

If There Were Roads. By Joanna Lilley. Turnstone Press, 2017. 128 pages.
The Birthday Books. By Joanna Lilley. Hagios Press, 2015. 152 pages.
The Fleece Era. By Joanna Lilley. Brick Books, 2014. 105 pages.

Reviewed by Eric Heyne

Interior Alaska and the Yukon Territory are typical northern neighbours: closer to each other than to anyone else, but as far away from each other as they can get. Joanna Lilley has travelled a long way from England, Wales, and Scotland to settle in the Yukon, but she's learned how it is in the North:

Canada is the perfect place to come to
now that England is full up.
The towns are ugly, but
there's space for everyone
in this megaland. We might go
country residential next year.
Clear some trees so we can see the
mountains but not the neighbours.

In two books of poetry and a book of short stories, all published since 2014, Lilley has chronicled a circuitous route from growing up in Britain to finding herself in middle age and halfway around the planet from her family. It took a while to make that journey, and the poems take their time laying it all out, while the stories launch themselves from waypoints into those alternate lives documented by fiction. Poems first.

The title poem in *The Fleece Era* comes near the end of the book, when the speaker has hitchhiked her way to northern Canada: "The man who pulled over / was wearing the first fleece / she'd ever seen." This is funny for a number of reasons, not least because other poems talk about Lilley's youthful experiences with real sheep and their fleece. I was a little surprised to hear that in "the biggest forest / she'd ever almost got lost in" her ride-giver complains about oppressive government regulation. Alaskans sometimes forget that Canada has those folks too. But before this immigration Lilley spends a chunk of her book exploring children and the lack of children, family and the loss of family, marriage and other abortive relationships. Like many poets, Lilley is fascinated by what connects us to each other and

what prevents us from connecting. The links can seem arbitrary—a seemingly random smell, a surviving heirloom—and tenuous—“the powerlessness of aunts.” But most of the time we struggle with their relentless hold upon us: “You pick carefully from the palette / our parents gave us all to share. / We can be anything / as long as we’re artists.”

There is a strain of humour throughout *The Fleece Era* that works best for me when it’s a little mean: “The strumming mother is not quite / as tiresome as her droning daughter. / I wish they’d get their knees dirty / and weed this bluegrass song.” Lilley’s 2017 *If There Were Roads* has less humour, takes itself more seriously, but in a good way. The lines tend to be just a little longer, the stanzas slightly more shapely, the imagery a shade subtler, some of the verbs more deeply sounded, and the overall construction tighter. Many of the poems have regular stanza patterns that achieve an effortless formality, that elusive quality of being found, or of growing in place, rather than being imposed.

The first section, “Stepping Off the Bus,” is all about testing the waters, venturing out, tasting freedom in new places, and remembering losses in old places: “Gripping the shoulder / of a pew is how I withstand / the undertow—the urgent / tug to sit and stay.” The second section, “Hand to Mouth,” is mostly about bodies, and is not for the faint of heart. The speaker bathes her elderly mother, meditates on her grandfather’s missing arm, imagines the anonymous freedom of being a man, and explores images of obesity, cancer, and other corporealities. The third section, “Interspecies Engineering,” explores a variety of animals, from sheep and grouse in Britain to hagfish and moose in Canada. The fourth section, “Invasive Species,” is about travel, and feels a bit weaker than the rest of the book, a bit more overt in its ironies and declarative in its observations. The fifth section, “Coming to My Senses,” isn’t as tightly unified thematically as the first four, but as my detailing of each theme indicates, this is a very carefully made book, and I can’t help feeling there’s an underlying current in this final section asking me to ride it if I can find it. The book ends with a short final suite of poems, “The Stones of Torphichen,” that finds the poet, who is “not just from where I was born / [but] from where I’ve lived,” finally at home: “Though far from field and moor and sea, / I am at last where I need to be.”

Not surprisingly since Lilley is a poet, her short story collection *The Birthday Books* has some of the strengths and limitations of lyric. The stories are almost all short, snippets of experience vividly rendered

from a single point of view, and all but two of the point-of-view characters are female. Men are in general not very highly thought of in these stories. Neither of the two male protagonists is appealing, and most of the men we meet elsewhere in the stories exemplify a female character's assertion that "emotional intelligence" is "not a skill men have developed yet." The settings of the stories are far-flung, and the general trajectory from Britain to Canada is familiar from the poetry. Several of the stories are about transit, about vacations or pilgrimages or migrations, being in a new place physically and emotionally. But we only get a glimpse of these new places and an introduction to the people who find themselves elsewhere.

The last story, "The Triskelion Necklace," easily the longest in the book, settles into a slower, deeper, more ambitious rhythm, though it remains firmly in the mind of a single character at a crucial moment in her life. The young protagonist not only delivers newspapers, she also reads and hoards them. The particular news stories she ponders (and many of us remember), such as the trial of Jeffrey Dahmer and the ordeal of Terry Anderson, situate "Necklace" in a larger world, demonstrating one of the strengths of Lilley's writing overall. Whatever the particular setting for a story or poem, we are always aware of the connections across distances and cultures, of the bigger questions that make lyric poems and short stories resonate. I began this review by noting the degree to which Lilley has made herself a citizen of the North, but her writing feels very cosmopolitan. This is the North of the twenty-first century, closer to everywhere else than we'd thought.

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