

A HAIR'S BREATH OF ABANDON



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JASON HOLT
POEMS





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FOREWORD
GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE



FOREWORD

Jason Holt is a disciplined philosopher--and a libertarian poet. But there is no contradiction here. His training in rigorous logic and his practice of organically anarchistic thought (i.e. poetry) are perfect complements for an artist who navigates every sect of English--abstract and laic, Latinate and vulgar--to find the words that convey precisely the image or nuance he needs. The tensions that Holt imposes on language may resemble, at first, the coercive pressures of mathematical formulae. But, but, such a judgment would be superficial. Holt's almost tyrannous demand for *le mot juste* results, not in a sclerotic realism, but in profound and abundant magic: surrealism with a human face.

Some English-Canadian poets and critics exalt Richard Outram as a *nouveau* metaphysical, while others advance Eric Ormsby as a philosophical poet and Christopher Dewdney as a "scientific" one. Such discriminations are justifiable, but ignore, coolly, the issue of who among the younger Anglo-Canadian poets may merit such adjectives. To read Jason Holt is to find at least one candidate. His work is vividly cerebral, lyrically intellectual, and whimsically serious. The two Jans--the "scientific" Jan Conn and the "philosophic" Jan Zwicky--are the two young English-Canadian poets Holt resembles most closely. But his tone and style follow the playful, *avant-garde*, linguistic modernism of the American poet Gertrude Stein, while yet remaining clearly, blearily mimetic. Holt is, really, the only true heir, after Irving Layton, of the 1940s-era, Montréal-Canadian modernist, A.M. Klein.

No poetry *aficionado* should dull the glistening beauty of Holt's verses with too thick a lacquer of commentary. Suffice it to say that here's a poet who dares to scrutinize every word and to utilize new words, strange words, and foreign words. Holt appreciates that there can be no *neo*-anything without neologisms. For Holt, the word is paramount, opulent, and insolent. Its combination must always surprise, puzzle, and amaze:

she that should be
lithe in art
drunk in celebration
the long
in stockings black
the touch
beyond restraint
the merely blinking eyes
the quick skinning hands
soft with books
and sloughing off
their own unfinished page
the boningknife
of silent roses
well past the rot
better off and newly limned
with something else delight

There's a multifaceted revelation, here, of relationships, of a particular woman, of even, perhaps, a painting in a gallery. To "get it" is to swoon.

The reader who cares to cogitate and meditate will find herein no ephemeral pleasures. Holt sets before us the joys of a constabulary-less vocabulary and a sophisticated vision:

my renascent face
reflecting a little
the man
whose blacks I pilfered
prepping
for a tour of duty
archetypes all

The poet speaks elliptically--à la Eliot's Prufrock--but with optic 'nerve':

I want
away from all this
to break you
at your passing
to proof those little gaffes
that interrupt your grace
to soothe the lines of evidence
from your perfect face

Jason Holt's lyrics are sonic icons: works that put the iron in irony. To enter herein is to find "A Hair's Breadth of Abandon."

[George Elliott Clarke]
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