

Coupland, Michael Turner, and others have filled in some contemporary blanks, the fiction of Canada's urban history is not as plentiful as it might be. In this regard the likes of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown*, Mordechai Richler's stories of mid-century Montreal, and Wayson Choy's and Joy Kogawa's haunted Vancouver remain rare objects.

Howard Akler has conjured a Toronto I am very glad to have visited. In addition to its many formal pleasures—not least of which are its treasure chest of 30s slang and its playful, perfect synecdoches—*The City Man* is an admirable contribution to the story of the city it so clearly loves.

Amy Langstaff

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John Taggart, *Crosses*. London: Stop Press, 2006. 180pp. \$18

John Taggart's *Crosses* takes its epigraph from Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks*: "The fact that there is nothing but a spiritual world deprives us of hope and gives us certainty." We expect epigraphs to orient; this one provokes. In the pages that follow, which collect poems from 1992 to 1998, Taggart presents a sustained meditation on the relations between transcendence and immanence. *Crosses* names more than just the book's twenty-eight-page centerpiece: the crossings of spirit and matter, light and materiality, are Taggart's central concerns. For Kafka's line demands the question: what space does "nothing but a spiritual world" leave for corporeal existence?

Taggart speaks to this question without ever answering it. *Crosses* is the darkest of his books, and the tension of dwelling at the junction of the material and the spiritual determines its agonized tone. Passages at once grotesque and pastoral present wounded bodies in devastated expanses, mephitic gardens littered with rotting fruit, suffering brides with putrescent wombs, and "bones a sheep skull or two beer cans in the dirt." Blood saturates this book; a "guilty stain" imbues its pages.

But Taggart's crosses are not only machines of torture, they are also means of discipline, *modes* as well as objects of attention. His sanguinary meditations serve an ascetic spiritual practice: for Taggart, like Simone Weil, contemplation amounts to participation in the crucifixion. "Composition is attention," Taggart has written, and the attitude that enables this attention is encouraged by the poems' formal austerity. Repetition, transformation, and attention are the cornerstones of his poetics; lines are born, buried, and resurrected with minute but crucial variations. In "A Number of Times," for example, the nine-line stanza that opens the poem creates near-mirror images. Their plane of reflection—an uncanny crossing of heaven and earth—is

the anomalous fifth line:

The son steps into what he heard was empty
the son steps into the empty house of his father
the son steps into what he had heard was empty
the son steps into and is seized and bitten
the son steps into and is bitten a number of times
the son steps into only to be seized and bitten
the son steps into what he's heard was empty
the son steps into the house of his father
the son steps into what he heard was to be empty.

To the extent that it relies on transformations like these, *Crosses* represents a continuation and culmination of the compositional technique at work in his previous book *Loop*. But these poems stand apart from those in *Loop* and from older pieces like “Slow Song for Mark Rothko.” The lines of that poem mimic the painter’s luminous blocks of color, with their auratic, tapering edges:

To breathe and stretch one’s arms again
to breathe through the mouth to breathe to
breathe through the mouth to utter in

The imagery of expanse (outstretched arms, free-flowing respiration) is enhanced by the lightness of the lines, with the ethereal infinitives at their periphery.

In a poem like “Crosses,” however, Taggart replaces that lightness with a measured pummelling. The lines do not breathe, they heave:

Before there can be a kind of a cross there has to be a ground
before there can be any kind of the one there has to be the other
before the one the other and the other is a ground
there can be a black cross if there can be a black ground
there can be a black ground if a black field can be imagined

In *Crosses* the pummelings are often so heavy, the saturation with blood so pervasive, that density almost overcomes luminosity. Taggart is aware of the danger; in *Songs of Degrees* he writes, “I thought density was the true goal. If the motion of the cadence made for a sufficient density, then the space would have to be saturated. [...] But this is not desirable because it immobilizes. Complete saturation leaves no room to move.” To avoid complete saturation, Taggart drew inspiration from the “dense and complexly luminous” colors of stained glass. The laminations of cathedral windows—“particularly the inner-glowing red”—are enriched by the “impurities, air bubbles, and streaks within

them.” Likewise, the spiritual world emerges through the imperfections and vicissitudes of the material. Color resides in stains, interest in impurity.

The line from Kafka that opens the book is revisited at its close and transformed. Here Kafka’s words stain, and are also elided by, the pure negative space of the page, which literalizes, even materializes, the spiritual world. The slow, deliberate rhythms deliver us to the brink of that world just as that rhythm begins to abate:

Kafka: fact

nothing

nothing but a spirit world
nothing but

deprives

gives
certainty.

Crosses is a book of Good Fridays, of crosses fashioned from struck trees that still absorb—and exude—the blood of bodies nailed to them. The light filtering through its pages is the light of the final hours of the Passion. The sun is awash in sacrificial blood—the blood of “an ongoing sacrifice,” an endless crucifixion on the cross of time and eternity. And if these poems are approached with the attention they call for, one might participate in the spiritual world they evoke, looking upon oneself as through a glass, stained.

Jeremy Biles

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Simon Jarvis, *The Unconditional*. London: Barque Press, 2005. 242pp. \$35

It would defeat rhetoric to overstate the peculiarity of Simon Jarvis’s book, *The Unconditional: A Lyric*; this must be among the most peculiar books ever published, up there with Raymond Roussel’s *Nouvelles Impressions d’Afrique*, to which its multiple parentheses and interminable prosody seem to pay tribute. Imagine if you can an enterprise as formally intricate as Roussel’s, a continuous poem of 237 pages mainly in iambic pentameter,