

Gilfillan's quietly experimental poems, for instance, provide reasons not to believe poetry in English is irredeemably Manichean, beholden either to the Language school or to epiphanies involving deer. Jennifer Moxley, Donald Revell, C.D. Wright, and Forrest Gander come to mind as well. And Ange Mlinko, despite her lapses into the sort of chatty patter that infests so many hip journals, can bring us to that necessary point where a cricket is thrown out of a house "like rain bounced off a small false roof / over the spiral volutes of its capitals"—where, that is, our "view of the sweet / hypoglycemic across the street" unoccluded, our interest in "precise correlatives to describe the randomness of the universe" might be sustained long enough for us not to mind that we will never find them.

Michael Robbins

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Howard Akler, *The City Man*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005. 154pp. \$14.95

Because the *Chicago Review* is a serious publication, given to sober criticism and averse to fawning blurbs, I feel bound to reveal straight away that *The City Man* contains a simile that strains my objectivity. Toronto, 1934: pickpocket Mona Kantor, trailing a mark through Union Station, watches the back of the sucker's head and finds "His yarmulke askew like a large lazy eye." Consider yourself warned.

In games of word association, the utterance of the word "Toronto" is answered inevitably, instantaneously, with the cry "Rhythm!"

This claim does not seem so far-fetched in the world of *The City Man*, a spare, episodic first novel from Howard Akler. Pickpockets, hustlers, touts, and grifters ease through Toronto's Depression-era streets, their speech as deft as their fingers and feet. Good timing here is not just a tool for conning bateses, pinching pokes, scoring pits. It's a sign of a sensibility, a kind of knowingness. Characters with rhythm of movement or language see and sense things to which other Torontonians, lazy-eyed suckers all, are oblivious.

In the manner of its characters' clipped but rhythmic speech, Akler's third-person narration taps out an easy patter, often in imagistic sentence fragments. Parts of speech are rationed in the downtrodden city, forcing readers to fill in blanks—pronouns, verbs, articles—the way impoverished citizens patch their suits.

Mona, our grifter heroine, has the most preternaturally perfect timing in the novel. She is a stall: that half of a pickpocketing duo responsible for

manoeuvring the mark into position through imperceptible nudging and blocking. Once the victim has been set up, stalled for the subtlest instant, the cannon moves in to pull the touch, reef an easy kick. (Provided no one crumbs the play.) The argot and choreography of the pickpocket or “the whiz” do not penetrate the dull senses of upright citizens; as one grifter puts it to a reporter, “We can kibbitz right there in front of the sucker and he don’t even notice.”

Eli Morenz is the *Toronto Star*’s city man. In addition to his ear for puns, Eli has a feel for the pace of an interview that’s as keen as Mona’s sense of the whiz. He extracts information with deft nonchalance—never rumbles a bates. Eli is the only Torontonian who experiences Mona’s genius as anything other than an inexplicably empty pocket.

Making strategic use of an incriminating photo of her taken by a *Star* photographer, Eli induces Mona to instruct him in the art of the grift. In their first class, she trails him around his tiny apartment, picking his delighted pocket again and again. (“Eli feels nothing but her eyes.”) In a subsequent session, she forks over the grifter lexicon:

Bang a souper?

Steal a pocket-watch.

Good, says Mona. Keister kick?

Uh. Hip pocket.

The dipsy?

A warrant.

Centre britch?

Eli flushes. Uh, he says.

Come on come on.

Well, the space between the left britch and the right britch.

The cock, says Mona.

Right. Cock.

You’re catching on. How about raust?

Um, says Eli.

Mona jabs his hand with the lit end of her cigarette.

Ow! What was that for?

An example, says Mona. A raust is misdirection.

Her lessons—the less interesting ones, anyway—he publishes in the *Star*, giving the readers/suckers a glimpse of the (under)world they fail to notice. As the quoted passage suggests, the intersection of the economies in which Mona and Eli respectively specialize—of cash and information—is flirtatious. Eli’s pocket is happily plundered; Mona hands over her secrets under the most flattering duress. It doesn’t take long for a third economy to spring up:

Her hand steals away from the small of his back. Lolls along the thigh.  
Fingers his asshole.

Uh, says Eli. That's not my pocket, you know.  
Who's the grifter, chum?

The Hays Code, applied in the United States in 1934, prescribed moral principles for filmmaking. Among these was the instruction that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.” Unregulated pulp magazines and paperback originals, however, were able to throw the sympathy of the audience wherever might yield the greatest entertainment. During the Depression, as noir fiction grew out of the hard-boiled detective genre, the criminals, with their moneymaking schemes and their unapologetic sex lives, took center stage—edging out police detectives, private eyes, and newsmen.

If noir fiction is defined in part by the extent to which readers enjoy its criminals, Mona and her gang of (mostly) lovable grifter associates, who drink and gossip at a friendly speakeasy near Kensington Market, paint *The City Man* decidedly noir. Fact-finding Eli bears traces of a more hard-boiled world. But as the novel begins the newsman has just returned to Toronto from a mental-health leave up north (“the depressed man returns to the depressed city”); Eli's yolk would be no match for even a lightly toasted crust. His softness, though not so runny as to seem contemporary, nevertheless keeps him from being a straight shoeleather hero.

Eli's role, unlike that of the typical hard-boiled newsman, is not to unravel the mystery of the grifters. His job is to ration out choice morsels of their story to a curious public. Even more curious than the public, it turns out, are the police, whose failure to apprehend the pickpockets becomes increasingly embarrassing with every article the *Star* prints. (As to whether there is any rhythm-savvy detective who might break the case himself, we learn everything we need to know when we are first introduced to The Law in the form of the Police Fife and Drum Band, clomping around a parade ground pounding out a lumpy and discordant “Vimy Ridge.”)

One question of the unfolding novel is whether Eli will furnish the police with the incriminating information they seek. A fellow reporter sums it up: “If you can do that, Morenz, you've got the makings of a real dick in you.” Our sympathies having been thrown vigorously toward Mona and her crime, wrongdoing, evil, and sin, we are free to read the final line as devoid of period slang.

In addition to its well-written criminals, *The City Man* offers an extra cause to hope that Eli will not cooperate too enthusiastically with the police. As we listen in on the whiz mob at their preferred speak, it becomes clear that Toronto's 1930s underworld features, like some legitimate economies, a horizontal division of labour, organized tribally. Here, for example, is a

friend counseling Mona to avoid outsiders (and find herself a nice Jewish pickpocket):

You know what I always say, honey: the other rackets are plain trouble. Remember that sap man you hooked up with? What was his name?

Markson.

Right, Markson. What a bozo. And that goyish card player?

Robison.

Geez, honey, see what I'm saying? Stick with the whiz. You can't beat a man with good hands.

It's not that Jewishness and criminality are overlaid. Robison, Markson, and "Dago Joe" are all working their own illicit angles, and the police staff sergeant bemoans his growing PR problem with a weary "Feh." But we happen to find Mona and her associates at the intersection of these two outsider identities—grifter and Jew—in Toronto the Good in 1934. It is hard to dismiss the hunch that, if apprehended, the grifters' liabilities might number more than ten quick fingers.

The story is set less than a year after the Christie Pits riots of August, 1933, perhaps Toronto's most bombastic display of anti-Semitism. (A brawl erupted at a baseball game after a homemade swastika flag was trotted out near the ballpark. The riots were preceded by months of smaller incidents and a long campaign on the part of some residents to have Jews banned from city beaches.) Subtle in this as in much else, *The City Man* conjures the ambient anti-Semitism of its time and place—just enough to evoke a quiet menace that may at any given moment come to nothing, or fly its livid colors.

The grifters move among more upright citizens, knowing better than the suckers themselves how to dress, move, and behave in order to look average. Mona's cannon partner Chesler reflects that his suit and tie "give him a sucker's anonymity."

For his part, Eli gets his first big lead on the whiz from a bartender named Little Freddie who tells him he should look out for a "Jew mob." Little Freddie explains his uncharacteristic generosity: "Normally that info'd cost. But I hate the mockies." "Oh," Eli replies. Passing: you don't have to be griftish.

Canadian literature's hard-dying emphasis on wilderness, rural life, and regional peculiarities has yielded its own good things. If Alice Munro's literary powers are sufficient to induce New York and London to visit Wingham, Ontario, on occasion, let no one scoff or sniff. Moreover, the days when the standard-issue Canadian novel must contain a supporting cast of jack pines, black bears, and Precambrian Shield are long gone.

Even so, the *Survival* tradition has left writing about the Canadian city with plenty of dead storefronts to populate. While Russell Smith, Douglas

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