

A labour of meticulous, scrupulous love

Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets

Edited by Zachariah Wells

Biblioasis, 160 pages, \$20

When her *Break, Burn, Blow* first appeared in bookstores in 2005 to explain 43 short canonical poems to masses unacquainted with the stalwart best of English verse, Camille Paglia made it known that she sought to turn close-reading into a practice attractive to the dysfunctional attentions of popular culture in order to save poetry from the tiresome homogeneity of poststructuralist identity politics. “Poetry does not simply reconfirm gender or group identity,” Paglia wrote. “It develops the imagination and feeds the soul.” Though the more insular among us can at last breathe easy now that we have something else assuredly Canadian to hold up against the encroaching succubi south of the 49th parallel, Zach Wells’s latest editorial enterprise, *Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets*, is a work in much the same vein — one which endeavours not to sell Canada back to Canadians so much as to awe, arouse and edify them. As Paglia’s book took its title from one of John Donne’s sonnets, Wells’s finds its source in a sonnet of Margaret Avison’s which opines “Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes. / The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation.”

Through Wells’s deft collection of sundry sonnets written by Canadians, *Jailbreaks* manages to foist responsibility for such “re-creation” upon the individual members of its readership, as Wells stubbornly refuses to stuff the works into an artificial overarching metaphor or unifying theme. Instead, Wells revels in the possibilities of the anthology form, letting the contents of individual poems bleed outward to resonate in broader, linear readings. Here, George Elliott Clarke’s “Negation” (“Le nègre negated, meagre, *c’est moi*”) comes close on the heels of David O’Meara’s “Postcard from Camus” (“I only love the brown bodies — young, alert, / and full of joy”), both unwittingly calling into question the black/brown imagery of Charles G.D. Roberts’s otherwise-innocuous “The Potato Harvest” a page earlier. Here, six sonnets about boats float directly into two about rope, which in turn lead into the opening lines of John Barton’s “Saint Joseph’s Hospital, 1937”: “My heart, a knot undone with pain, forgot / a beat, the message cut.”

In his introduction, Wells claimed to have assembled his roster with an eye to demonstrating the “portmanteau portability and cosmopolitanity of the sonnet”, and that indeed he does. But in reading *Jailbreaks*, Wells’s more successful editorial gambit was not only in locating Canadian works that demonstrate proficiency and virtuosity in form, but in juxtaposing poems with content that rewards repeated interlinear reading.

Indeed, the inclusion of Leonard Cohen's "You have no form", alone serves mostly to remind readers that Cohen's lyric skill lies primarily in free verse, but when its concluding couplet ("and I get up to love and eat and kill / not by my own, but by our married will") is read against that of Sharon McCartney's "Impending death of the cat" ("And yet, remark her purr, her carriage, / how capably she embodies the state of our marriage"), readers are left breathless recognizing the spreading darkness permeating the Canadian connubial tundra. Flip backwards a few pages, and Elizabeth Bachinsky's "How to bag your small town girl" seems less regionally bittersweet than informed, responsive; the volta of Molly Peacock's "The Lull" ("only its head was smashed. In the lull / that it took you to look, you took the time to insult / the corpse...") returns, echoes — have we always been this jaded? And why does it sound so good in fourteen often-decasyllabic lines?

But *Jailbreaks*' best comes last, with Wells's "Notes on the Poems" demonstrating the interpretive possibilities of a careful reader's "optic heart." For once, a critic declines to over-analyze his texts, *enabling* rather than infantilizing his audience. To read Wells's commentary you need to be well-versed in Frost, Avison, Sanger. He is a skilled prosodist, and he is at his best when he is beard-deep in scansion. In other hands, such grey matter could seem pedantic, petulant, or dry, but through Wells's froward refusal to anatomize the sonnet form and its prosody, his readers have no choice but to inform themselves of the relevant poetic lingo if they want to keep up. While terms such as "anadiploic volta", "ekphrastic", "consubstantiality", and "caudated" flow unapologetically from Wells's "Notes", his direct address to the reader throughout keeps the tone casual, immediate. Wells is *right here*, he's having a beer with you, wrangling over what Richard Sanger *isn't* saying, telling you not to be fooled by Don Coles's "Sampling from a Dialogue", or offering an irrelevant anecdote about a hung-over John Newlove. Did you know that "girdles for women were once made from the baleen of right whales?" Doesn't that somehow draw you back to page 65, where Eric Cole's "Right Whale" gasps, "the nostrils on the head / from each black fathom"?

That Wells is well-read in the history of Canadian poetry is clear, but his choices veer towards the recent and the living. Most poems in the collection were written in the previous decade. Such a focus is unsurprising from one determined to illustrate how "many younger poets...are hungry for change. It's getting hard to open a journal or a new collection without stumbling over some sort of sonnet, or even a book-length sequence of them." More troubling perhaps is Wells's almost exclusive use of poems from single-author chapbooks and collections — if a reader as determined as Wells can't be bothered to invest in the poetical works published in Canada's literary journals, what message does that send about their relevance?

What other criticisms there are are few, and personal ones at that. Wells, a poet himself, is perhaps too fond of meta-sonneteering — a reader with a less

cheek-enjambed tongue than his might grow weary by the fifth or sixth time she encounters a poem about writing poems — but the enthusiasm Wells displays in his notes begs forgiveness for such indulgences. That *Jailbreaks* is a labour of love is clear, but it is a love as meticulous and scrupulous as that of a strict parent, one who applauds “inventive innovation” in poetry only so long as it is accompanied by a concomitant “rigorous vigour”.

Because it is requisite in Canadian journals to point out that Wells is a “PEI-born writer who now lives in Vancouver”, this reviewer shall do so, thereby espousing the yawning tedium of geo-biographical detail even though Wells himself declines to offer such banal trivia in his own volume. *Jailbreaks* mercifully contains no bios, no cringing boilerplate included to supposedly illuminate the socio-cultural impressions possible within each poem’s 14 lines of verse. “Who knows *not* Colin Clout?” Edmund Spenser asked sometime towards the end of his *Faerie Queene* of 1596, ushering in a swell of ego that the debacle over the *Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* and resultant sour grape mash of the so-called *Salon de Refusés* demonstrates is still widespread amongst writers of our little Dominion. In such a climate, Wells’s avoidance of traditional Canuck self-congratulation is invigorating, even audacious. “Most anthologies are about poets, or generations of poets, with photos and bios and all the trappings of quasi-celebrity,” Wells told *Literary Photographer* in a July 2008 interview. “This one’s about single, small poems.” Because Wells organizes the poems in his anthology according to his own private thematic and poetic logic, *Jailbreaks* is not a typical act of ennuish Canadian canon-building, commemorating regionalism or post-Charter multiculturalism or whatever it is that “makes us Canadian” (really, is there any nation but ours so committed to talking unremittingly about itself?) but instead celebrates a small poetic form whose “deceptively ample cargo space can accommodate...pithy wit and irony, intellectual investigations and expressions of sincere feeling.”

Hefting the quarto-sized Biblioasis codex, with its luxe red cardstock cover, clean lines, and the wry learned humour of its assiduous editor, one feels most astutely that *Jailbreaks*’ form does indeed echo its content. Such deceptively ample cargo space is still enough to break, blow, burn — and make the sonnet new.

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