

The Terpstra Review

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Disarmament
John Terpstra



A study in

Reorganization

A letter from the editor ²



Dear Reader,

When I first picked up John Terpstra's seventh poetry collection, *Disarmament*, I had a hard time putting it back down. Each poem seemed to jump right off the page thanks to Terpstra's incredible ability to create extremely vivid scenes in no more than a few short pages.

Although each poem is very well-written, I found that each piece worked more as a standalone text, rather than one work in a larger collection. As far as I could tell, there were no clear connections between the poems in each section. In addition, the section divisions themselves often seemed rather arbitrary and somewhat jarring. Many times I found myself thinking that a poem I was reading had similar themes to some of the works earlier in the text, and that therefore the collection as a whole would have an improved sense of flow if these pieces had been placed in the same section.

This issue of *The Terpstra Review* aims to rectify this situation. I have endeavoured to reorganize the poems in *Disarmament* based on the themes and central ideas that I believe are key to each piece. To effectively complete this task I have divided the book into eight sections as opposed to the six sections in the original organization of the

collection. In doing so, I have also given a title to each section — something that was curiously missing from the original layout of the book. By adding section titles, the divisions in the collection gain a greater purpose.

Aside from the titles for the first and last sections of the book (both of which are clearly connected to each other, thus emphasizing the bookend nature of these two pieces which will be explained in greater detail on page 3), all of the section titles are derived from a line within the first poem in that section. I have chosen these lines as I believe that they very aptly represent the themes and central ideas of each section.

The articles contained within this issue will explain my rationale behind both my new titles and my new groupings. Terpstra provided me with fantastic poetry to start off with — I have merely tried to improve their presentation. I hope that my reorganization of Terpstra's poems helps other readers in their understanding and enjoyment of this wonderful collection. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Suzanne Gardner".

Suzanne Gardner, Editor-in-Chief

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Editor-in-Chief

Suzanne Gardner

Design Director

Kirill Levin

Photo Editor

Michael L. Davenport

Makeup Artist

Jacqueline McKoy

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Effects of an unexpected miracle

The first poem in the 2003 edition of John Terpstra's *Disarmament* published by Gaspereau Press is titled "Restoration". In my reorganization of this collection, I have left "Restoration" as the introductory poem to this book. In addition, I have given this piece even more prominence as the opening piece by placing it into a section by itself.

Of all the poems in this collection, "Restoration" best sets the tone of the entire text. Throughout *Disarmament*, the idea of the Biblical world blending with the contemporary world continually recurs in both incredibly blatant and rather subtle ways. "Restoration", however, is one of the most direct examples of this blending of worlds; the other most clear example is "Two Couples, Four Voices", the last poem in this collection. The juxtaposition of the two starkly contrasting worlds is most noteworthy in these pieces because both poems involve a modern retelling of the story of the Virgin Mary.

In "Restoration", the narrator tells the story of how he dealt with the unexpected news of his daughter Katie's pregnancy while on a family vacation in Cuba. During their trip the family visits the Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad, a church decorated with many carvings depicting various moments in the life of the Virgin Mary. While observing these carvings and the precise moments they portray, Katie

Poems in section: Restoration



The Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad in Cuba

COURTESY SUSAN K. KIESAU

whispers to her father, "*That's what happened to me*" (12). By having Katie compare herself to the Virgin Mary, the story suddenly turns both playful and spiritual at this point, while also simultaneously merging Biblical times with the current day.

The title of this section, **Effects of an unexpected miracle**, represents the idea of both Katie's current pregnancy and

Mary's past pregnancy. Although Katie's situation is originally seen as a more unfortunate miracle than that of Mary's, these women still must face the effects, both good and bad, of their similar circumstances. This section title makes a reappearance later on in the collection as the story of the Virgin Mary is a central idea in "Two Couples, Four Voices". ■

Rhythm and eternal Love of water

Poems in section:

Beach; Trinity Sunday, Sydling St. Nicholas; Ceremony; The River

The first poem of each section in the reorganization of this collection, aside from the only poem in each of the first and last sections, was chosen for a very particular reason. Each of these poems starts with the same first line: "In the church where we go to now". Although this line is rather grammatically-awkward, it very effectively reminds the reader of the somewhat religious nature of this collection, even though it is not always clearly evident in every poem. Terpstra manages to make an initial religious reference by mentioning a church at the beginning of the poem, yet he continues the piece by discussing everything from dogs playing in the

water to children building sand castles, like in "Beach", the introductory poem to this section.

Rhythm and water are two key ideas that continually appear as themes throughout this collection, but it is the connection of these two central elements in the poems "Beach", "Trinity Sunday, Sydling St. Nicholas", "Ceremony", and "The River" that truly unify this section.

This section begins with the poem "Beach" because of the key repeated line "the rhythm and eternal Love of water", from which the title of the section is derived. The repetitive line most clearly illustrates the connection

between the two key ideas in this section. In *Disarmament*, rhythm drives both the movement of the water and the movement of the poetry itself.

These two main uses of rhythm are most prominent in the poem "Ceremony", in which the narrator rides his bicycle down to the water's edge where he finds three people sitting in the sand and "drumming / the sun down, / singing rhythmic undulations over / the chanted surface of the bay" (27). With the image of these beach drummers, Terpstra effectively makes clear the connection between rhythm and water in his poems. ■

A kind of perverse luxury

Poems in section:

**Humus; The Economy of Hope;
Poolside; Wild Edibles; Free Lunch**

The third section of the reorganized version of *Disarmament* centers around the idea of differing lifestyles and the juxtaposition between rich and poor, old and young and other binary opposites.

Terpstra first introduces this idea in the section's first poem, "Humus", in which he describes the somewhat strange situation of protesting the injustices done to those less fortunate than ourselves while simultaneously enjoying our own well-off state. He explains how "it seems a kind of perverse luxury / that we experience so many varieties / of grief and sorrow / made available in such abundance, / though it doesn't quite fit / with the cut of our clothing, / or the cleanliness of our skin" (47). Terpstra addresses the idea of the rich versus the poor in a similar fashion in the poem "Poolside", which details a vacationer at a resort hotel on the Caribbean Sea, enjoying the beautiful scenery yet stating that "The poor are with us always, and we have come / a long way to find them" (77).

In the poem "Free Lunch", Terpstra tackles a different pair of opposites as he sets a student against a professor. Although Terpstra, the student, has now graduated and is much older than when the two first met, he still relates a clear distinction between the two characters: "Why is it that whenever I talk with my old professor / my eyes water, my intelligence shorts out / like a small appliance, / and my voice takes on a waver / that mimics the gentle, aging waver of his hand" (69).

In each of the poems in this section, Terpstra uses juxtaposition to emphasize the disparity between these strongly contrasting ideas. ■

Life everlasting

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Poems in section:

**How it all goes round; Conviction;
Three Stones; Port-au-Prince; Planetary
Lives; Giants**

In "How it all goes round" and the other four poems in this section, Terpstra explores the ideas of creation and the past through the theme of life everlasting — a line from the section's first poem.

The most interesting portrayal of the idea of creation is in the poem "Conviction", which tells the story of a preacher who carves new worlds out of oranges: "Our fascination grows / as the latitudes unravel and dangle / a loose spiral / that disconnects from the pole and falls to earth, / and the orange world turns pulp white" (63). The idea that this one woman has the power to sculpt new worlds with only a fruit and a machete as her tools is a very intriguing take on the creation myths currently in the canon. The poem "Three Stones: Port-au-Prince" also connects directly with "Conviction" by re-using oranges as a central object and by having a tailor as the one who connects us all through the new worlds created by the preacher: "We are all of us / pierced all the way through, / by the needle that is drawing this thread" (66).

Terpstra also focuses on stories from the past in this section in both "Planetary Lives", in which the narrator reflects on his childhood while visiting his old schoolyard, and "Giants", a short piece about the giants who used to live in the Niagara Escarpment. Both of these poems hold a sense of loss and a tinge of regret for the days gone by. For example, at the end of "Giants", the narrator inserts his own voice directly into the poem to express the emotions of the giants: "They loved it here. / I'm telling you, they absolutely loved / every living minute here, / and they regretted ever having to leave" (25).

Terpstra lets the spiritual side of his poetry shine rather strongly in this section as he promotes the idea of eternal life through creation myths and reliving the past. ■

Furthest point you think it is possible to stretch without snapping

Poems in section:

Tension; Disarmament; Jaws

Throughout *Disarmament*, Terpstra often leaves his reader with a tense and somewhat uneasy feeling — a feeling that is most noticeable in the poems in the third section: "Tension", "Disarmament" and "Jaws".

This continuous stress and strain is particularly prominent in "Tension", the poem from which the section title was chosen. The poem begins by relaying the

apprehensive feeling between a group of people, and how that uneasy atmosphere can only last for so long until the tension must break: "twang, the relief is instantaneous. / The string has been plucked" (41).

A similar feeling of uncertainty is present in the collection's eponymous poem, "Disarmament". In this piece, Terpstra details the situation of living directly across the street

from a twenty-five pound gun and to "feel perfectly confident that it is disarmed, / or hope so" (57). This almost incomprehensible situation, yet at the same time incredibly frightening, conveys an extreme sense of uneasiness to the reader.

The poems in this section relay a series of uncomfortably tense situations creating an appropriate sense of discomfort in the reader. ■

Connects the dots between ourselves and everything else 5

Poems in section:

Art; White Buffalo Jump; St. Terra

In the sixth section of this reorganization of *Disarmament*, Terpstra focuses on the connections between art and nature and how the two elements often work together as one. While his discussion of this idea is most prominent in the section's first poem, "Art", the idea of beauty and art and their intrinsic involvement in nature is also apparent in the poems "White Buffalo Jump" and "St. Terra".

In the poem "Art", Terpstra describes a scene in which four campers are sitting

around a beach fire discussing the relationship between art and nature: "Art is a product of human culture," one states. / Another replies, "Sky, water, rock, trees — / it is all art, and we are part of it" (43).

By studying the other poems in this section, it appears that Terpstra is more apt to agree with the second camper in this dialogue. In both "White Buffalo Jump" and "St. Terra", Terpstra details the surroundings as a thing of beauty that is inherently connected to humankind. For example, in

"White Buffalo Jump", Terpstra writes: "At twelve years old, she feels the story / resolving to a landscape / she can love, / that loves her desire; / but can't yet trust the hills desire / happens against, rock she must / move through, / and by the 7th Concession Road" (29).

The title of this section, **Connects the dots between ourselves and everything else**, aptly sums up Terpstra's idea that art, nature and humankind all work in tandem with one another. ■

Two edges of truth

Poems in section:

Logos; Saying Goodnight; Flagrance; The Easy Part; Silence

The poems in the seventh section of the reorganized *Disarmament* all relate to a quote from the first poem, "Logos", from which the section title is derived: "In the church where we go to now / there is an indescribably painful beauty / that has to do with the two edges of truth / being drawn through our lives" (50). Each of the section's five poems focuses on these two edges of truth: life and death.

This idea is most thoroughly explored in

"Logos", which tells the story of many different people around the world — some of whom are tragically dying, some of whom are miraculously living — and how we cannot control any of their situations. In "Saying Goodnight" this same issue is dealt with on a more personal level as the narrator must say goodbye to his slowly dying mother-in-law: "Goodnight Dad. Goodnight Mom. Goodnight / sweet sainted parents; mothers, fathers, all. / What more can you

do than draw our fear away? / Goodnight" (15). "The Easy Part" and "Silence" both address death or near-death experiences as well.

The poem "Flagrance" deals with the more positive edge of truth by serving up a true slice of life, as it depicts the average activities of a family on a spring day.

Terpstra effectively explores the universal truths of life and death in this section without collapsing into cliché. ■

Effects of an unexpected miracle 2

Poems in section:

Two Couples, Four Voices

In Terpstra's original organization of *Disarmament* he placed the poem "Two Couples, Four Voices" at the end of the collection in its own separate section. In this reorganization of the anthology this poem has remained in exactly the same position.

"Two Couples, Four Voices" acts as the last bookend in this book — the other half to the collection's first poem, "Restoration". Both poems were given their own sections

to emphasize their important bookend role to this anthology. As in "Restoration", "Two Couples, Four Voices" also portrays a modern-day version of the story of the Virgin Mary.

In this final poem, Terpstra tells the story of two different women who have conceived babies not from their own husbands. Both of these women, as well as their husbands, must come to terms with this obviously awkward situation. At the end of the

poem, the second husband eventually accepts his situation as he tells a sidewalk vendor, "The child's name is as its mother said. / Its name is who the child is. / Its name is Gift-of-God" (95).

While Terpstra continually emphasizes the spiritual nature of his work by creating a blend between the Biblical world and the contemporary world throughout his poems, this idea is most prominent in both the first and the last story in the collection. ■



Terpstra, John. *Disarmament*. Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2003