

THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

Blue Met: Poetic voices from near and far

By Harold Heft, Special to The Gazette April 22, 2011

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MONTREAL - Literary festivals, when they are well organized, are both an opportunity for writers to market their work to new readers and a forum to facilitate a creative dialogue across borders, languages and cultures. This year's Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival is such an event, with poets from around the world, including John Mikhail Asfour, Edvins Raups and Oliver Scharpf, bringing radically different poetic traditions, styles and themes to a singular conversation.

Asfour, one of Canada's most gifted and underappreciated poets, recently released *Blindfold*, his fifth book of poetry. Born in Aitaneat, Lebanon, Asfour was blinded at the age of 13 as a result of a grenade explosion during the Lebanon Crisis of 1958; he immigrated to Montreal in 1968, where he has worked as a literature professor, translator and writer.

In many of the finest poems in *Blindfold*, Asfour courageously shares details of his life by tracing the interplay between his adult experience of blindness and the lost visual images that remain in his imagination from childhood. The long poem *Reflections* is the tour-de-force of the volume, beginning with the story of a failed surgical attempt to restore his sight, which sees Asfour, in his frustration, calling for the doctor to return and try again:

Thread the needle for a finer fix.

Shed more light to make him see

where sight is left, retrain his fingers,

place God in them,

connect what is lost with what is still living,

go deeper to the source of light.

The experience brings him back to a yearning for his younger self and the “images of forty years past,” which he outlines with exquisite detail: “horses racing to the end of the earth, / charging the land with hoof marks and neighs / and coming back with shades of light.” In *Reflections* and other poems across *Blindfold*, Asfour provides readers with a deeply moving glimpse into the frustrations and disorientation of physical loss, as well as the heroic effort to find the language and metaphors that will translate his experience into poetry.

Contrary to the clarity and lucidity of Asfour's work, the verse of award-winning Latvian poet Edvins Raups is disruptive and jarring, challenging readers either to find order within incongruent, juxtaposed images and ideas, or to accept the disorder as central to his esthetic. His recent book, *Then Touch Me Here*, includes poems selected and translated by Margita Gailitis from his fourth and fifth volumes; often, these poems read like a stream of consciousness, stream of unconsciousness and stream of impulses, as in the following untitled piece:

—oh!

how good this heaviness upon

my heart I smack my lips like a refined

gourmet I gaze

at God

One might think that 125 pages of such disorder could be exasperating, but the careful reader can find logic and method in the mechanics of Raups's poetry. Even within the brief selection above, there is the romantic narrative of finding pleasure in pain, a dimension of humour and playfulness in grasping for the right metaphor to capture that experience, and a drama in the vacillation of moods and shifting focus from the personal to the commonplace to the divine. Raups's poetry requires commitment, but then, so do most worthwhile journeys.

Swiss poet Oliver Scharpf was born in Lugano and writes in Italian. His recent volume, *A Choice of Uppercuts*, includes poems from his first two collections in both their original Italian and translated into English by Marco Sonzogni. The term "uppercuts," is appropriate in describing his poems; like boxing uppercuts, they are quick, they rely on the element of surprise, and they're designed as a knockout punch.

In one of the poems in the volume that illustrates Scharpf's style (they are all simply titled by their first lines), the poet describes

two hearts barely outlined with chalk

on the pale saffron walls

of the courtyard in the cleopatra quarter

of alexandrea, one evening

While Scharpf's poems are brief, they all tell a story. There is usually, as in this poem, an acute attention to detail in identifying the location and moment of the event. Readers must interpret the details of the story within the sparse, often surprising sequence of images. In this poem, the reference to a chalk outline suggests violence, the fact that it is hearts outlined indicates a lovers' quarrel, and the fact that the hearts are "barely outlined" evokes the transient, ephemeral, fading quality of the moment. Like a boxer's uppercut, Scharpf's poetry delivers a sudden flash and, when successful, a visceral shock.

Poetry, like science, has become a language that transcends nationality. This sampling of recent works by three of the leading poets of their respective countries, each of whom possesses a unique history and esthetic, indicates that this year's Blue Metropolis will be a true ingathering of disparate voices and an open creative exchange.

John Asfour reads from *Blindfold* on Wednesday at 5 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Select Montreal Downtown Hotel, 99 Viger Ave. W. in the Jasmin Room (cost: \$7). Edvins Raups and Olivier Scharpf appear together in two events: along with several other poets on Friday at 6 p.m. in the Camelia Room (cost: \$7) and at a launch for their books on Sunday, May 1, at 1 p.m. in the Narcisse AB Room. Free admission.

Blindfold

By John Mikhail Asfour

McGill-Queen's University Press, 106 pages, \$16.95

Then Touch Me Here

By Edvins Raups

Guernica, 130 pages, \$20

A Choice of Uppercuts

By Oliver Scharpf

Guernica, 104 pages, \$15

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