

## *Variations on the Everyday*

*What We Hold in Our Hands*, Kim Aubrey. Demeter Press, 2013.

In Kim Aubrey's story "Unfinished," a woman visits an exhibition of Yoko Ono's artwork for nine days, because, according to Ono, "nine is a spiritual number" (37). Ann walks through the museum seeing familiar pieces in new lights and new pieces that eventually remind her of family members — her son who "will be sad and angry a thousand times over without ever again resolving his feelings into red and yellow strokes" (44) and her daughter's fiancé, "the small-as-a-point financial advisor" (43). The exhibition becomes entangled with her life, and she acknowledges her participation with the art when on the ninth day, she slips part of an artwork (an apple) into her purse.

I have often thought of Yoko Ono's art and poems as variations on recurring themes, ones that could be returned to, revisited. They are endlessly repeated categories and sequences — such as appear in *Grapefruit*: "Make a hole. / Leave it in the wind" ("Painting for the Wind"); "Drill two holes into a canvas" ("Painting to See the Skies"); "Drill a hole in the sky" ("Painting for the Skies") — that exercise the breadth of invention. Kim Aubrey's collection *What We Hold in Our Hands* performs in a similar way. While revisiting subjects that not only appear throughout the collection but also saturate contemporary fiction, Aubrey's short stories infuse new life into ordinary, everyday situations. Her array of characters includes young and older women with dissatisfying marriages or dysfunctional parents, tough-love friends, and husbands with high-profile careers as doctors and lawyers. The scenes are usually domestic but bring out raw and frayed emotions.

Aubrey's most fascinating characters are her stubborn ones. As in "Unfinished," where Ann's dedication to visiting the museum nine days in a row leads her to overlook other daily tasks, many of the characters are easily enraptured by particular feelings or attitudes that become difficult to shake. Even the imminent death of Gilda's younger sister in "Compact" cannot loosen her anger towards her husband and others who have wronged her: "Forgiveness has never been one of her strengths" (99). In "A Large Dark," André strives to keep up a traditional family dynamic for his son, even after his wife has left him. As a replacement in (nearly) every respect, the young nanny Bridget must cook elaborate meals and withstand André's sexual advances.

Behind this stubbornness is a sense that the past continually haunts Aubrey's characters. They become stuck in past selves or situations, which continually restrict them and pull them back into their histories. "Peloton" aptly portrays this haunting. The reader learns that "Jack knows what Joanne wants. He keeps a list in his head, anxious to be the one to grant her wishes, but reluctant to satisfy all her longing in case she stops needing him" (115). Jack's insecurity appears out of place throughout the story in which he and

his wife appear to communicate with ease as they watch the Tour de France on TV. However, the narrative perspectives — which jump back and forth between Jack’s and Joanne’s points of view — offer snippets of the past, such as how Jack’s mother used to crawl into his bed when his father was away and, more recently, how Joanne “encouraged Jack to try one of the window whores” in Amsterdam and later proclaimed, “Now that you’ve sinned, I can too” (120). Instead of establishing a clear, singular cause to Jack’s anxiety, the story offers cumulative details of possible contributors to his behaviour, showing, indeed, how the accumulation of past events weighs heavily on him.

In these far reaches into the past Aubrey displays her storytelling dexterity. “Peloton” introduces the characters’ backgrounds in short paragraphs acting as parenthetical notes to Jack and Joanne’s conversation. After the narration reveals Joanne’s urge to move and the couple’s list of components for an ideal home, it slips into a short description of “Jack’s boyhood house” (116), setting up the ensuing revelatory particulars of Jack’s upbringing. The descriptions, neat and restrained, satisfy the desire for back-story while pushing the narrative forward. “Over Our Heads” displays the riskiest manoeuvring between distant times in the protagonist’s life, but Aubrey manages to pull it off. Narrated in the past tense from a first-person perspective, it is the future of this story that colours its past:

The November I celebrated my nineteenth birthday, I’d already been married a year and was living in a high-rise apartment near the university with my husband, Cam, and our baby daughter, Alice. That was twenty-five years ago, but I still remember how the sun slipped away from the living-room floor while we waited for Cam to return from his last class of the day, and how Alice would grab hold of my shirt . . . as she squealed and pointed at the china dolls banished to the top of the bookcase. (1)

In the opening paragraph, the author jams together complex versions of childhood and adulthood, where an older Janelle looks back, critically but sympathetically, at her younger self, who is both responsible for a child and childlike enough to own a collection of dolls. Instead of focusing on the tale of Janelle as a new mother, Aubrey widens the story’s perspective by jumping into the future and expounding on her family life after the immediacy of those years in the high-rise; she thus lends the narrative depth and richness.

Even with these leaping narrative gestures, Aubrey focuses the reader’s attention on objects and details that become imbued with significance, like small relics of magic: the china dolls, for instance, or the many feminine articles that permeate Gilda’s life — brightly coloured shoes, dainty sandwiches and scones, and the small mirror she looks into. “Eating Water” begins with the image of overalls crossed twice “— once over my back and once across

my chest. I was so small, so slight, a breeze could have swept me away” (21). Aubrey affixes items to characters in meaningful ways to make their stories unforgettable. And while circumstances and motifs recur in varying ways, each story in this collection stands out as intricately distinctive and worthy of a second visit.

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## *A Ragged Masculinity*

*What You Need*, Andrew Forbes. Invisible Books, 2015.

At the end of Jacques Demy’s musical drama *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), star-crossed lovers Genevieve Emery and Guy Foucher are reunited by chance at a gas station six years after they were separated by the war in Algeria. Genevieve, with child at the time of Guy’s departure, was pressed into marrying a wealthy diamond merchant from Paris, and was nowhere to be found upon his return. This shared history puts a huge strain on the few words they exchange. When another station attendant asks Genevieve what kind of gasoline she would like — super or regular? — the question reverberates against the impossible life decision she had to make. What kind of life would she like? Genevieve responds with the weariness of the failed romantic: “It doesn’t matter.”

There is an echo of this scene in “What You Need,” the title story in Andrew Forbes’ debut collection of short fiction. Richie Goodspear is visiting his older brother Jamie and his young family in rural Illinois. Years earlier, Richie had spent the night with Janet, his brother’s wife, and his long-buried love for her is the tightly-furled bud out of which the story unfolds. Jamie, as it happens, is a less than faithful husband, making the situation all the more morally ambiguous, suggesting a possible rapprochement between Richie and Janet. Just before turning in, she asks: “You got what you need, Richie?” In that moment, their own shared history hangs between them as taut as a clothesline. Richie’s answer, in the final moments of the story, is as resigned as Genevieve’s: “I guess I do.” Whether because of the unrelenting grind of domestic life or Richie’s unyielding fraternal loyalty, the moment is lost.

*What You Need*, Jade Colbert writes in *The Globe and Mail*, is essentially about manhood (fifteen of the seventeen stories gathered here are told from a male point of view). We might add that this is a book about a ragged masculinity after it has passed through the damaging prism of male fantasy and celebrity and endless sexual conquest (embodied in “What You Need” in the