

HEART

Alexander MacLeod. *Light Lifting*. Biblioasis: Windsor, Ontario, 2010.

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The publication of this collection of seven stories by Alexander MacLeod, which has been short-listed for the Giller Prize, is a significant event. *Light Lifting's* characters live mostly in gritty industrial Windsor, Ontario, their lives occasionally threatened by violence. The writing is intensely physical, fresh, relaxed, open, colloquial—not obviously controlled or self-consciously crafted—art hiding art, but including those moments of transcendent beauty-and-clarity that characterize the best literature. Style varies with each story. Most are impressive. Two, at least, are masterworks.

One of these, “Miracle Mile,” concerns a distance runner named Burns and is narrated by a friend of his. For Burns, importance has become mania—as it can for “scholars of Renaissance poetry, . . . car buffs, sexual perverts, collectors of all kinds.” Winning means everything to him. As he jogs to cool down after a race, a little girl on a bike passes, taunting, “I’m faster than you are,” and he takes off after her. The story ends with him closing “the gap . . . his hand . . . already there, reaching out for the strands of her hair.” And you recall an earlier, riveting account of him running before a railroad train through a narrow mile-and-a half long tunnel under the Detroit River, when “the gap kept closing” and “for one second” the narrator imagines “how even at top speed there would still have to be this one moment, just before full impact, when” Burns “would feel only the beginning of it, just that slight little nudge of cold metal pressing up against his skin.” Burns has become that railroad train to the girl. All this takes place the day after “Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield’s ear” and is narrated, significantly, in an aggressively argumentative style.

The best story in the collection is “Adult Beginner I.” Its subject is water, about which few have written better: the impressively dangerous North Atlantic in which an aquaphobic child nearly drowns; the distressing clarity of a swimming pool (“more parking lot than ocean”) in which, at the age of twenty, she sinks, then learns to swim; and the great dark Detroit River, through which “one quarter of the fresh water in the world flows.” She falls into this river at night, her former swimming teacher (they are in love) dives in after her, but fails to surface, so she swims out to rescue him, chasing a “paleness in the water,” and the reader remembers how, when she was learning to swim toward her teacher, he used to back away just beyond

her reach. The story ends indeterminately with the “throbbing” approach of a great-lake freighter, “three football fields long” with a “propeller ... the size of a two-story house,” and a wake boiling with “froth even the ocean cannot match.”

In other stories one discovers a twelve-year old drugstore delivery boy has frightening or repulsive experiences with disconcerting sexual connotations; a family befriends a neighbour boy whose mild reaction to being severely beaten by one of the boys in the family indicates his desperation to belong; a group of driveway brick-layers fail to take enough care of the seventeen-year-old boy hired on the summer and, as a consequence, his life prospects are implicitly diminished.

In one story parents care for young children in a montage of moments of delight or (much more often) distress or fatigue including glimpses of an epic struggle against a lice infestation. The father narrates with vivid detail. After crushing a louse between thumb and middle finger, he watches “blood seep into my fingerprint.” At one point, beleaguered, with three kids in the car, he asks at a drive-through, “What does a happy meal come with?” and any reader who has raised children will recognize the familiar desperation under the question. As the family drives through Toronto to visit grandparents, in a condo overlooking the highway a tableau is briefly glimpsed: “A single guy watching a hockey game on a big screen TV. Bag of chips in his lap. Bottle of Beer. Feet up on the coffee table. He sits in the sky as we pass.” This glimpsed figure is an ambiguously appealing yet poignant image of what might have been for the father at least. The final image in this montage is of the parents lying together in a hospital lounge chair beside their sleeping baby, a purple light flashing on the ceiling “Like a dischoteque maybe, maybe or the reflection of ancient fire in a cave.” Parenthood has always been like this, physically and emotionally exhausting and, here, ending where it begins, in a man and woman embracing.

These stories are products of generosity, imaginative energy, and (my guess) a long time devoted to the writing. Alexander MacLeod is the son of the award-winning author Alistair MacLeod and a 1997 graduate of the graduate creative writing program of the University of Notre Dame. Averaging about thirty pages long, many of the stories reach a natural conclusion, where most writers would have ended them, but then go on for twice that length without loss of power. Abundant detail makes them imaginatively rich, and what I can only call heart gives them emotional depth. You care about these vividly achieved characters because they are dedicated, brave, honest, suffering, or emotionally attached to other people. Irony as a defence against feeling is absent; but so is sentimentality, which is precluded

largely by attention to detail.

This is most evident in the final story, about an autoworker forced to take early retirement, who, after an accident in which he was driving and his wife and son were killed, refuses to drive or even enter a car. As the anniversary of the accident approaches, he mentally concentrates on the making and mechanics of cars with an abundance of detail that is, to me, uninteresting in itself. On the anniversary, despite imperfectly healed injuries, he walks thirty miles to the site of the crash. That night his daughter locates him returning and urges him to get in her car so she can drive him home. He refuses, and she says, "This won't change what you did." Suddenly the reader realizes the depths of grief and guilt that his obsessing over cars has covered. The ending is charged with dread, but only implicitly: the title of the story is "The Number Three," and misfortunes come colloquially in threes; there have been two calamities in his life (the other being the collapse of "the Big Three" North American auto companies); two of his loved ones have been killed, leaving only his daughter as the third; and his refusal to get into her car is a variation of the pique with his adolescent son that caused the fatal auto accident.

The writing is intelligent and sensitive. As narrative it is gripping and unflagging. Aesthetically, it is richly informed and invites formalist analytical interpretation, but heart is what ensures that it will continue to be read. This book is the debut of a major talent.