exactly representative of Newlove's style than any other poem in this collection, displaying both his direct and intense lyricism and his painful self-honesty.

Piling Blood (1984) is Al Purdy's first major collection of poems since *The Stone Bird* (1983) and picks up where that volume left off, with poems on travel, on marriage and friendship, on human and geological history, and on D.H. Lawrence, whose presence can be felt throughout this collection. Like Lawrence, Purdy is a poet who "chips verses earnestly out of the living rock of his own feeling," and from his

feeling for Lawrence he has produced several remarkable poems, including "In the Beginning Was the Word," "Death of DHL," and "Lawrence's Pictures." In the last of these, Purdy pays homage to Lawrence the artist, praising his paintings for their uninhibited vitality:

Nakedness in all these pictures
 as if the stick figures
 in Cro-Magnon paintings
 suddenly achieved flesh
 and the several million years
 of yesterday when the human
 race went forth unclothed
 naked and without shame
 had arrived again

The lines might very well be used to describe several of Purdy's own poems, in which a similar desire to be alive in the here and now manages almost miraculously to telescope the distant past and to incorporate it in the present moment. Like Lawrence, Purdy admires the nakedness of primordial man and yearns for his innocence and his savage grace, if only as a temporary relief from the burden of his own consciousness.

Several poems in *Piling Blood* express in one way or another this longing for the simplicity of the primitive, including a number on birds and animals. In "Seal People," for instance, Purdy describes an encounter between himself and a baby seal on the Galapagos Islands, emphasizing the curiously inexplicable bond that develops between these strange creatures:

For a moment
 I feel an electric jolt
 of adult tenderness
 as if the inside organs
 of my own body had emerged
 and were living separately from me
 making hoarse little oink sounds

For Purdy this moment of identification between human and non-human is as rare as it is mysterious and constitutes a kind of transcendent experience which prompts both wonder and humility. As he writes in "Iguana" another poem about people and animals:

What can I be but humble
 for the reptile and mammal primate
 may never touch each other
 without fear of opposites

Piling Blood is a more varied and eclectic book than my comments so far have indicated, and Purdy writes about more than his search in nature for the romantic sublime. He is a poet of unusual energy, who is most engaging when he draws upon his idiosyncratic erudition and his diverse occupations, past and present, as poet, traveller, mattress stuffer, labourer, and amateur naturalist and historian. In "Carpenter's Notebook Entry," for instance, he writes of a 19th century Upper Canadian carpenter who secretly carves a unicorn in the gable of a house he has built in order to leave something of himself in the "sweet resinous pine wood." Alongside this poem he places another, "Machines," which highlights the distinction between work done for its human value and work done for money. He also includes poems on historical subjects, such as "Voltaire," "Archilochos," "Names," and "Menelaus and Helen," as well as a number on his travels in Aisa, Mexico and the Soviet Union, the last of these appearing previously in the limited edition of *Moths in the Iron Curtain* (1979).

As a result of this eclecticism, Purdy's collection lacks the unity of either Newlove's or Wah's. Moreover, not all of the poems here are equally as satisfying. Some, like "Voltaire" and "Menelaus and Helen," for instance, seem unsuited in their subject matter to Purdy's talents and his sensibility, while others, like the travel poems from the Soviet Union, fail to rise above their travelogue style. These poems are few in number, however, and do not actually detract from the more successful pieces in *Piling Blood*, which reveal Purdy's mastery of his art in their seeming effortless and their surprising shifts in tone and mood. In particular, the poem "There Is Of Course A Legend," which takes us from the Purdys' lodgings at a tourist parador in Toledo to a late night encounter with El Greco and his mistress, Dona Jeronima, deserves special mention, if only because of the lines describing the old man's vision of the sleeping city:

Looking from one to the other
 the painted and the actual city
 tile-roofed buildings drained of colour
 windows blind eyes watching
 in the bone-grey night
 only an artist's brush moving
 in a dream its hairy finger
 across the sleep of animals and men
 supplies a human meaning

Reading such poetry, one thinks of Purdy's understated praise of Lawrence's pictures, and of the appropriateness of these lines for Purdy's poems: "He is in all of them / Some element of him."