

# Book Reviews

***Slant Room*. By Michael Eden Reynolds. Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2009. 96 pp.**

When you pick up Michael Eden Reynolds' first collection of poetry, *Slant Room*, it is as if he is handing you a pair of binoculars. As soon as you have finished focusing on the constellations far above, he gets you to flip the binoculars around so you are looking down the wrong end. Binoculars, of course, work both ways. One way, they make us feel as if we can reach out and touch the roof of our galaxy. The other way, they act as a magnifying glass, enabling us to look at what we think we already know in sometimes uneasy detail. Reynolds plays with our perspective right from the start of his collection in *Spring Night in Caledon*, where we begin with our attention focused on a vegetable ("Spring comes up like an onion") and end with that vast galaxy view ("I no longer know how I saw the world yesterday."). In between, he sticks our noses in dung and rotting garbage and makes our eyes water along with his own.

A lot of people have been waiting for *Slant Room*, and while it is a cliché to say it, they will not be disappointed. Reynolds' poems have won the Ralph Gustafson Poetry Prize and the John Haines Award for Poetry, as well as both first and second prizes in the 2009 *PRISM international* poetry contest. Reynolds was also a finalist for the CBC Literary Awards in 2005, the Bronwen Wallace Memorial Award in 2006, and *The Malahat Review* Long Poem contest in 2007. Moreover, one of his poems has been included in the 2008 *Best Canadian Poetry in English* anthology, edited by Molly Peacock and Stephanie Bolster.

Strictly speaking, *Slant Room* is not Reynolds' first collection because in 2001 he published a chapbook, *Migrations*, with Patricia Robertson's Linnaea Press. Thankfully, the current collection is bound for broader distribution. It is published by The Porcupine's Quill, a press that, judging by its website, cares for quality and pays attention to detail; it not only glues its book bindings but sews them. The publisher is therefore a good match for Reynolds, whose poems convey a feeling of careful and high-quality construction.

There is an impression left by each of the collection's four sections—Spare Room, Migrations, Slant Room, and Fugue—of words used carefully, precisely, resourcefully, like well-cared-for and well-maintained tools. For instance, this densely meaningful passage from *The Dandelion*: “Upstairs a lullaby of weekdays loops”. And from *Nostalgia*: “The journey's turn metastasized; I'm hidden now / across the earth, so thin my body tunes the wind.” Even those poems that have a look of prose, such as *Soundtrack to the Moment of Your Birth*, are nimbly stitched: “The bedsheet stretches out in all directions where you lie, white and / cool beneath a threadcount of white sky.”

This latter poem may be familiar to readers who saw it performed with music by Andrea McColeman in *The Longest Night* at the Yukon Arts Centre in 2006. A second-person account of a child's first years, it is the sort of work that can make a reader smile in recognition of universal truth as well as marvel at the ability of the poet to articulate what the rest of us cannot. In another poem, *Estranged*, Reynolds writes: “There's no one *born* alone.” In *The Phonograph*: “The snow remembers everything it covers.” In *Migrations*: “Sound constellates the mind.” And in *Ho Fa Hotel: On the Malady of Travel*, the heartbreakingly eloquent: “At night, all the hinges lift like moths from the doors and your / dreams run amok in the rooms.” These are lines that many of us, frankly, read poetry hoping to find. They are keys we can use to open the door to the rest of a poem—skeleton keys because of their universality.

This is not to suggest that Reynolds is interested only in generalizations. His poems are always specific. In *Slow Boat*, the protagonist is on the Mekong River, travelling like most of us, probably, in pursuit of new experiences. Yet, in this case, new experience leads directly to a childhood memory: “Stretched back to the ceilingless sky / there's a field winding in / that's arriving so slowly / a ball bounces into it onto the pavement beside you.”

All this may be painting a picture of Reynolds as a serious poet—which he is, of course, particularly in the least hopeful section of *Slant Room*, *Migrations*, which Reynolds has described in an interview with *OpenBookToronto.com* as a suite “which gives voice to a subarctic ecosystem” and where he writes, “There is an argument like this: we all die, / there are no good decisions.” But there is also plenty of levity in his poetry. For example, he writes of a “lesser god” who “opens up a franchise shop” in *Tuesday Myth* and describes the Prime Minister of Canada as one who “takes on the pallor of the poet in the thin dawn light” in his prize-winning *Upon the Conversion of Stephen Harper*. He also writes speculatively

in *Aleph-nought* about a slippage of time that leads to a national emergency, entertaining us with ironies such as “The curfew was abandoned” and “It’s certain the economy will crash, / when is difficult to pin.”

Reynolds’ playfulness not only looks forward to possible futures but also backwards to children’s literature of the past. *Self-Portrait as a One-Eyed Rat* (F. H. Varley, Lynn Valley, 1934), evokes an alcohol-soused *Wind in the Willows* and on reading the sonnet, *The Claptrap*, which brings the collection to a satisfying, smack-of-the-lips close, our reaction may well be to want our children to read and revel in it: “she squats, boulder-big, red and blister-skinned / by the algae pot”.

It is only when we have read this last poem, once, twice or several times, and shut the book that we realize we still have a pair of binoculars around our neck, that Reynolds was not just lending them to us, but has given us them to keep.

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***Rock, Water, Wild: An Alaskan Life.* By Nancy Lord. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 248 pp.**

In the middle of her new memoir, *Rock, Water, Wild: An Alaskan Life*, Nancy Lord explores the ongoing debate about the future of whaling. In a mixture of reportage and first-person narrative, she provides a history of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the anti-whaling movement up to the current regulatory impasse, as well as a short description of her attendance at an IWC convention. People unfamiliar with Lord’s work and particular brand of conservationism might find her conclusions surprising: she advocates a return to whaling, saying, “Might not an acceptance of regulated, sustainable whaling crack open, not a return to the past, but future potentials?” (116). Her conclusion reveals a great deal about the evenhanded, practical, science-based approach to conservation that she often takes. Hunting whales might be intuitively anathema to the environmental community, but Lord believes that the possible results of a return to the practice—cooperation, rational management, resumption of traditional activities, an end to the perceived hegemony of wealthy nations—will serve both humans and the natural world well in future, larger settings.

Tellingly, the chapter on whaling is titled “The Conservationist as Wood Chopper.” As Lord explains, she takes her pragmatic approach to conservationism from Aldo Leopold, “who said the best definition of a