

the First World War, according to Gordon, endorse a national myth that “promotes the collective by simply enlarging the category of the homogenous,” a tendency that is propelled by an anxiety about the instability of Canadian national identity.

As a whole, Gordon’s analysis is insightful and compelling, although she occasionally underplays the subversive aspects of the literature she discusses. For instance, in Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers*, Gordon appropriately indicts “the artist figure” (Walter Allward) for “transforming the particular into the allegorical,” but limits her discussion of Klara, Tilman, and Giorgio as alternative artist figures who challenge Allward’s totalizing tendencies. While I agree with Gordon that the works of literature she examines share a common tendency to reinforce the myth of a national collective, I do not think this observation sustains the argument that these works are not critical of the historical record; many of these novels and plays (as well as R. H. Thomson’s *The Lost Boys*, which is absent from Gordon’s discussion) draw on lesser-known aspects of Canadian history *in order to* criticize official versions of the war and its effects.

Gordon concludes her study with the assertion that Paul Gross’s film *Passchendaele* (2008) marks the end of “the Great Canadian War Novel”; Canadian authors have moved on to military events that are still part of living memory. *Catching the Torch* is an important survey of Canadian war novels and plays—Gordon also covers an impressive range of literary criticism generated by these texts—however, I am not convinced that we should drop the torch just yet. Is the state of anxiety that Gordon describes not simply a substitute for the myth of a national collective? Is it not possible to endorse a national collective *and* to challenge the official historical record? Before we extinguish this flame by declaring the First World War

a “closed book,” I suggest we wait and see how responses to the centenary shed light on these questions.

A Mighty Fine Epitaph

Catherine Graham

Her Red Hair Rises with the Wings of Insects.

Wolsak & Wynn \$17.00

Sina Queyras

MxT. Coach House \$17.95

Adrienne Weiss

There Are No Solid Gold Dancers Anymore.

Nightwood \$18.95

Reviewed by McKinley Hellenes

Sina Queyras’ latest collection is brutal and breathtaking. A tactical field-manual, *MxT* navigates the landmines that linger in the terrain of the living long after the dead have been buried beneath it. Complete with diagrams and equations, *MxT* cold comforts us with the hope that there is a science to grief and a procedure in place. But the poems themselves remind us that there is no such thing: “When in doubt, wear lipstick.”

This is not kindly work. This is necropsy at its finest. The collection is caustic, harrowing, leaving us gut-punched and spitting teeth. I can’t look them directly in the face without flinching. Queyras confirms the eerie superstition we all entertain—that the dead can hear us, and so can the void: “I have spent my life avoiding you, Emptiness,” the speaker admits, and yet she can’t shy away from her work. “I love the old questions,” she says. Chasing the old questions results in unconstrained meditations on loss and memory over which Queyras exhibits a reckless control. “Why is pain so much better than nothing?” she asks.

Elegies more instinctual than calculated are nonetheless precisely honed. The incisions they make sting like expertly slit wrists. This collection is a vehicle that will save you from the worst of the crash, but the poems themselves will bleed you dry.

Yet this isn't a meditation on futility. It's not a dirge. It crackles, it screams. It burns. It remains even when we wish it wouldn't. "Grief is too bright. Too Head-on. We want to hide it with the empties."

The dead populating *There Are No Solid Gold Dancers Anymore* are mostly of the public variety. Adrienne Weiss employs a parade of familiar voices as oracles on life, loss, and our tawdry obsession with celebrity. Fairy-tale figures rub elbows with wage-slaves, and future starlets condescend to high-school nobodies. Former princesses hobnob alongside vaudeville legends. The deftly-handled vernacular of these impersonations remind us that we all inhabit the same world in our turn. Some of us gaze at the stars, some of us *are* the stars, and Death presides over us all like a game-show host whose finger hovers inexorably over the buzzer. "Here I am, a tramp, with a perfectly red mouth, her heart a perfectly arranged mess of rags," Weiss laments in Judy Garland's voice. "Old, hard me, forever talking to myself in the dark."

As uncanny as Weiss' impressions are, the unnamed narrators often resonate the longest. "What I do, what I've done, one day'll make a mighty fine epitaph," declares the speaker in the titular poem. "It is meaningless, dying," shrugs another nameless voice within the same poem. "This summer, you kill yourself while I job search," the final poem recounts, "wander Walmart's maze of aisles, the devastating weight of stuff." In Weiss' realm, ordinary deaths reverberate on par with the celebrated.

Catherine Graham continues the theme of loss in *Her Red Hair Rises with the Wings of Insects*. Many of the poems begin life as *glosas*, but beyond retaining the four-line *cabezas* borrowed from the works of Dorothy Molloy, they swiftly develop forms of their own. As well crafted as Graham's verses are, the italicized excerpts distract rather than illuminate: "The earth *slides over my face*. I see the exchange that's happening—a dead

mother wants out. Her red hair rises with the wings of insects, and I sink further than *the lair of the fox*." What is intended as homage feels more like decoupage.

These poems feel needlessly secretive, the private cypher of a poet talking to herself, unaware that she has or even requires an audience. They retain a passivity perhaps too invested in the experiment of tribute to allow them to speak in their own voices. It may be unfair to pit Graham's understated eloquence against Queyras' unnerving incisions and Weiss's deft verbal mimicry, but compared with the other two collections, there is very little distinction in these cunning but ultimately bloodless poems.

Each of these collections speak to the dead, through them, or for them, with grief as a communal tapestry. These poets show us that stripped down, the scaffolding of loss is, if not the same for all of us, at least darkly familiar. This is what we go to poetry for, to remind us of what we have left when what we love leaves us.

Prairie Land/Lovescapes

Leah Horlick

Riot Lung. Thistledown \$9.95

Don Kerr

Wind Thrashing Your Heart. Hagios \$17.95

Reviewed by Moira Day

Even in an era of growing urbanization, land and the memory of land seem to be the rich mulch out of which the most intimate expressions of body, spirit and passion arise in the work of Saskatoon poets, Leah Horlick and Don Kerr. Though their individual lyrical voices are marked by differences in generation and gender, Horlick's and Kerr's sometimes humorous, sometimes haunting "lovescapes," interweave piquantly with a sharply observed and remembered sense of place.

Horlick's book of sixty-two short poems juxtaposes the memory of land as