

To End A Conversation, Kelly-Ann Riess

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Reviewed by Bill Robertson

Series Ten of Thistle-down Press's New Leaf Series includes two emerging writers from Saskatoon, one from Regina, and one from Alberta.

One of the Saskatonians is Taylor Leedahl with her collection of poems, *No Apologies for the Weather* (all titles \$12.95). Leedahl is 22 and her poems inhabit all of those 22 years, making no apology for poems of childish delight, while making room later for changing relationships with family and friends and for both the brutal and the ecstatic in sexuality.

Poems about playing with her brother, her neighbourhood and its colourful characters, give way to Strawberry-Kiwi Lip Smackers and "the ink smell that became an aphrodisiac." In *Nighttime Mechanics* she falls backwards into a mid-May lake and "[i]nfinitesimal stalactites shatter/from the ice-husk. This melt-melody/ releases nature's highest octave," while in *Madcow Season* "next month deer will be suited up in fast food uniforms, forced// to flip their young."

There's a beautiful poem about raking leaves and hungering for the ocean and another about knitting, and being set apart for doing so. These are poems wise enough to know the adult world, still child-like enough to know their first.

Another poet from Saskatoon is Adrienne Gruber with her collection *This is the Nightmare*. In amber's collection the world exists much more for her in terms of human relationships: with family, friends, and lovers.

In *Cleaning the Tub* there is a lingering reminder, "[t]he bathtub smells like your hair," while in *Your Mother Makes Pizza*, things are stated bluntly: "This is another poem about you and me. But there is no you and me." In *Meeting Up with You on Big Island* she ends with stirring lines of another ending: "How all I have left/ is a picture taken on the edge of the shore. That day,/ left in a frame you can't walk out of."

Like Leedahl, Gruber is not shy about telling us she writes poems, and in her case, as she listens to "your friend and/ her girlfriend ... seven feet away," for instance, we get the feeling that many of these romantic intertwinings are being turned into poems almost as fast as they occur. Not so the tender *Holding My Oma's Prosthetic Breast*, with its mixture of sexuality, reverence, and dear love. Its final lines about the "[t]riangle of radiated skin. The flatness/ the world was once built on" are wise and careful.

Regina poet Kelly-Ann Riess comes out swinging in the arena of sexual politics in her collection *To End a Conversation*.

The collection hits a promising high note with the early poem *Fraction of a Hockey Date* in which a young woman does not share a young man's enthusiasm for hockey and he tries, with comical faux-gallantry, to cover their awkwardness with a kiss. Unfortunately, there follows a string of rather drama-less observations in such poems as *From the Playground to the Gas Station*, *High School Reunion*, and *A Photograph*.

Reiss recovers from this little run with some solid poems about what it's like to be a young woman living in and mostly out of relationships in the contemporary world. Poems such as *The Weight of a Man*, *Downtown I Circle ...*, *Apples and Eve*, with its strong lines "one bite/ and

women couldn't work or vote," *Half-soaked in Beer*, and *Saskatchewan in Love*, with its forlorn closing image of a woman shrinking in a rearview mirror, all have something to affirm about life and the way women live it.

Reiss then wanders into a final section that becomes rather whiney. *If I Gave Up* opens with lines about a woman following a man and giving up on her own life. From that inauspicious turning point we get poems from an uncomfortable fantasy world in which the poetic persona has ongoing battles with unavailable men while dreaming of making it big – and here comes the real fantasy – as a poet. Would that all the poems here were as tough as that middle section.

Finally, from this *New Leaf* series, comes Ian Letoumeau, who hails from the Maritimes but now lives in Athabasca, Alberta.

Letoumeau has a whole lot going on in this slender collection, as he mixes science and art—looking for the soul in the machine, or anywhere, for that matter; as he contemplates his newborn son and the world that will open out before him; as he measures himself as a poet against translations and various poetic forms, including the sonnet, the *paradelle* (a parody of a *villanelle*), and the prose photograph; and as he offers up praise to various things that catch his eye: photographs, geographical features (note the collection's title), and the humble fireplace:

"O let's praise the combustible creature ... "

Letoumeau, like recent poetic forbears Christopher Dewdney, Tim Lilburn, and Don McKay, is intellectually equipped to go headlong into the scientific world with a philosophical head of steam and a spiritual magnifying glass.

In *Fireplace*, for instance, he contemplates said mechanical contrivance, praising its genius, then ends the poem by talking of reverence for "the embers of coal-/ like residue, the ash that once was dragon's soul," while in *Bow River Valley* he writes of a dead soldier being burned on a bier, "allowing/ the spirit to rise in columns of smoke."

Letoumeau trains his gaze on the moment of transformation, of one thing becoming another, "the apple's perfect globe giv[ing] way/ to the hourglass of appetite," the tank "rumbling into an iron metamorphosis," and, in *Bicycle*, the "paradox of/ transforming body into engine." And still, after all these scientific observations, in *Eating Ice Cream*, he admits "the sky is a nursery/ of stars, of which our knowledge remains inexact."

There are machines, there are apples, children, and terminal moraines, and there is the soul, the spirit. Letoumeau examines where one meets the other and the mystery that's left after we've explained all we can.

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