

now the moon appears among the lilies. Susan Ingersoll.

Patrick Warner

Volume 16, numéro 2, fall 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds16_2rv07

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Warner, P. (2000). Compte rendu de [*now the moon appears among the lilies.* Susan Ingersoll.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 16(2), 296–299.

Ingeroll, Susan. *now the moon appears among the lilies*. St. John's: Breakwater. 62 pp. 1998, \$14.95, ISBN 1-55081-112-6.

PATRICK WARNER

AT THE HEART of poetry is negotiation; and negotiation, if it is to appear successful, demands movement. A journey must be undertaken between and within ourselves. Borders must be crossed and recrossed until we understand that they are not points forever fixed, but markers which respond to the flux of reality, particularly as it is perceived by imagination. In *now the moon appears among the lilies*, her first book of poetry, Susan Ingersoll takes us on this journey. Settings shift within poems and between poems, we find ourselves moving between interiors and exteriors, between night and day, between waking image and dream image, from desire to act to inhibition. A romantic poet, Ingersoll employs irony, lyricism, humour and coolness of diction to facilitate these transitions. The result is a beautiful tension that runs, almost unfalteringly, from the first page to the last.

In the first poem of the book, "Lunar Changes," we find the speaker somewhat self-consciously situated in her apartment and looking out on the world. The world which the speaker overlooks, and which she is drawn into, is a hostile one, inhabited by the "Itinerant Homicidal Maniac," the "Welfare Woman," and the "Dead End Kid." Desire comes to the speaker as the full moon (red), as a cat (in heat?), and humorously as a would-be lover who tries to woo her by calling up to her window. After this failed negotiation, desire departs in something of a hissy-fit, as the absurd "fat man/in white tie and tails ... [who] ... /without a word ... hot wires the piano/and together he and it sweep quite gracefully/out the Gower Street window:" following a "Diminished Interval" desire returns, this time as the "piano man" and as knowledge. There is a sense of the speaker having outstripped, in some measure,

her inhibition. There is a sense of greater willingness on her part to allow desire, or “piano man” to “orchestrate this descent.”

Throughout all of Section I (Tower), there is a recognisable philosophical movement—observation, desire, followed by a willingness to embrace the outside world/reality. It is a movement that achieves, for the speaker, varying degrees of success. It is also a movement that underscores all sections of the book; a learning curve if you like. These are not poems content to observe reality, but poems that actively question it.

If Section I of the book frames the question, “is it possible to fully embrace the world?”, then Section II (sleeping in the future) appears to ask the question, “is it possible to live within the imagination?” Section II opens with the surprisingly Plath-like “no trump,” which seems to function as an exorcism. The poems following, “three evasions,” and “so long,” further address the speaker’s anxiety. Why is she anxious? Where are we going? “Distant Thunder,” “Night crossing,” and “Found Stories,” with images of castles and riders, and imagery of flying over water, set up a feverish, dream like state. Noticeable is the archaic language—use of the words “bodkin” and “bullaces,” and the phrase “escutcheon tierced in pale.” At first it seemed we were heading straight for the future via the Middle Ages. And why not? The imagination needs some provenience, which is often gained through fanciful imagery. A strong imagination, however, will quickly tire of this (its yields are thin) and seek ground that is more familiar and yet still not familiar. And where better than a foreign country, with all the licence that newness bestows? Hence we find ourselves returning to terra firma in modern day England, in a sequence of three poems entitled “a night walk.”

“Hampsted heath,” the first of these poems, shows us a poet of greater confidence, one who scales a fence to walk in a public park at night. Here, the other (the world) appears no longer as an abstracted or poetically mythologised form, but as a real person, and one more timid than the speaker, “I would be afraid/to walk through here/at night, alone.” In the next poem, “colin,” we learn this person’s name and also a great deal more as he and the speaker walk together, and, talking, negotiate the space between them. The third poem sees this distance dissolve. “Home” is one of the most beautiful poems in the book. After a fairly prosaic opening, the poem shifts gear rapidly — there is a sense of immanent opening ... “and though trees and buildings block the view/you have a sense of being at an edge/and that below this ridge of hills/lies all of London,/a dreamed and factual landscape/dreaming itself like a castle,/and glittering darkly like an inland sea....” Here what is imagined and what is real come closest together, and most closely when Colin locates for her, within this vast dream scape, his small house. It is a romantic high point. In this small domestic detail, the particular meets the universal effortlessly, and so much more successfully than in the earlier poem, “Moving into Voice,” with its jaded image of river running to sea.

Ingersoll takes a step aside in the next poem, "Covent Garden." The speaker, back once more in observation mode, stands watching a street performer in an open air market. This is a dark, perplexing poem. Watching, the poet wonders at the elemental forces harnessed by art, and their ability to free us from present time. Watching with her, we see the mime/actor struggle with the act of becoming. At first wobbling "like a satellite/in a faltering orbit," then as "someone you almost recognize./someone from history." And indeed he does become historical personages — first Lincoln, then Martin Luther King, Jr., then Bobby Kennedy. Elemental forces all, forces of emancipation whose becoming (we must infer from their similar fates) is more than we can bear. In the end it is easier for us to bear their absence, which steals "from the afternoon/a little of its colour."

As if having found fault with her romantic vision, and yet somehow still hopeful for it, the poet in "end of summer, jackson's lane," and in the first part of "Guy Fawkes" enters a decadent phase. Here the moon has become "silvery crisis; it has crossed into the breakdown zone." It is the "dark vestibule/between zero and daybreak." In "Guy Fawkes" this space becomes the site of a wild late night party. It is like one last storming of the castle, a last hallucinatory hurrah where "champagne laughter,/the chime and chink of money and glass," becomes the "commerce of insects," which in turn becomes "the turning of the planet/the whisper of friction/as it spins into darkness," which becomes "the traffic of Archway road...ap- plause/and beyond it,/the sussuration of space,/a muted distant cheer." It stands in starkest possible contrast to the second part of the poem which opens bleakly, on Parliament Hill (are we back in Canada?), among the litter of the night before. In the light of morning "the face of things seems veiled." The party is over. The last poem in this section, "long distance," is suffused with disappointment, with distance and dislocation.

Section III opens with the beautiful "a poem about icebergs and planting" which begins in irony and ends in a lyrical invocation to hope, to "spring obser- vances,/performed against disaster or despair." Again there is the reassuring rhythm of observation — desire, willingness to embrace; only now the path is tougher, and all the more so after the conclusions of the previous sections. In the poems "figure and ground," "silent piano," "advent," and "poem for march," the speaker seems between places. Having rejected the simplistic strategies of Art vs Life, she is left to negotiate a new living space, and at first none is forthcoming. There is real sadness here, "And I was younger then, and proud,/and this alone could speak to me — /the lonely discipline that frees/the fiery constellation from the stone" (silent piano). There is frustration, "the atmosphere is mineral, isinglass/less clear than ice, a dark membrane between/ourselves and ourselves, behind which we shout" ("advent").

Finally, there is some movement. The last poem of the book, "all of an april evening," finds the poet "emerging from dark ages as from a forest/to find April has come again." Things are, however, no longer what they seem. Three pages on

we discover that this is not the speaker, but the speaker remembering herself as a child, remembering her encounter with a painting of a sleeping woman — images of awakening within awakening within awakening. What we get now is a depiction of a multi-layered reality like “transparent leaves that made a layered map/of continents — sheer colour you could strip away/to uncreate the world...down...to the ancient, ash white nucleus of the planet.” A nuclear nothingness, I couldn’t help think, within which this subtle and engaging imagination has negotiated something like detente ... “pale spring/a landscape you look out on/from a moving car/how transparent and mysterious/this season is, how unknown to you/your travelling companions.”