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John Terpstra and the Place of the Sacred: The Body of his Work

by Deborah C. Bowen

"Come, let us anthropomorphize the landscape. The story here is about bodies—human, liquid, and that one called earth—about where and how they meet, and what happens then."

(*Falling Into Place* 26)

The material location of the sacred

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" ("Regional" 59). Thus O'Connor, a Roman Catholic, positions the creative writer on the borders of what has been called religious geography, whose concern is "the geography and cosmology that are in the mind of the religious man, the way in which, informed by his faith, he sees his world and his place in it" (Park 19). In the literary and academic circles of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, in Canada as elsewhere, traditional religious faith has often been dismissed as untenable and unrespectable, well-replaced by the skepticisms of post-structuralism and the empiricisms of neo-Marxism and the New Historicism. Nevertheless, as David Kent pointed out in the introduction to his anthology of *Christian Poetry in Canada* (1989), account needs to be taken of the fact that Christianity "continues to be a hidden, often unacknowledged reality in Canadian culture" (*Christian Poetry* 15). One of the best respected poets in Canada in the last half-century was of course the Christian poet Margaret Avison (1918-2007) who, because of her consummate craftsmanship, was highly respected by readers, whether or not they shared the "location" she found in her faith.[1] While recognizing a very different poetic sensibility, I want to suggest that to find a contemporary Canadian poet whose work is informed by a similarly intense religious geography and belief in the material location of the sacred, we can best turn to someone who is increasingly well-known for the rhetorical winsomeness of both his poetry and his creative non-fiction: John Terpstra.

The problem that O'Connor described, the writer's problem of finding the location "where time and place and eternity somehow meet," is one to which Terpstra continually returns. He is particularly concerned to explore the relationship of the material and the spiritual in contemporary urban space, and in so doing he first considers the natural world in the city: "Can a person have an experience of Nature with a capital N in an urban environment?"[2] A reading of his work, particularly *Naked Trees* (1990), *The Church Not Made with Hands* (1997), and *Falling into Place* (2002), will show that his answer is, clearly, Yes—the experience of urban Nature can be as profound and lifegiving as any of those journeys to distant lakes and forests more traditionally associated in the Canadian imagination with access to the transcendent. Thus Terpstra might respond to O'Connor's question by declaring, even in the middle of the city, "*Here* is where time and place and eternity meet." But this response will implicate not only Nature, and not only physical place itself, but also the human body within them, and the human being who perceives them. In his most recent volumes, *Disarmament* (2003), *The Boys* (2005) and *Skin Boat* (2009), Terpstra meditates deeply and poignantly on the ways in which time and eternity have now and always met and passed through the frail human body.

Terpstra has won numerous awards for his poetry over the years, including first prize in the annual Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio Literary Competition in 1992, and two book awards in Arts Council competitions in 1995 and 1997. In September of 2000 he was "Artist of the Month" on the webpage of *Image* Magazine, that prestigious and beautifully-produced journal of the arts and religion out of Seattle, Washington. The poetry collection *Disarmament* was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 2004, and in 2006 Terpstra was a finalist for the prestigious Charles Taylor Prize for Creative Non-Fiction with *The Boys; or, Waiting for the Electrician's Daughter*. His name itself, like those of so many Canadians, signals what one might call his displacement: he is a first-generation Canadian whose family came from Friesland in the Netherlands after the 2nd World War, and he spent his early childhood years in Alberta. Thus he writes out of a very wide personal sense of place—a sense that crosses the North Atlantic and encompasses the bodies of land each side of it, even as it centres on the particularities of south-western Ontario. For all but one of the books I have mentioned are set mainly in and around Terpstra's home town of Hamilton, which happens presently to be mine too.

Terpstra also writes, unavoidably, from the always-given location of his faith in God. In an essay entitled "Falling, Not Far From the Tree," he says, "Perhaps it [belief] is in my bones. My Frisian forebears killed and purportedly then dined on the first missionary who challenged their ways, St Boniface, after which the message he was delivering seems to have entered into their collective bloodstream" ("Falling" 49). His early volume *Forty Days and Forty Nights* (1987) treats specifically of the uprooting and resettlement of Dutch immigrants to Canada, when "we had no names, just places we were sent / like mail from overseas" (*Forty Days* 9), but were still able eventually, after all the hardship of moving rocks and felling trees and living in shacks, to "show his [God's] glory, not displaced / in people who'd been moved from there to here" (12).

Western Christianity is often considered to have an otherworldly view of the sacred, associated with a realm beyond the earth. From this perspective, as William Closson James argues in *Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature, and Canadian Culture* (1998), "regarding nature as numinous is idolatry" (67), and the natural world cannot be seen as a location of the sacred because it is provisional, "a temporary arrangement before the establishment of a new order and the final revelation of God's purposes" (62). Closson James does recognize that some recent Canadian fiction has suggested the reality of a sacred dimension beyond the dailiness of life, when the sacred is relocated into a this-worldly transcendence as experienced in moments of crisis that disrupt the ordinary. But for Terpstra, writing out of an upbringing in the Christian Reformed tradition that grows from Calvinist roots, the sacred is profoundly implicated in this world to begin with, so that there is no need of heightened or extreme moments for the divine to be apparent. Perhaps in part because Terpstra is also a cabinetmaker, used to having his hands in close contact with the different grains and hefts and textures of wood, he has a very acute consciousness of the physical body of a place. In the European Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reflections on God's handiwork in creating the earth and its inhabitants led to an understanding of geography itself as a theologically oriented discipline, "the science of the visible side of the Divine revelation" (Park 9). For someone raised in the direct line of the Reformation, not only is the natural world sacramental, in the sense of manifesting the glory and presence of God, but so too are people as a special part of that world and, potentially, the human-made cultures that have grown up upon and within it.

The legacy of immigration

There is another common misconception that needs to be addressed here, less about Christianity in general than about Calvinism in particular. For Neo-Calvinism, as it developed in the Netherlands in the late 19th century, contradicts the popular idea that Calvinism is inherently anti-artistic. The Cambridge theologian Jeremy Begbie, in his 1991 book *Voicing Creation's Praise*, points out that one of Calvinism's deepest drives is "a consuming desire to activate the Church [i.e. the body of believers] into a thorough engagement with every field of culture" (*Voicing* 82). In one of his famous Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898, the Dutch father of Neo-Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper, declared, "Understand that art is no fringe that is attached to the garment, and no amusement that is added to life, but a most serious power in our present existence" (qtd in Begbie 95). The "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1.28 and Genesis 2.15 calls on humankind to cultivate the earth; "culture," then, consists in drawing out what is implicit in creation, and actualizing its latent potential. Though there has been much criticism in the last half-century of the imperialistic excesses apparently authorized by this mandate, there has developed a strong counter-voice from within the Christian church that emphasizes instead the biblical call to wise stewardship of creation (Kong 366). Indeed, one of the first writers to critique the hubristic behaviours of Christian anthropocentrism under modernity, Lynn White, called at the same time for a revolutionary "alternative Christian" care of creation, arguing that "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not" (White 114-15). For the Neo-Calvinist, this stewardly call extends beyond the natural world to what is broadly understood under the rubric of "culture." Begbie puts it like this: for the Neo-Calvinist, he says, "the history of human culture is the story of the myriad of ways in which men and women have sought *to open up creation* through interacting with the natural world and with each other" (Begbie 114, my italics).

Here, then, is the aspect of Reformed theology that justifies a wholehearted cultural involvement, and that manifests itself as an emphasis on the incontrovertible value of nature, the human body, and human culture. Since God indwells, sustains, and renews the creation at every point, God is present not only in the natural world, but also in the human-made world of downtown street and shopping mall, created by those who, though they have fallen and though they are sinful, nevertheless retain the mark of God's image. Material is holy, in the sense that both places and bodies are sustained by and witness to God; we are rooted in them, acculturized into them, given our conditions of being by them, and they must play a significant part in defining our relationship not only to the sociopolitical but also to the divine.

And, as it turns out, this linkage of physical and spiritual geography has other roots too for Terpstra, older than those in Neo-Calvinism: he has been profoundly affected by the ancient British notion of the earth as a sleeping giant or king, a notion which was overlaid with Christian symbolism as the sleeper came to be identified both with Christ and with the church as the body of Christ before the final resurrection. It was in his 1982 article on "The Sleeping Lord," a long poem by the twentieth-century Welsh poet David Jones, that Terpstra spelled out the connection in Jones that is also in Terpstra, between the land, the people, and the culture. He writes of Jones's poem that "[t]he lord who sleeps is the embodiment of a whole people and their culture, and this embodiment includes their physical landscape" ("Bedad" 102). Thus, though George Grant's *Technology and Empire* may suggest that "the historical legacy of European immigration to North America dooms non-native Canadians to continuing alienation from the natural environment, to a lack of spiritual connection with the landscape" (Closson James 76), Terpstra is an exception to this posited rule. What his own "legacy of immigration" has made possible for him is not only a recognition of the sacramental in the physical geography of the natural environment, but also a recognition of the inescapably religious nature of the social and human-made landscape that depends upon it. The book for which Terpstra won the CBC literary competition in 1992, *Captain Kintail*, was already about just these relationships: a group of people, adults and kids, spend a wet spring weekend out of town, by the lake, and create in a dilapidated camp a community as harmonious with the natural world as they are able to do—at one and the same time as otherworldly as that of the first men on the moon, and as earthy as those assumed of First Nations peoples. There is something about this community that is also a communion with the earth, something that is "holy": the word recurs.

Urban geography

But in writing about contemporary culture, Terpstra's is as often as not an urban geography. I first met his work almost two decades ago, when I was asked to review *Naked Trees*, a collection of prose poetry, for the *Journal of Canadian Poetry*. I found the book a refreshing surprise in a number of ways. For a start, it is a book about *city* trees, composed in reaction to the discovery that, for the City Works Department, "This is the year they're taking down the trees" (*Naked Trees* 9). Hamilton, though its reputation is as a steel city, is also a city of tall and abundant trees, a feature often remarked upon by visitors both from the windswept prairie provinces and from the less temperate regions of eastern Ontario and Quebec. Terpstra describes these Hamilton trees as dignified companions and helpmates along sidewalks and surrounded by highways, more able to contain contradiction than people are, living in tension with them, and open, like people, to abuse. One of the doomed trees is a silver maple which is first introduced like a person, living "across the street and five doors down, eighty-four years old" (9). The trees' names are as present and familiar as those of the people on the street: the old woman whose father planted the silver maple "[k]now[s] the ones who grew from seed. Hayes, Butternut. The transplanted ones. Locust. Ash. Dorman. The ones you have to watch. Ryan. Box Elder" (18). The trees have more grandeur, perhaps more life, than the people, so that their felled trunks have the forceful appearance of "Someone else's altar. Who doesn't live here anymore" (21). Later sections identify trees with Christ, insofar as they have laid down their limbs to help humankind, "cradle to coffin" ("Transpiration," 62), even to the point of humiliation where they bear the mark of the cross as utility poles spanning the country ("Utility Poles," 73). The epigraph to the book declares that "Naked trees extend their complicated praise / branches sway, in / a sort of unison / not agreed upon" (6); the final entry, "Yes," concludes that "A tree is an act of affirmation" (77). Thus the book is a homage to trees in their dignity and variousness, a declaration of their quasi-priesthood in taking an "intercessory role" that provides "a continuity from heaven to earth to the waters under the earth" ("Indifference," 40).

The Church Not Made With Hands, published seven years later, again takes up the theme of the bodies of trees in a sequence of poems called "This Orchard Sound," first written for performance with jazz accompaniment in church on Good Friday, and roughly based on the traditional liturgical Stations of the Cross. The sequence concerns Terpstra the carpenter seeking out a tree from which to make a cross for the church, and his experiences of being the tree's betrayer and murderer, in an orchard in Burlington "located near a six-lane highway / in an area zoned for…light industry" (19). The name of Burlington, on the main highway along the edge of Lake Ontario between Toronto and the States, could be said to function as a kind of Ontarian code for the suburban sprawl that Terpstra most dislikes: he writes elsewhere in this book that "I badmouth Burlington so strongly / my daughter now complains of headaches / when we're driving through" (14). What is wrong with urban sprawl, he has said in conversation, is what it does to the land: there is no sense of symbiosis, or of living in harmony with the earth; rather, urban sprawl represents out-and-out conquest, the worst aspects of an imperialist mentality.[3] But in "This Orchard Sound," he feels unwillingly complicit. He drags a tree branch home from the mutilated orchard, and when he has prepped the branch, "pried / under skin," he leaves it:

> Cleaned, and naked, propped outside
> for time to let the living water
> locked within
>   surface
> abandon the body, dry
> like bone
>
> (31)

The woundedness of both tree and earth are constant cries in this series of poems; but what Terpstra has to say is that in his being implicated as the killer, his guilt is paradigmatic of the human condition, and that the wounds which produce the church's cross are paradigmatically "the wounds of love" (36).

This kind of material and geographical specificity which both embodies and symbolizes a spiritual truth is typical of the way Terpstra thinks and writes, about more than trees. "Flames of Affection" opens:

> I walked to the end of Dundurn Street,
> to the quiet hind of a busy road,
> where the bus loops.   I walked
> to the foot of the escarpment and looked
> up, way, way, up, at all those stairs.
>
> (43)

The conversational voice here speaks particularly to me, because I happen to live where the bus loops, just off Dundurn, at the foot of those stairs. But the voice also speaks easily to contemporary urban dwellers in other cities, other places. And what it says is, in the same way, specific as to place and time, but also huge in its spatial and temporal displacements, or, better, in its transcendence. The point of Terpstra's climb up the stairs is that it is a climb up the three hundred and fifty million years of rock deposit and formation of the Niagara escarpment, as it curves its way through Hamilton and around the Dundas Valley after leaving Niagara Falls. And when the evening lights come on "like / the lively little tongues of lovers / in the flame of affection" all over the city below, the scene reminds the narrator of Pentecost, "kind of" (44). And then this whole scene becomes an image for a more immediately personal scenario: the light years of distance between people who hold tenaciously to mutually exclusive belief systems and cannot communicate, for whom Terpstra wishes new tongues of fire to erase their difference:

> If only the window would blow open once,
> and the conversation catch, like fire, so that
> we're both, we're all consumed, and the room
> isn't big enough anymore, and we take
> to the street, and talk and talk,
> and the languages we've learned to cultivate
> exhaust themselves, so we have to dig deeper
> and break out other mother tongues,
> and get a bit drunk, spilling words
> we never said before, didn't know
> we knew….
>
> (45)

and this language is so contagious that others join in, and the face of the earth is changed. "But here, / today," the poet takes home a stone chip from the top of the cliff, to remind himself and those near to him with whom he can't communicate "how hard it is. / How long it's taken to get here" (45).

Time, place, and attachment

As "here" and "today," place and time, by a process of synecdoche become universals as well as specifics in this poem, so the slippage between time and eternity, place and all space, is a constant in Terpstra's poems. A second poem for Pentecost in this volume, "Explicable as the Centre Mall," considers the common sight in this part of the world of a group of retired elderly men from Eastern Europe gathering cheerfully in a shopping mall to walk, to chat, to play chess, as "a kind of evangel" (46) among the sour "boys and girls who tend the shops /… in their dolled cages" (48), but concludes that "the confusion of tongues and cultures" in the mall is too complicated for him to interpret, "bested my glossolalia, simple as wine" (49). There is another poem in this section, "Uncarved Totems," that talks about something as daily as telegraph poles being analogous to the dead who keep our lives together, who "line the way, stand by / to haul our messages …//…to bear / our sometime recognition, grief and memory" (53), because these "barkless columns of pine" are also the dead "who go, / who also stay" (52, 53). This poem was written for All Saints' Day; like "This Orchard Sound" it harks back to the concerns of *Naked Trees*. Since reading it, I see quite differently those telegraph poles that I pass almost every day along Aberdeen Avenue by Longwood Road, the very ones about which Terpstra is writing.

And so Terpstra's version of Kurelek's paintings in *A Northern Nativity* is "The Little Towns of Bethlehem," a poem in which he sees the birth of every child all over Canada as the birth of the Christchild; it is both specific to particular locations right across Canada—"An angel of the lord appears in the night sky / over Rankin Inlet, over / Iqualuit" [sic] (9)—and universal—"and nativity is given / every name" (10). In a similar way, Terpstra's cycle of poems for Lent is set in that one specific overgrown and abandoned orchard a few kilometers from Hamilton, along Harvester Road outside Burlington, but it is an orchard that represents every fall from paradise and every sin of humankind that has been paid for by Christ on the felled tree of the cross. The epigraph to *The Church Not Made With Hands*, taken from the same song as the book's title, is "she is everywhere and no place,"[4] which initially I took only in its universal aspect; as I read Terpstra's poems more carefully, I realized he meant me to take the "everywhere" quite literally, and therefore quite specifically.

Not only may any child's birth parallel that of the Christ-child, but any living creature's activity may suggest the activity of God. Terpstra's vision of God is sometimes radically other than what might be considered usual in the Christian tradition; his God can be more subversive, more playful, more wily—a kind of parallel to the trickster figure of North American Indian mythology. For instance, in "To God, as a Small Pest," a poem in the 1998 *Devil's Punch Bowl* collection, Terpstra imagines God as one of those boldly ubiquitous black Ontario squirrels, "scrambling, light-as-air, over the roof":

> I believe, now,
> you have no pride; an imagination
> that ranges wildly, seizing any
> shape that fits, adopting
> what'll do,
> with a relentless playfulness,
> and your insidious intent;
> and I resist
> this recognition, as strongly as the gnawing at my fascia, soffit,
> that I imagine comes next, and tense and listen for.
> (18)

Here Terpstra is interested in the myriad and unexpected ways in which God is bodily present in his creation, in God's signing of his name in every place we look, even with signatures that we resist. It is for reasons such as these, as Terpstra pointed out in an email to me, that he has not actually used God's name: "Thus far, the God in question has not required a three-lettered presence. The three-lettered-presence is implicit in all the other letters, words, and sentences of the poems, anyway."[5]

This presence is implicit in the creative non-fiction too. *Falling into Place* (2002) is a book of sustained non-fictional prose about the sandbar under the highway on the west side of Hamilton Harbour at the westernmost tip of Lake Ontario. Terpstra considers its history, its metamorphoses, its interactions with the people of the area, and the fact of his attachment to it: *"I am attached to a piece of geography*, in an urban setting," he writes (*Falling* 66, italics in original)—and then counters with the surprise that his own pronouncement arouses in him. He shows and tells the ways in which this "piece of geography" is attached to the people around it: "Like many of us who live around, beside, and atop this feature of the landscape, the stuff it's made of comes from elsewhere. Pushed and dragged all the way, the sand and gravel and pebble and cobble were deposited here by ice age glaciers as unceremoniously as an immigrant ship discharging its cargo of humanity" (16). Since everyone in Canada, with the exception of the First Nations people, is a relatively recent immigrant, this relationship between the land and the people is not merely sentimental, or fanciful, or metaphorical. "Come, let us anthropomorphize the landscape. The story here is about bodies—human, liquid, and that one called earth—about where and how they meet, and what happens then" (26). There is an interdisciplinarity inherent in Terpstra's vision—sociology, psychology, history, biology, geography are connected words: "The words begin to form in my mind: I am attached to how the lines are drawn here. *Geo graphis*. I am attached to what is written. Inlet, shoreline, sandbar, ravine" (66, italics in original).

His interest in the relationship between these interdisciplinary bodies has been present from his earliest work. In *Forty Days and Forty Nights* (1987), there is a poem called "A Ceremony, To Dedicate a Tree and the Backyard it One Day Hopes to Dominate" that reads like a prospectus of the interests Terpstra will explore in his future work. The trees are there, of course, but also the local and human history of urban settlement, the relationship of trees to buildings and to people, and the only-half-fanciful parallels between the three: "this is to the oddball angles and curves, indoors and out / and to living geometry" (*Forty Days* 45). So in *Falling into Place* Terpstra spends time, both in the library and on the site, exploring the rich history and geography and biology of the sandbar across the area called

Burlington Heights, and comes to the conclusion that “there may actually be more to receive, and to give, here where the sandbar’s arm lies broken and the bodies are buried, where the inlet’s mouth is closed and landfill meets the saddened water, than can be dreamt of on starry nights by northern lakes” (*Falling* 66). The revitalization of the dead metaphors of anthropomorphic terminology has by now become a Terpstra trademark. This is not mere romanticism for Terpstra—it is a statement about the interrelatedness of material things, the relationship of people and trees and rocks and water and highways and cars and houses and shopping malls and stairs up the escarpment. The “bodies [that] are buried” are in this case literal human bodies, in a cemetery that lies along the bar, and past which every visitor to Hamilton must drive as he or she enters the city; but they are also, by a kind of transference, the bodies of the sandbar and the water.

When Terpstra describes how he is presently “[s]itting in a car on a sandbar in a slow motion through time” (70), there is an almost dizzying sense in which we as readers experience that peculiar crossroads of which Flannery O’Connor spoke, “where time and place and eternity somehow meet”: we too are “attached to a piece of geography, in an urban setting.” Fine writing has this syncretic ability; it can enable the reader to experience attachment without fully understanding it. Years ago now, in an interview with *Calvinist Contact*, Terpstra said, “I would like to be given the grace to enjoy God enough so that the way I write would give that same enjoyment to others” (qtd in De Peuter 41). As we pay attention to “how the lines are drawn here” in Terpstra’s pages, experientially we enjoy something profound not only about the interrelationship of nature and culture, not only about our own geosocial context, wherever that may be, but also about our humanness, and about a charge to the world that can best be described as sacramental.

“The body is played as a stringed instrument”

This is a line from “Tension,” one of the poems in Terpstra’s acclaimed 2003 collection *Disarmament*, the point being that playing a stringed instrument requires tension in the strings.

In his three most recent books, Terpstra’s emphasis on the human body and its frailties is central. Many of the poems here are about the struggles of human beings to belong to a group of other humans, and the cost that underlies the pleasures—even, or perhaps particularly, in the community of the church. But in the end, “We’re only humus, after all. / And all the good we thought we were, / and all we did or did not do, / these seasons past, / is gone to soil, is / Holy. Holy. Holy” (*Disarmament,* “Humus,” 48).

Here Terpstra's underlying *credo* is spelled out. Whether he is describing his teenage daughter's pregnancy out-of-wedlock in "Restoration" (12) or his parents' final days in "Saying Goodnight" (14-15), there is never any doubt that the human body, like the earth it comes from, is holy. And "In the church where we go to now," a pointedly awkward oral phrase that recurs in a number of poems, "every day and meal / is a communion, one with the other," even in the life of a family arguing on vacation ("Beach," 39). The title poem, "Disarmament," pushes us to recognize the price of taking this communion, this holiness, seriously. For despite what people think, "The war is never elsewhere" (58): we need to see that "our enemy" whom we are called to love may be the noisy guy thoughtlessly partying late with his friends on the seventh floor of our apartment building. The only way to resist the "cycle of violence" to which we are naturally drawn is through the love that comes from that unnamed divine presence, "the unseen one who sits beside us on our balcony":

> Tonight we lie awake,
> and invite the spirit come brood over our twenty-six storeys,
> the storied conflicts of a tired world.
> To tuck us under wing, all.
>
> Come, love,
> disarm us.
>
> (59)

The final section of the book, "Two Couples, Four Voices," reenacts the stories of Joseph and Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, as they cope with the disturbing and wonderful intervention of the divine into their physical existences. How is Mary to read the "indecipherable hieroglyphic / on the opening pages of her life" when she discovers she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit (89)? How is Joseph to read the fearful grace of Mary's announcement in his life (88)? How is Elizabeth to take the "sweet outlandishness" of her pregnancy in old age (92)? How is Zechariah, that "humbled, grateful old ethno-religious coot," to respond to being "an old man and a young father" (94, 93)? Again, Terpstra is pushing us to become aware of the awkward bodily nature of holiness. And his final word, through Zechariah, is "It is a gift" (95).[6]

No light attesting

Terpstra's 2005 piece of creative nonfiction, *The Boys: or, Waiting for the Electrician's Daughter,* is an homage to awkward physical presences of a more immediately personal kind. The book is about his wife Mary's three younger brothers, and their deaths from muscular dystrophy in the same year as young adults. This is the book that was shortlisted for the Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction in 2006; it touched a nerve with many readers, because of both its subject matter and the way Terpstra writes about that subject matter. It is written not in chapters but in two hundred and thirteen short numbered segments: some are one sentence long, some are several pages, some are poems, and some of those written by Terpstra's wife Mary during her girlhood with her ailing brothers. And the most extraordinary thing about the extraordinary tale that these segments tell is that, though it is poignant, it is not depressing. Yes, Terpstra's initial encounter in his new girlfriend's home with "the boys" in their wheelchairs quickly makes him realize that "[t]hese were, after all, nursing home conditions" where "[t]here was too much time in the house. More time than anyone needed" (sn 41); yes, as the boys get weaker and the list of daily caregivers gets ever longer, there is an "intensifying" in the atmosphere and a "deepening stillness of their three bodies" (sns 78,77). But this is a house full of good humour, of makeshift hockey and boardgames and jokes and the energy of lively personalities, so much so that it is those who see the worsening situation with sympathetic horror from the outside of whom Terpstra writes, "You can't help but feel a bit sorry for them" (sn 99); after all, of the boys who are by now his brothers, he can say no more and no less than "they are grand" (sn 100).

And yet it is clear that "this is the bad Word" made flesh; the disease will "ravage the body; the body personal, the body familial" (sn 108). Terpstra shows each member of the family under increasing stress—not only the boys themselves, but also their dad, their mom, their sister, their brother-in-law. Neil, the oldest and apparently most frail brother, lives the longest: "The presence of his disease, stretched out on the bed, hips disjointed, legs akimbo, head and torso tilted upward. A horizontal ballet…. He lay there in the flesh, his flesh. His broken glory. // The body as landscape" (sn 161). On realizing that Neil wants to be free of this body, even though Terpstra has been taught that the body and the spirit are not to be understood separately, he offers us a one-sentence section: "The body makes theologians of us all" (sn 165). And as the boys die one after another over the first six months of 1978, contrary to received opinion it is not "better this way": "People mistook the relief the caretakers might feel in being freer, with happiness" (sn 154). The beginnings of a family biography pencilled by the boys' mother is the epigraph to the book: "Their hearts were light, and we tried to live as normal a life as possible" (sn 192).

If Terpstra's gift is to attest to the presence of God in the simple light of everyday physical being, this is no light attesting. Even as he sits in church on the opening page of *Skin Boat: Acts of Faith and Other Navigations* (2009), Terpstra's attention moves from the fine performance of a jazz trio to a child playing with a skeleton on a keychain. He concludes, "I have thought this about the place: anything can happen" (8). Thus Terpstra's first paradox in this searingly honest and lyrical meditation on the clumsiness of "growing up Protestant" (36). The Christian writer's search for a "location" will likely include the desire to situate the often uneasy realities of the present in the context of a traditional religious history. But here we see that, whether in stories of St Cuthbert, the seventh-century namesake of Terpstra's present church and a saint around whom extraordinary miracles accreted, or in stories of St Brendan the navigator, a sixth-century Irish monk who went on a seven-year journey in a curragh with fourteen other monks to find the Land of Promise (and perhaps found North America), just as in stories of present-day people in and around the church, anything can and indeed does happen.

In this book Terpstra has taken on the direct challenge of musing about how a Western 21st-century poet can write honestly and compassionately and yet lyrically about his love-hate relationship with the Christian church. One of his answers is in the quasi-liturgical repetitions and balances of his prose; another is in the way he relates time present to time past, realism to myth, the everydayness of now to the mysteriousness of then. In his own church, the previous minister (male) was dismissed for sexual improprieties; this almost destroyed the church community, and the minister is still estranged, but they still meet to pray for him. The present minister (female) is diagnosed with a brain tumour; they meet to pray for her, and she is healed. A visiting preacher with a prison ministry takes in a pedophile and creates for him an accountability group who, like Brendan, will be "sailing into the unknown, at the mercy of wind, wave and current" (68). These themes of navigation and miracles ancient and modern are constants in the church's choppy waters. When the previous minister was first accused, "So outrageous did these reports seem that it would have been easier to believe that Brendan and company indeed spent Easter morning on the back of a whale, or that Cuthbert's body remained uncorrupt for centuries after his death" (90). As, in the medieval narratives of these saints' lives, was indeed said to have happened.

Terpstra writes as both poet and cabinetmaker: "I have thought: the reason I persist is for what is being made" (28). As in *The Boys*, he employs not chapters but thought-paragraphs, tight sections sometimes no more than a couple of lines in length. There is a kind of litany of phrases that repeat—"any and every thing happens," "This too is bullshit," "Why do I persist?" The relationship of the glorious to the inglorious is pointedly often in the same person. "I have thought: the church as an institution is built upon the rock of the disciple who swore on a stack of bibles that he would never, under any circumstances, deny the one who won him over, and who several hours later did that very thing three times running" (41). As Terpstra asks himself why he keeps being part of this wayward and suffering and paradoxical institution, his response reads like a direct interaction with that comment of Flannery O'Connor's about the writer's "peculiar crossroads": "This is the only place I know where time and eternity meet on a regular basis" (106). *Skin Boat* is assuredly another place where readers can experience such a meeting. But in fact this location is one that Terpstra is constantly finding: it is the body of his work in all the books that he writes.[7]

Notes

In writing about John Terpstra for *Canadian Poetry*'s Special Issue in honour of Barbara Pell, I am aware of focusing on a poet though Pell was best known for her work on prose. But three things spur me on. First, the name and nature of this journal! Second, Barbara had a deep and abiding concern for the welfare of Canadian literature, and John Terpstra's work is a fine example of such literature, written by someone who shares Barbara's Christian faith. Third, three of Terpstra's most recent volumes are in fact written in the increasingly popular genre of "creative non-fiction," and they are also deeply imbued with a sense of place, thus coming closer to the kinds of texts Barbara was concerned with when she wrote about Hugh Hood, or Morley Callaghan, or Hugh MacLennan, or many other Canadian literati.

1 See, for instance, David A. Kent, ed., *'Lighting Up the Terrain': The Poetry of Margaret Avison* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987); Ernest Redekop, *Margaret Avison* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970); "Margaret Avison: An Annotated Bibliography," in *The Annotated Bibliography of Canada's Major Authors* (vol. 5), eds. Robert Lecker and Jack David (Toronto: ECW Press, 1984). Of Avison's peers there is none who has written with her intensity of Christian faith, though perhaps the meditations on Judaism in A.M Klein (1909–1972) and Eli Mandel (1922-1992) and the more recent spiritually-oriented poetry of Leonard Cohen (b. 1934) carry a comparable weight of authenticity to the work of Avison. Of the better-known Canadian writers of the last half-century in the Christian tradition, Jay Macpherson (b. 1931) has produced some significant work, though inspired more by Judaeo-Christian mythology than overtly by faith; Joy Kogawa (b. 1935), though probably most widely-known as a novelist, has written some finely crafted and lyrically magnetic poetry explicitly out of her Christian faith perspective. Among more recent poets, Patrick Friesen (b. 1946) and Di Brandt (b. 1952) have written, not always positively, out of their Mennonite backgrounds, and Bernadette Rule (b.1950) much more positively out of her Roman Catholic one; Maggie Helwig

(b.1961) has written some fine faith-inspired poetry out of a mystical sensibility.

2 In interview with the author, April 2001; see also *Image* magazine's online portrait, September 2000.

3 In interview with the author, April 2001 and August 2001.

4 "Church Not Made With Hands" is the title of a song by Scottish singer Mike Scott, and appears on The Waterboys' 1984 album *A Pagan Place*.

5 In email correspondence with the author, May 17, 2001.

6 Throughout *Two or Three Guitars* (2006), a fine collection crafted from Terpstra's previous seven volumes of poetry, both the awkward body and the awe-inspiring gift are constantly present.

7 Some parts of this paper appeared in an earlier form in my article "John Terpstra and the Sacramental in Urban Geography," *in Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture* 16.2 (June 2002): 188-200. The section on *Naked Trees* is adapted from my review of that volume in *Journal of Canadian Poetry: The Poetry Review* 7, for the year 1990 (1992), pages 33-35. The section on *Skin Boat* is adapted from my review of that volume for *Canadian Literature*, canlit.ca web, 10 Dec. 2010.

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