

A Newer Wilderness

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Roseanne Carrara

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Confronted with a title like *A Newer Wilderness*, one could be forgiven for thinking that Roseanne Carrara's debut collection is yet another book of bland Canadian nature poetry, trite celebrations of the flora and fauna that populate this vast country. Fortunately, it is a different creature altogether. Her interest in nature is often abstract and tied to the imprint of humankind upon it. In "Surveillance" (whose epigraph from Dickinson gives the book its title), consistent rustling in the brush prompts the speaker to predict a violent natural scene, that one of the "dogs, we imagined/was sure to emerge from the woods with a rabbit/or a squirrel, or some other prize, dangling, bloody/from its mouth" only to realize that it's just forestry surveyors. That something so innocuous should be the cause of trepidation subverts a convention of Canadian nature poetry and represents the dissolution of Frye's garrison mentality. In an era of environmental decay, the garrison mentality no longer applies: it is, after all, we who are destroying nature, not the other way around. That it should be surveyors indicates mankind's interaction with nature is one of measurement, containment, meddling and, ultimately, control, an association that, according to Carrara, typically ends in disaster for both.

The poisoned relationship between nature and humanity often manifests itself through transplants: the prism through which Carrara views the natural world is movement, dislocation, and cross-pollination, the process and effect of the introduction of a species (or people) into a foreign locale. As related in "The Ears of Kings" a flock of imported starlings, in an act of late Victorian aestheticism gone wrong, was released into Central Park in 1890 simply because the species was mentioned by Shakespeare. Their aggressive behaviour and screeching call promptly drove off a variety of indigenous birds and left us "all kings with harried/ears, really, waiting for the wailing to stop." In "A Muscle in the Country" a washed-up pop star retreats to a rural estate and fantasizes that he has achieved mastery over nature, that "the birds cried out meet him there in his authority." These are two examples out of many of a dominant theme that is eventually tied in the title poem to our waning civilization: mirrored in mankind's casually contemptuous treatment of the environment is a morbidity that will "keep us contemplating/our inevitable decay, or worse, the decline of culture." The poem ends with a clarion call to let nature interact with us, to awake a "newer wilderness in us/and in our languages." However, vibrancy in language can also be a compensatory gesture. As the world goes to hell, "we will likely find more words/than we ever possibly imagined to describe what we have lost/what, exactly, we require, and everything we cannot have."

Carrara's poetry is of long lines, a measured tone, and a chatty quality, rather like meeting a dour café dweller with a lot on her mind. Structurally, her poems start with one concept and meander through several disconnected ideas before bringing them together with an essayist's sense of self-assurance. The opening poem, "Prologue: To a Translator of Horace," ranges from the titular poet to Pythagoras to Edward Teller (a physicist who developed the H-bomb and advocated geo-engineering as a way to combat global warming) to Proserpina and contrasts the promise of eternal life offered by the world's religions with the promise of endless death thanks to our conduct on the planet. The environmental focus of her work is limited as far as subject matter goes (though not so much as I've made it out here; her other hobby-horse is to retell well-known stories from the point of view of minor characters) but she mines it very well. (As an aside, I must mention that one cannot read *A Newer Wilderness* without some annoyance at the book's design. A 5x8 format undoubtedly keeps the price down but Carrara's long, flowing lines are strangled by a design inherently hostile to the work.) Moreover, she should be credited with the seemingly simple ability to generate a thought and develop it to its fullest extent. This may not sound like much but one is amazed at how few poets possess this aptitude. If more first collections were as competent as this one, our poetic culture would be a great deal healthier.

Christopher Doda is a poet and critic living in Toronto. His first collection of poems, *Among Ruins*, was released in 2001 by Mansfield Press and his second, *Aesthetics Lesson*, will appear in autumn of 2007.