



## Occupied by Order

by BECKY LIDDELL

**F**IRST, A CONFESSION: I can be a crabapple of a reviewer, sour and hard (to please). But that's because I think poetry deserves to be taken seriously — even in a column such as this, where nine collections are “cornered” in a small space, and thus must be dealt with briefly.

Ken Norris's work is generally pleasant, if not exactly memorable — something like the poetic equivalent of easy-listening music. *Alphabet of Desire* (ECW, 70 pages, \$12 paper), his 16th book, consists of two sequences: “The Ascent of Spring” uses the cycle of the seasons to chart the poet's movement through a winter of creative sterility and self-questioning to the spring's rebirth of imagination; the section “Alphabet of Desire” offers prose poems of philosophical musings on various formidable — and not so formidable — topics, including “The Passage of Time,” “The Impermanence of the World,” and “The Blue Hairbrush.”

Norris is skilled at evoking the delicate spell of a reverie, and in several poems, notably “Baseball,” he goes beyond atmospheric description and makes a point without straining. With humour, even! But too often, especially in the second section, the poems sound embarrassingly guru-like: “Start by only dreaming your / own dreams; they will carry you like a kite up into your own / altitudes, the marvellous Himalayas of seeing things clear” (“The Tools of Ignorance”). Or they are slack and banal, as in the title poem: “Phone rings; it's you, suddenly in town. Query: was I asleep? / Response: no, up late and reading a book. Should you come over? There is little hesitation in my answer.”

No hesitation is necessary before recommending Jesús López-Pacheco's *Poetic Asylum* (Brick, 79 pages, \$9.95 paper), a collection of poems written between 1968 and 1990 and translated from Spanish by the author's son, Fabio López Lázaro. López-Pacheco came here as a refugee from Franco's Spain, and much of the book centres on the poet's transition to Canada's “page of snow.” He's precociously at ease with unconventional forms, such as a “do-it-yourself” poem and “EXIT,” a piece that includes instructions for audiovisual accompaniments. But he also excels at whimsical epigrams:

*Autumn has left me a golden ticket  
on the windshield.*

*'Unlawful parking under my trees.  
Sadness not allowed.  
Golden carpet under construction'  
 (“Golden Ticket”)*

Read this book for its witty resistance of authority, be it that of

a repressive government, spiritually numbing consumerism, or literary culture, which is satirized in “The Hoop.” Or read it for its versatility and playfulness. Or — hell, just read it. Jesús López-Pacheco offers his readers the rare gift of surprise, and in abundance.

The experience of exile is also the focus of *Guerra Prolongada/Protracted War* (Women's Press, 111 pages, \$11.95 paper), by Carmen Rodríguez, who came to Canada from Chile when that South American country was under military rule. It is a much more sober and painful (though politically impassioned) book than *Poetic Asylum*, and its style — simple words inch down the page in short, halting lines — reflects the sense of fragmentation and precarious identity that is often the subject of the poems:

*I've created a world for myself  
some old clothes  
a few books  
the table  
music  
a place occupied by order  
 (“Subject”)*

The collection's virtues are its directness and clarity; its faults a certain predictability and flatness of language. (I should add that the poems are somewhat more effective in their native Spanish because although the English translations — by Heidi Neufeld Raine with the author — preserve meaning, the rhythmic cadences are almost always lost.)

I wanted to like Richard Stevenson's *Learning to Breathe* (Cacanadadada, 101 pages, \$10.95 paper): it plunges fearlessly into the deep end of the pool — the personal and social costs of our culture's macho values — equipped with only the waterwings of good (if frequently transparent) intention and figurative panache. The book is an alternative coming-of-age story that begins with a re-examination of the rites of masculinity passed through in adolescence, widens the focus to include the geopolitical system, and closes with a series of poems on fatherhood. It's ambitious in scope and bravely buoyed up by conviction. But the poems often founder under the weight of too many metaphors and similes:

*Lies preserve the candied legs of words  
like insects in amber  
while silence rests  
its wet burlap over desiccated vegetables  
 (“The Vendor”)*