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( : a journal of poetry and poetics )

edited by rob mclennan

*How else are we supposed to learn anything, unless we keep talking?*

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**FIRST ISSUE: FALL 2008**

*compiled : mdesnoyers*

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Draft 91: Proverbs

To pass a successful night in the forest, don't sleep in the clothes you cooked in.

We are living in the incalculable. Passport may not work.

A lump in the throat is never food.

Sometimes there's a loss of a sense of the verb.

How even is with odd.

A book: transparent pages, opaque letters, and errata.

Worship is a sinking ship.

Always calculate the cost of whiteness.

When flooded with shame, endure.

The one who broke the hinges should pay a double fine.

Zim-zum, strum, strum, zero sum, wikipedia.

How many times can books talk about books? How many stars are in the starry sky?

The torn are always laden with further burdens.

Birds of a schnozzle flock to the nozzle.

Shake it upside down; you will see capital falling from the Capitol.

Make the book an imitation mountain, but with real hard strata. Data.

Work is struggle in time with plenitude's scarcity.

Departing can be arriving.

This entanglement reveals ever more attractive labyrinths.

The beyond is in two places: here and there.

Whenever there is critique, there is a third grammar.

To read well, you must open the whole stained cloth.

The Spider poisons for only an hour; the Justice Department saturates.

Clean the lanterns once every year.

We need a last person singular.

To write is to choose.

Think of yourself before you obey.

What is redeemed is but a token of a token.

Modernity is the word “shame” in thirty languages.

Though always on time, you must run for the train in your dreams.

One can never stabilize the line of signs.

Better to have agon and discovery than the guidance of beneficent spirits.

Better still to have gloss.

When  $\pi$  is solved for, perhaps there will also be justice.

If legible, find the illegible in it.

The Global Leader in Portable Blank Media could be You.

When people burn schools, cry out.

Let the mite live. Let the girl become literate.

Economic bulimia equals social anorexia. But who is gathering up the vomit?

Even picking every 7<sup>th</sup> word is not random.

Take this question as your conceptual muddle.

Bends should be tied only in two ropes of the same size, stiffness, and smoothness.

On the other hand, not everything is rope.

Deep back in the cobble of languages, knot and knife are linked.

Thinking is a problem in knowledge.

Never believe the word “disinterested.”

Even the magisterial had helpers and companions.

Not hero, not polis, not story, but it.

If you are on crutches, people talk louder to you, and more slowly.

Wild horses wouldn't melt in my mouth.

In the event, perhaps polis, but gendered differently.

Language wants language.

Write only hungry sentences.

Do not always finish the same book.

Look down. Look down, your teeming site.

Can complexity be fathomed without personification?

Even the air you cannot breathe is your only air.

To redeem the pledge, give the thirsty animal a drink.

When the government rules it can read your laptop, take up cryptography and resistance.

If Duchamp is turned on his head, he is a unicycle.

“I give to you a paper of pins.” This is it.

There are red and yellow and blue. Then there is the unidentifiable “sad.”

Don't bottle honey in long-necked jars unless you own a very long spoon.

If rhyme is the motor, what is the machine?

“The implications of this gesture were enormous”: never to use the word “gesture.”

Look into your own heel and ride.

Reduplicate the awkwardness.

If you are a match, will you donate?

One one-off at a time keeps people in line.

Spotted dick is an example of a cultural difference.

Make sure the main socket has an earth-wire.

If you dream of numbers, watch out.

Keep things cut back or your hill will become bramble-thorns.

Things suddenly happen on a bed.

Integrity in the micro-space is seen from the stars. But even if it isn't!

Winnow the old words; harrow the new.

Adding sugar to make wine is not illegal, but think again.

Pitch knaves.

Deep back in the cobble of languages, knead and knock are kin.

Plant trees, but also water them.

Gamble on Language, that wager well beyond Pascal's.

When serifs get used as Law, back away slowly, but face forward.

Stand forth, mystery. Learn mobility. Learn humility.

Assume it is thirsty; give it drink.

Even if you sing a little, little song, still are the words behind the song you sing.

Much obliged. Obbligato. Obrigado. Say it.

Dog's letter for the wonder of it.

No matter what, it cannot be called back.

Is it possible to say what else might be found here?

Don't listen much to other people's rules.

Hold out the cup of dust; show it to those who control water.

Resignation is anger spread over long, wide acres.

Wake again into the wake of watchfulness.

August-September 2008

Notes to Draft 91: Proverbs. The upside down Capitol is a motif in Theodore Harris's collages. Draft on the line of fifteen.

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The long poem project of Rachel Blau DuPlessis is collected in Torques: Drafts 58-76 (Salt Publishing 2007) as well as in Drafts 1-38, Toll (Wesleyan U.P., 2001) and Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft unnumbered: Précis (Salt Publishing, 2004). In 2006, she published Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work on gender and poetics, along with a reprint of the ground-breaking The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice, both from University of Alabama Press. She is also the editor of the Selected Letters of George Oppen and co-editor of The Objectivist Nexus, along with other critical books and anthologies. DuPlessis teaches at Temple University; in 2008-09 she is at the National Humanities Center in Durham, North Carolina.

[http://phillysound.blogspot.com/2008\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://phillysound.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html)

See <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/duplessis>

## Chain Home

No one exactly knows  
Exactly how clouds look in the sky  
Or the shape of the mountains below them  
Or the direction in which fish swim.  
No one exactly knows.  
The eye is jealous of whatever moves  
And the heart  
Is too far buried in the sand  
To tell.

Jack Spicer

## ***Cobra Judy***<sup>1</sup>

Is  
of an an, &  
aboard. Is  
to against. Is  
to for,  
& quite capable  
of.

The wide (or  
a wide) available  
to aid in. (Can also  
perform from.)

Consists  
of. Has  
a field  
of. Is  
mounted on a (some, even,  
in the).

Controlled,  
to ensure  
much of, to  
be during, required  
by, & needed  
for – as well  
as critical for – use  
by all.

The heart,  
hung motionless.



## ***Cobra Dane<sup>2</sup>***

Is a,  
fulfilled & early to others,  
of all but  
the.

Is an, to  
acquire on developing.

Was developed. Was upgraded (including  
all of the heart &  
its audible past).

Was rewritten, en-  
hanced.

Generates approximately,  
arranged in,  
& radiated through,  
together with  
designated containings  
occupying,  
roughly,  
buildings oriented  
toward.

Provided to.

Established by.

Responsible for.

Under a,  
by all reasonable to anticipate.

## ***Cobra Gemini*<sup>3</sup>**

Transportable (designed to), to collect.

Capable of.  
Housed for.

Will be,  
temporarily. Is,  
currently. Was,  
eliminated.

Is based (to Provide).

On-targets  
are phased,  
are transmitted, &  
are common.

Width of  
& wide-band.

Has a (slaved to),  
as well as.

Uses super. Uses double. Uses triple  
(respectively.)

Runs the  
made up of,  
which – directed,  
established,  
& validated – used  
to use the heart, though  
blooded.

Provides processing,  
is responsible for,  
will operate  
& maintain.  
Is one of a,  
& funded by.

Is the program  
for.

Will validate  
& model  
& modify, essential to  
the use by.

## ***PAVE PAWS<sup>4</sup>***

A  
triangle,  
rapidly. An  
elevation, supporting. A  
direction, tilted  
back.

A  
final check  
of the heart. The  
timing fixed  
to another. The  
large fix  
aimed & entirely  
automatic.

The name.

The better beams (commonly aimed & not to blame).

The permissible heart.

## ***White Alice***<sup>5</sup>

The white  
was scattered. It  
was scattered to standards  
& line-of-sight.

It  
was connected – in some cases  
was used.

It  
was conceived,  
for example, was  
installed, was  
designed, was  
leased, was de-  
activated, though  
still beating.

Names  
were used. (It  
was possible.) Each one  
was remote. Some  
were far. Some  
were required. Some  
were sometimes connected,  
disrupting hearts.

Having  
& meaning  
both.

***Texas Towers*<sup>6</sup>**

Off-  
shore, &  
eastern first  
(2,3,4).

No  
one.

***DEW Line***<sup>7</sup>  
*for DHM*

**1**

Toward zero  
dips. The whip  
of snow. Talking  
across the sky, miles  
from any eye to-  
ward.

The domes  
loomed, were  
traveled between. The world  
took cover.

**2**

But say. Said  
already. By  
dialing could speak, cover  
an entire  
continent. Do  
with it what-  
ever.

**3**

Effective storms. Man's  
land. Radio,  
occasionally, threw up much  
partially reflected. Sphere  
sited, the signal,  
& it was at-  
mospheric.

**4**

By  
the tundra, by  
the buildings, & hard by  
the depths by  
the tundra.

**5**

The nature.  
The difficulties.

**6**

Alters. Widens. Latens.

Hearts laid  
end to end.

**7**

The domes  
came, planned,  
manned,  
& rechecked. Building  
them. Tons  
of essential  
weeks.

**8**

Life battles  
& isolation  
nights. Grace  
be good. The health  
of the chaplains.

**9**

Yet  
for the  
zero

**10**

Nothing but you  
on all sides of me.



## ***Long Lines***<sup>8</sup>

The long  
haul heavy  
duty open  
wire.

The digits, the  
two letters so  
far gone.

## ***Chain Home***<sup>9</sup>

In  
the early days, warning  
couldn't go  
out. Early,  
for the way might might  
strike.

The island, the  
height of land, the bits the water  
washed. Personnel, they  
came, be-  
came, moved  
on.

Monotony  
a popular pastime.

The chain. The units. The remoteness. The factured hearts.

No tracks  
plotted.

## ***Yellow Beetle***<sup>10</sup>

The reports,  
first, were  
kept on, you  
know.

Then  
the navigations (in  
secret). The  
permafrost (interference un-  
predicted). The  
differences in determining. Pulse-  
matching, no.

Slaves, east  
& west. Word  
was received – how closing  
& for when?

The  
predominant tower. The  
archaeology.

On the river, years ago.

<sup>1,2,3</sup> are code names for U.S. military radar systems designed for missile warning and detection, and confirmation of arms control treaties. Cobra Judy is a ship-mounted system, Cobra Dane is located in Alaska, and Cobra Gemini is a transportable system capable of being used on land and sea.

<sup>4</sup> is a highly sophisticated chain of three United States Air Force radar stations situated in Massachusetts, California and Alaska charged with the task of missile warning and satellite detection. Unlike typical radar sites, the antennas of PAVE PAWS (PAVE is a military program name, and PAWS is an acronym for Phased Array Warning System) do not physically rotate. These stations comprise three-sided pyramidal structures with flattened tops and radar arrays set along each side. The PAVE PAWS site in Massachusetts has been highlighted as a possible cause of elevated rates of certain forms of cancer in nearby populations.

<sup>5</sup> was a military telecommunication system set up in Alaska by the United States Air Force in the 1950s to link air force bases and sites like the DEW Line to command centres. Rendered obsolete by advances in telecommunications, in the early 1970s it was transferred to civilian use. The last site was in operation until 1985.

<sup>6</sup> were offshore United States Air Force radar platforms situated in the Atlantic Ocean along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. Three platforms – Nos. 2, 3 and 4 – were constructed, and operated from the late 1950s until the early 1960s. In 1961, a storm destroyed No. 4, taking the lives of its entire crew of 28. The remaining towers were decommissioned and demolished two years later.

<sup>7</sup> was a chain of radar sites across the Canadian arctic and Alaska. Constructed in the 1950s, the DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line was designed to keep watch for a Soviet attack from across the North Pole. The advent of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) rendered it all but obsolete. Donald H. McElroy went up to the Line in 1969 and worked there until it was shut down in the late 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> was the AT&T network responsible for long distance telecommunications. Established after WWII, it evolved from a system comprised of open-wire telephone and telegraph lines to coaxial cable and then microwave communications networks. Its now obsolete microwave towers can still be found in Canada and the United States. Long Lines introduced direct dialing for long-distance telephone communications in 1951.

<sup>9</sup> was the code name for a chain of early radar stations established along the coast of England just prior to WWII. Technologically crude by contemporary standards, it was instrumental in the defense of England against German air attacks. A version of Chain Home was set up along the coast of British Columbia during WWII to keep watch for Japanese attack. Don McElroy spent that war serving in the RCAF manning remote Chain Home sites located on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

<sup>10</sup> was a code name used as part of an experimental chain of secret LORAN (**Long range navigation**) stations established in the Canadian arctic in the late 1940s by the RCAF and USAF to provide navigation assistance to military flights in the region. The system (made up of the “master” Yellow Beetle station at the mouth of the Mackenzie River and two “slave” stations to the east and the west) never worked properly, and was shut down in early 1950. D. H. McElroy served at Yellow Beetle from 1949 until its closure. In 1997, the site was archaeologically examined.



***Gil McElroy***  
***Biography***

My publications include three books of poetry – *Dream Pool Essays* (Talonbooks, 2001), *NonZero Definitions* (Talonbooks, 2004), and *Last Scattering Surfaces* (Talonbooks, 2007) – and *Gravity & Grace: Selected Writing on Contemporary Canadian Art* (Gaspereau Press, 2001). My work has been anthologized in *Groundswell: best of above/ground press, 1993-2003* (Broken Jaw Press, 2003), *Side/Lines: A New Canadian Poetics* (Insomniac Press, 2003), and *Written in the Skin* (Insomniac Press, 1999), and I have published widely in periodicals in Canada and the United States since 1979. I am also a curator, organizing exhibitions throughout Canada and publishing catalogue essays and exhibition reviews.

## a case made in lowers: an interview with ryan fitzpatrick, by *rob mcLennan*

*this interview was conducted over email from January 2008 to May 2008*

Born and raised in Calgary, **ryan fitzpatrick** is a past editor of *filling Station* magazine and is the publisher of the micropress MODL Press. His poetry has been published across Canada, most notably in the anthologies *evergreen: six new poets* (Black Moss, 2002, *Post-Prairie* (Talonbooks, 2005) and *Shift and Switch: New Canadian Poetry* (Mercury Press, 2005). He is the author of a number of chapbooks with small presses across Canada, including publications small and smaller by above/ground press (Ottawa), bytheskinofmeteeth (Lake Country, BC), No Press (Calgary), and MODL Press. *FAKE MATH*, his first full-length collection of poetry, was published by Montreal's Snare Books in fall 2007.

**rob mcLennan:** When did you first start writing?

**ryan fitzpatrick:** I've been writing for as long as I remember, but I probably started seriously in my second year of university. Before that, writing was something I did in fits and spurts very casually, but I hit a point where I really just wanted to write, so I started to do all those things I thought "serious" writers should do: carry around a notebook, read other people's poetry, talk to other people about writing. Stuff like that.

**rm:** What was it about going to university that brought it out? Can I presume were talking about the University of Calgary?

**rf:** We are talking about the University of Calgary, but probably not in the way you'd expect. I spent the first two years of university pursuing a science degree, which I decided wasn't for me somewhere in my second year. I thought back to high school and what I actually enjoyed (not just what I found easy) and discovered that the classes I enjoyed the most were my English classes, specifically when I was given the opportunity to write. So I switched majors. As far as the actual English program goes, it was very helpful in helping me refine my craft and decide what kind of poet I wanted to be. Ultimately, university just helped me realize a desire that was already there.

**rm:** Do you find much or any of your science background influencing any of your literary endeavors?

**rf:** Not really, other than using scientific vocabulary on occasion (which I do less and less the further I get from those formative years). Some of my early work is coloured by my scientific background, especially my first chapbook *Revised Notes*, which I wrote in the format of an informal scientific study. I'm realizing that the more I ground my writing in some type of non-literary discourse, the easier it is for me to compose and focus my work. A lot of *FAKE MATH* came out of readings in Marxism and Democratic theory. The work I'm doing now explores Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject and how it ties into our representations of a self affected by western capitalism.

**rm:** I'm interested in that strain of your work, the "representations of a self affected by western capitalism," and can see parallels in other works by poets such as Peter Culley and Jeff Derksen.

What is it that brings you into such concerns in your poetry? Do you think it had anything to do with coming out of a working-class neighbourhood such as Ogden, or was it something further?

**rf:** Let's start with Ogden and move out from there. Back when I was a young pup in Fred Wah's writing workshop I started a project that I started calling "The Ogden Shops." The project was really my first attempt to do anything remotely political in my writing and as a result, a lot of the writing is naive and repetitive and the book I tried to assemble out of the project was a mess. I have yet to find a satisfactory way to rescue this project so it may end up forever unfinished. I suspect other writers with abandoned or failed projects have similar experiences.

Why do I write political poetry though? This is a question that keeps coming back to me. Ultimately, I think it comes out of a displeasure or disgust with our current economic, political, and social systems (all of which are interconnected) and a desire to build something more positive. I'm very interested in writers like Derksen and Culley because they've found ways to exploit how the nuts and bolts of social language symptomatically reflect larger structures of capital. The big question though is how do you do this without getting too didactic or too simplistic or too theoretical. It's a tough balance.

**rm:** What was it about the Ogden neighbourhood that originally made you want to write about it, and want to, perhaps, return to it?

**rf:** Maybe the palpable sense of economic history imprinted on the area in that Ogden was a town set up to house the workers at the CP repair shops. Maybe the distinct and powerful lines between residential and industrial. Maybe the history of industrial irresponsibility in the area by companies like CP and Imperial Oil. It's a playground of content for any writer interested in economic and environmental issues who is willing to wade through it.

**rm:** In the statement you wrote to go along with your section in *evergreen: six new poets* (Black Moss, 2002), you wrote that "the ogden shops examines this mess of community, economics and politics that i live in trying at the same time to simultaneously build and destroy a history/mythology of Ogden (wherever that is.)" A number of writers over the years have worked poetry collections and/or chapbooks around their geographies, whether George Bowering and Daphne Marlatt writing Vancouver, Raymond Souster, Stephen Cain and bpNichol writing Toronto, Jon Paul Fiorentino and Patrick Friesen writing Winnipeg, Rob Budde writing Prince George, B.C., and even Julia Williams writing about Calgary. What is it about the geography of Ogden that makes you want to explore its mythology? What is it about "place" that keeps coming up as subject matter?

**rf:** I think we need to make a distinction here between a "writing about," which is where we see place or landscape appear as explicit content in a work like Marlatt's *Steveston*, which is "about" the town of Steveston and its cannery culture, and a "writing through" or a "writing in," where place is part of the work's landscape but the poem is not "about" the place. In the same way that weather can affect our moods, place can affect our sense of self or our sense of the world or our sense of language. I'm not sure why place keeps coming up other than the fact that it is one of the things we face in our daily lives. You could just as easily ask why people keep writing about work or relationships or politics. At this point in my writing career, I actually think writing about place is kind of boring (why would I try and write a landscape that a photographer like Edward Burtynsky could photograph in a way that can move me to tears), though I won't deny that living in Calgary as both a geographical and social landscape affects my writing. I can't deny that living in a place where

wealth is a palpable thing that you can taste in the air isn't one of the reasons I want to find ways to critique that wealth and how we obtain it.

**rm:** It's interesting you picked out *Steveston* when I mentioned Marlatt, which was very much an archival project, a "documentary poem" of the former fishing village. I wasn't even thinking that at all, thinking more along the lines of her *Vancouver Poems*, and even Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*. You don't think Bowering was "writing about" in such a book, do you?

**rf:** When I think of the role of place in Marlatt's work, I always tend to go to *Steveston*. Other than *Touch To My Tongue*, it's probably my favorite book of hers and a great example of the poem as documentary. It was a huge influence while I was writing the Ogden poems. But you're right, place plays a role in a lot of Marlatt's work. I think it's important to a number of the *Tish* poets.

As for Bowering, the community of Kerrisdale seems both important and not to Bowering's translation of Rilke. *Kerrisdale Elegies* is less a book about place than it is about ideas. In fact, it seems like the idea of place is more important to Bowering than Kerrisdale is as an actual place. I'm tempted to say that *Kerrisdale Elegies* doesn't actually need to reference Kerrisdale at all, but I'm not sure I want to go that far.

The books and writers dealing with place that interest me right now tend to explore place in much larger and complex ways. Jeff Derksen's movements from the local to the national to the global are sharp and inspiring. Steven Cain and Jason Christie use references to place to explore more political and psychic geographies. The last book I can remember happening in a specific place that really wowed me was Jill Hartman's *A Painted Elephant* which took place in Calgary (specifically the community of Inglewood), but, again, Jill's book is a book about the idea of place where a specific place is used to frame or anchor the poem.

I often wonder if there isn't a movement away from place as content in Canadian poetry. The anthology *Post-Prairie* seems like a good example in that it kind of pitches itself as an anthology of writers who are writing "after-place."

**rm:** That's why I was thinking *Vancouver Poems* or *Kerrisdale Elegies* (and Julia Williams' above/ground press chapbook) more in keeping with what the manuscript of *Ogden Shops* was doing (and even much of what Jon Paul Fiorentino has done with his poetry), using geography as some kind of framework to actually move into other areas. But somehow Canadian poetry is obsessed with geography; how difficult do you think it will be to work to really move beyond it? Even through Hartman and others, geography is still referenced. Where do you see that in relation to what Derek Beaulieu or Christian Bök have been doing, able to create work that removes itself entirely from the argument of geography?

**rf:** While I'm not sure that Derek and Christian are entirely working outside of a concept of geography — Derek's work in his letter-set-composed *Chains* at times evokes city maps and urban planning motifs and Christian's work is never entirely outside of geography (even if the question is one of the social geography outside of the text) though it rarely references political geography in any tangible way — I do think that geography is not a primary focus in their texts, which is one of a number of parallel traditions in Canadian poetry to the extremely visible urge to "write geography." There are equally compelling arguments to take much different directions in a text — to be a textual nomad, as it were. Most of the texts that deeply interest me find ways to combine a number of



different threads that people obsess over. Erin Mouré's *O Cidadian* is a book that blows me away each time I look at it because it traverses global, identity, and language politics in thoughtful and incisive ways; it is a book that takes recombination seriously as a compositional method. It was books like this and Steve McCaffery's *The Cheat Of Words* that made me realize that I had to abandon content as an end point in my poetry and embrace chance and procedure. Maybe what I'm trying to get at over these past few questions is that while I haven't abandoned the ideas and pressures of physical and political geographies, I have abandoned the idea of "geography as content," which, when it comes to actual composition, I find limiting and restrictive.

**rm:** How did you first get involved with *filling Station* and what kind of effect, if any, do you think editing a journal has had on your own writing? How did (*orange*) magazine get started, and what was it that made you think Calgary needed another journal?

**rf:** Let's start with (*orange*). At the point in time when we started (*orange*), the only established journal in Calgary that really made a connection with me was *filling Station*. *Dandelion* hadn't been rescued by the University of Calgary at this point and was still pretty conservative in its poetics. The previous undergrad journal at the U of C had gone under and a few of us (including Nikki Reimer, who, I think, was the only person with the magazine from beginning to end) looked into it and decided to take over their bank account to start a new 'zine style mag that we would produce on the cheap. The idea was that it would focus on work that might be under *filling Station* or *Dandelion*'s radar. Specifically, the work that was being produced by our peers in the creative writing classes at the U of C. That focus widened pretty quickly, but, even after I left, the magazine kept a close eye on the local. I think that it was that focus and grassroots support of the local was ultimately the biggest reason why (*orange*) needed to exist.

As for *filling Station*, I was pretty intimidated by *fS* when I was taking my undergrad, so it took leaving Canada and coming back to Calgary for me to consider joining *fS*. I had heard about a meeting from someone (probably Tom Muir at this point) about a meeting which I attended, got assigned a book review, and I was in. I was just a general collective member for a couple of years, and then took on the role of Poetry Editor, which, to be honest, was about as far up the chain I was willing to go. Between Natalie Simpson, Chris Blais, Carmen Derksen, and myself, we reorganized and rebuilt *fS* into a better and stronger magazine with a focus on strong content inside the magazine and a strong community profile outside the magazine. The collectives after us (some of which I was included in, some not) pushed *fS* into a more interdisciplinary space—something that makes me very proud.

As for how working for these mags has helped me as a writer, other than getting my feet wet editorially and having to make hard decisions about content (which helps immensely in realizing what you actually value as a reader), most of the time I spent taught me more about how to be a member of a community than it did about my actual writing practice. Helping Chris Blais start the Flywheel reading series helped me understand how important it is to have a reading venue for beginning writers. Working with other arts organizations, literary or not, helped me realize how important it is to provide spaces for cooperation and dialogue. I really believe that writers should openly share their writing and encourage other writers to do the same.

**rm:** For quite a while you were posting poems regularly on your blog, posting more recently on Facebook instead (you should watch out for the fine print regarding copyright). Why did you make

that shift, and what do you get out of that kind of immediate publishing, as opposed to working to publish more widely through print or online journals?

**rf:** One of the things I find compelling about internet self-publishing is how you can devote space to earlier drafts to allow a possible readership in on the writing process. For a couple of years, I was posting everything I wrote on my blog: every poem, every draft, every scrap. This was a process that became very important to me, especially as I composed *FAKE MATH*, because it allowed me to see how a project might come together as a whole without having an overarching plan at the beginning. I was also interested in how the blog might act as a type of archive for my own compositional activity and how it might act as a portal for any possible readership to view poems not as finished objects, but as procedures and processes still happening. I've always been drawn to self-publishing, though I have to watch myself a bit because it's way too easy to put things out in the world half-baked (releasing everything in a more informal setting helped curb this impulse).

**rm:** Does that mean, now that *FAKE MATH* is out in the world, that the impulse for posting poems on your blog is curbed (you haven't posted anything there in months), or are you simply waiting for the next project to come along?

**rf:** Kind of. Aside from last minute edits, I finished *FAKE MATH* around two-and-a-half years ago, and my blog didn't stop then. A lot of work from other projects has gone up on the blog, but, for me, the work from *FAKE MATH* was probably the most fleshed out on the blog and is the only project that was composed beginning to end with the blog in mind. So, in retrospect, drafting *FAKE MATH* might have been the initial thing that started me losing interest in posting. I'm still interested in the possibilities of blogging but I'm less interested in just arbitrarily posting everything I write (I'm posting part of a new project piece by piece on Facebook because it seem to fit there). I've got a couple of ideas to restart blogging, but, if I start blogging again, it likely won't be creative work that I'm showcasing. I'm considering doing a reading project that's blog-based.

**rm:** Another aspect of the collection *FAKE MATH* is, as Christian Bök talked about in his review of the collection on *Harriet, the Poetry Foundation Blog*, your work in Flarf techniques, "...recombining the results of Internet searches in order to generate poetry that provides an incisive, sardonic critique of contemporary, sociological discourse." How do you see this deliberate process of randomization as something that propels both poem and poetic discourse?

**rf:** I'm going to take issue a bit with your use of the term "randomization" because it is a major misconception that Google-sculpting and other similarly procedurally-based compositional techniques are somehow celebrating randomness. I prefer to think of the process as a dialogue with a series of unexpected others. In this sense, Google works almost like a Ouija board: you ask the box a question (ie. your search string) and you receive a series of responses that may or may not make sense, which changes the role of the poet from the romantic figure of someone who consciously and spontaneously writes the poem to someone who organizes and recombines the data of the universe in order to reveal or alter something. What I like about the process is that, to a degree, it removes the ego from the process of composition without removing the human or the emotional. With Google-sculpting, there is a sense that a poet doesn't work from an empty page but from a page filled with writing from a million others, or, more accurately, a crowded room where everyone is speaking at once. The poet's job is to listen and transcribe what is happening without feeling that she needs to transcribe accurately. For the poem to be random in a situation like this, the poet would have to make no choices at all in how they deal with the raw material that Google

presents them and I really don't think that this is a practical position for a poet to take (in fact, for a poet to make no choices at all would still constitute a choice). I think that at the heart of any writing is finding a line through the material that is neither apolitical and antiseptic or overly polemical or pedantic. Making choices about what is important to write is as crucial to this writing procedure as any other.

**rm:** The idea of “a dialogue with a series of unexpected others” seems to tie in with your earlier comments on “recombination [...] as a compositional method” (have you read the work of Margaret Christakos? She’s absolutely brilliant at working recombination) as well as working to abandon content. Couldn’t one argue that anyone who writes creatively is, in their own way, someone who already “organizes and recombines the data of the universe in order to reveal or alter something”? Certainly, it may be more obvious in some than in others, but is it the surprise itself that you are working for? I would think that one of the real strengths of this kind of method, too, is not necessarily removing the ego (as you suggest), but in forcing a writer to work outside the comfort levels of their own language, thus opening up further options for one’s own writing. Is this something you have noticed as well, and played with?

**rf:** I'm going to try to pull a few of the threads in your question individually. Maybe something will tumble out in the unravelling.

I think that pushing outside of one's comfort level and the idea of removing the ego or, more accurately, limiting the ego (an idea borrowed from Jackson Mac Low and his interest in chance-based procedures in poetry composition) are deeply related. My conscious self is deeply affected and driven by the pressures and scripts of the culture outside me, so how do sidestep the impulses that come with those pressures. I have found that removing the initial content of a poem from my control is very helpful and allows me to apply my agency as an author more directly in the editing process. But does this removal of agency at the beginning of the process result in a randomizing or emptying of the poem's content? I'd like to say no, but I'm well aware that a lot of people still believe this. I would be tempted to counter with a different question: isn't the agency of the writer used more macroscopically than microscopically? The small decisions are left up to something other than the writer, but the writer asks the initial questions and sets up any procedures. I think specifically about a text like *Apostrophe* by Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry, where most of the micromanagement of the poems (it seems) was done through a computer program. I still think of Bill and Darren as the authors of *Apostrophe*, but in a different sense than we normally associate with authorship, meaning that they are responsible for *Apostrophe* coming into existence as a creative project but didn't carefully compose every word in the book as it poured from their imagination or creative genius or whatever.

I'm also interested in your notion of "surprise" because it's one that I keep bumping into that I'm not quite sure about. While I like to be surprised by what I write and what others write and I like to hear that my own writing surprises someone who is reading my work, the idea of "surprise" feels like a goal that has so little at stake. It's a trifle of an emotion. I'm much more interested in joy or anger or frustration or despair. At this point in my writing, I think it might be more useful to horrify people outright while finding ways to keep them reading without making them feel overly safe. The big problem with surprise as a goal for writing is the inherent sense of safety and because of that, little is at risk. I deeply believe that risk is important in poetry. It needs to feel like a project or poem could fall apart at any moment.

**rm:** And how far are you willing to go with the chance-based procedure? As far as Mac Low and Bök, or are there other considerations mixed in, to temper against a single idea? Just how far do you want to take it?

**rf:** There are a couple of different answers I could give you here. The first, and most pressing for me compositionally, is that I don't have the patience or attention span to chase constraint very far down the rabbit hole. I don't think I could do the full Kenny Goldsmith and build a text on a single set of constraints or procedures unless I knew I could do it in a very short period of time. If I was the one writing \*Eunoia\*, the book wouldn't have gotten past the part where I'd have to gather all the words that only had "A." I find constraint very constraining, almost paralyzing, but often very useful in getting past the blocks and habits I tend to build up in my writing. So I tend to be very pragmatic in my use of procedure and I'm usually not afraid to change the procedure in the middle of composing a piece if I'm not getting a good result. For me, I think it helps to have a large and flexible bag of compositional tricks that I can dip into at any moment. Which leads into the second answer I could give you, that I'm constantly worried about treating ideas too simplistically and, for me, changing up my compositional method helps guard against that simplicity. I like to throw complications into the little systems I assemble for myself in order to interrogate any position I might take either compositionally or ideologically. Part of my job as a poet is to question the "hidden curriculum" of my own writing, to figure out how the way I write something affects the explicit content of a text.

**rm:** What made you first start your micro-press, MODL Press? And what is it about Calgary that makes every second writer in town, over the past few years, a chapbook publisher? What do you want your press to achieve, and where do you think it's going?

**rf:** I started MODL out of a desire to release my own work and I was completely enamored with the little books being published by other writers in town. The first batch of books that I remember picking up and really being impressed by was the work of the Phu collective. Jill Hartman's chapbook for "A Painted Elephant" still blows my mind when I pick it up. I started off publishing my own work and then moved on to publishing the work of my peers around town. I've done pamphlets and broadsheets and chapbooks. I've published well-known writers (Larissa Lai, Nicole Markotic) and emerging writers (Bronwyn Haslam, Ian Kinney). I'm not a very ambitious person when it comes to this kind of publishing, so I don't see MODL moving into trade books like Book Thug or moving to a very regular publishing schedule like No Press or your above/ground press, which, though not on a rigid schedule, do commit to having a number of titles each year. The more I publish, the more I want certain things from it: I want to be able to publish titles on a whim, I want to be able to hand books out rather than sell them, I want to run out of stock almost immediately, I want to be able to put the press on hiatus if need be, etc. My hope is that MODL will become a blanket for anything I'd like to release.

As for every second writer in town being a publisher (more like every tenth writer), the big reason is probably that we don't have a larger press in town that publishes more radical poetry, so, as a community, we need to make our own publishing opportunities and, when there isn't a lot of money floating around for the arts, that tends to translate into grassroots activity like making chapbooks. Chapbooks are cheap to produce, easy to make, and fun to distribute, until, of course you start making it a regular thing. That's why there are so many small presses that fold after a couple of books. That said, I really believe that if every writer put out a couple of chapbooks every year by people other than themselves, the small press situation would be much more interesting than it is.

**rm:** The constraints of *FAKE MATH* work through a pretty interesting social critique. Now that this project is a bit behind you, where do you see yourself going next? What are you working on now?

**rf:** I tend to think of my projects less as critiques and more as explorations and they usually start from a very open place. My next finished manuscript *Ghost Prison* is a series of prose-poems that I wrote out of a desire to do the opposite of what I did with *FAKE MATH*; as a result, it's a pretty serious book and ended up being much more personal. Not counting projects that have stalled, I'm in the middle of two projects right now. One is a series of post-lyrics (for lack of a better word), tentatively titled *The Fortified Castle.*, that I began out of frustration with the use of the term "emo" to slam people with depression problems, especially the way it has become a generic catch-all for anything bad or uncool (the same way "gay" has been used by some people over the last few years). The project has become an exploration of the shadows hiding beneath mundane, everyday language, especially as it applies to the self. The other project I'm working on is a collaborative text with Natalie Zina Walschots where we're looking at video games and the language and logic structures surrounding them. Past that, I'm not sure. I do have a hankering to work with narrative again and I'm really enjoying collaborative work. I find that the direction of my writing life can turn on a dime, which makes it difficult to find a project I want to stick with.

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# sexing the prairie

*rob mclennan*

## SEXING THE PRAIRIE; or, Why I Am/Not a Prairie Poet

*How do you sex the prairie?*

The gopher was the model:  
Stand up straight:  
Pop in and out of holes.  
Vanish suddenly: the  
gopher was the model.  
– lines not found in Robert  
Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*

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That prairie, she's a boy. John Palliser was a boy; so was Wallace Stegner. W.O. Mitchell was two or three boys. Even Sinclair Ross was a boy, but he didn't like it. Frederick Grove was a boy too, but not here.

Let me tell you something about boys: Grain elevators. Telephone poles. Church steeples. False fronts. What goes up, must go up. Get the picture?

The railway? They don't call it "laying track" for nothing.

When these boys grew up they could take us girls out for a drink, escort us through the "Ladies & Escorts" door.

They could take us girls out. But they didn't.

In the issue of *Open Letter* that came out of the Poetics & Public Culture in Canada Conference at the University of Western Ontario (twelfth series, no. 9, summer 2006), a conference held to honour Frank Davey to coincide with his retirement, Winnipeg poet and critic Alison Calder responds with a magnificent three page long poem to the apparent maleness of prairie poetry. This is easily the most engaging poem I've seen from Alison Calder, from years of reading her poems in various Canadian journals, or sections (with slight repetition between) in anthologies such as *Breathing Fire* (1996) and *Exposed* (2002). But what is it about Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* (1977/2004) that prompts such a response? Why is her prairie a boy? How does one even begin to "sex the prairie"?

It's no accident that her reaction to prairie poetry maleness comes first to the work of Robert Kroetsch, he's nearly the poster boy; is the maleness of his prairie so prevalent, so sexually and otherwise male in the prairies that it becomes impossible for any woman writer wanting to sex their own prairie and *not* mention his name? Or is Kroetsch *less* male than Suknaski, than Barbour, than Cooley? Is this why so many prairie women writers after Kroetsch — Aritha van Herk, Nicole Markotić, Méira Cook, Susan Holbrook — sexed their prairies predominantly in prose or prose-poetry? As van Herk wrote in her essay "(no

parrot/no crow/no parrot)," responding to the works of Sheila Watson, Robert Kroetsch and Michael Ondaatje:

Well Kroetsch;

Swore I'd never write another line about you, that bio/critical introduction to your archival inventory (that you didn't need) like trying to fuck the wind. Tried but I couldn't come.

Still, the other night I picked up a speedskater in the bar (no parrot/no crow/no parrot), just a speedskater (second fastest, he claimed to be) (in which world, I wanted to ask) leaning into the windless ice. Rapped my unskating ankle propped up on the chair beside him and told me he was from Philadelphia. Philadelphia — now do you believe that? — (no parrot/no crow/no parrot) and asked me if I had a car. Yes, I agreed. I've got a car has crossed the Battle River and where do you want to go? (no parrot/no crow/no parrot). And there I was, waiting for his answer.

Fenceposts, Kroetsch, I want to remind you of fenceposts, just in case you forgot and (no parrot/no crow/no parrot) sitting on any one of those fenceposts. Bare, under the sky skying itself, hand between its legs, and you pulling the leaky Battle River behind you like a boy ahead of a sleigh full of sisters hoping for a long pull. In a field of snow (no parrot/no crow/no parrot). I am jealous of your sisters, Kroetsch, every last one of them.

Hoping for a long pull, as van Herk wrote; wanting to see the experience through the snow but wanting tall-tale-telling Kroetsch to lead, and to do all the work. Is that what she means? (How *do* you "sex a prairie"?) It would be easy to say that the prairie long poem is something the boys do, but that would not entirely be true; saying that would be even a lie, having to count van Herk's own "Calgary, this growing graveyard," or Carla Milo's more recent "A Medical History of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan," as well as countless other pieces over the past few years by Jill Hartman, Sylvia Legris, Larissa Lai, Natalie Simpson, Markotić and Julia Williams. And what of even earlier works by Lorna Crozier (the one who supposedly left Kroetsch in the dust for Patrick Lane, thus making the Phoenician "sad")? What of other recent works by Suzette Mayr or Pamela Banting or Jacqueline Turner? Sexing their prairies, but through prose, not poetry. As Milo writes in her piece:

yellow flame flickering like a nervous lover, wind rushing in, planes landing at the Saskatoon airport — we were stacking firewood on the deck the first time they thundered down. we were laughing. take a picture of this.

swimming in the South Saskatchewan mud & sea creatures smiling ripping letters up blood on my paper small cherries. it was noon, November, all the leaves had fallen as far as I could tell, cars had run them down, brown goo in the gutters. it was noon & grey water careening, a kid's tricycle broken apart, into all its limbs. I thought I might light a few candles, carry them singing down the river in a rowboat my hair spread wide like Ophelia, Lady of Shalott.

when you think about it though, it has more to do with sleeping, the way I twist into myself, the way pain comes & goes, curling my hand up.

often cried at funerals, never knowing who had died, burning up the white bones.

oh city of bridges I have fallen from

One could go to the prose-poetry of Calgary writer and critic Nicole Markotić, sexing her way through the prairie and prairie writing, referencing van Herk, Crozier and Cook alongside Gertrude Stein, Mary Shelley, Gail Scott and Erin Mouré in her collection *minotaurs & other alphabets* (1998). Markotić takes possession of her own literary and geographic spaces through language, writing:

**Lovers desire and seduce only to murder and create.**

- Aritha van Herk *Places Far From Ellesmere*

mythic hands transform from birds to fish and back to hands again. just in time to pull up the reins. just in time to be cut off by the evil twin brother who has trained his snakes to swallow birds whole to slit fish with their tongues. the cross on your eyelids etched with tapwater

trauma begins at the level of the sentence

evil brothers are heroes gone mad

the hero is a brother gone too too sane. a perfectly good alphabet, trembling at the level of sound. his fingertips drip blood as he strokes her frozen skin. his newly adopted snakes slither comfortably into his iron sable hair

Even as she writes in the title of one of her pieces in the chapbook *Widows & Orphans* (2004), that there's "No such thing as a prose poem." Is there such a thing as prairie? But before I get too far, one has to ask, what is sexing? What is prairie? What is the prairie long poem? As Jon Paul Fiorentino writes at the beginning of his "prairie long poem" from *Transcona Fragments* (2002),

i have read seed catalogue and the wind is our enemy and fielding and still  
i will fail to present you with this prairie long poem because if anything  
they have taught me to write against this form and to be discursive and  
elusive and most of all they have taught me to desire each other and so  
to perpetuate an incestuous notion of poetry which is discretely referred  
to as intertextuality.

write fragments. not full sentences. but most of all disobey all  
instructions toward poetry.

"son this is a modem  
this is a wordprocessor  
this is a concrete metaphor  
this is a sledgehammer"



"and the next time you want to write a poem we'll start praying"

There, in Fiorentino's poem, Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue," mentioned yet again; is this the standard in which long prairie poems are judged? Otherwise, I don't know why Calder would pick on "Seed Catalogue," of all things, above anything else. Are these choices made through "author" first, and "poem" second? Sure, there are parts, to be sure, bare lines after he asks:

*How do you grow a past /  
to live in*

he writes a list that includes:

the absence of lutes, violas and xylophones  
the absence of a condom dispenser in the Lethbridge Hotel  
and me about to screw an old Blood whore.  
I was in love.  
the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathédrale de Chartres  
the absence of psychiatrists  
the absence of sailing ships  
the absence of books, journals, daily newspapers and everything else but the Free Press Prairie Farmer and The Western Producer  
the absence of gallows (with apologies to Louis Riel)  
the absence of goldsmiths  
the absence of the girl who said that if the Edmonton Eskimos won the Grey Cup she'd let me kiss her nipples in the foyer of the Palliser Hotel.  
I didn't know where she got to.  
the absence of Heraclitus  
the absence of the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Tiber and the Thames. Shit, the Battle River ran dry one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it. He could piss higher on a barn wall than any of us. He could piss right clean over the principal's new car.  
  
the absence of ballet and opera  
the absence of Aeneas.

Is the poem that Calder wrote caught in the sticky idea of a Robert Kroetsch machismo line? Is this a poem caught in the mud of the Battle River? She displays the vernacular and humour that came from there, from other pieces. Or is her poem alabaster-trapped in the conversation between van Herk and Kroetsch? In his "Circle the Wagons, Girls, Here the Bastards Come," Kroetsch writes on the sexual aspect of van Herk's most recent novel, *Restlessness* (1999), writing:

The obsession with hotel rooms in *Restlessness* is the contemporary acting out of the melancholic's condition. Bedrooms. Places of escape. Places of assignation. Places of placeness stasis. Places of relaxed masturbation, with death the fantasy. The

killer lover. The woman in the room across the way. The ghost of Robert Barr, killed in this hotel. Take your time, enjoy by delaying.

As the darkness travels west across the continent, the journey of the heroine becomes epic. It is the classic journey into the underworld with the hope of returning with knowledge that will benefit the world. But where is the secret opening that is concealed in the sacred grove? Will the elevator doors suffice?

I have been a friend of Aritha van Herk's for many years, and I can tell you that she is fascinated by graveyards — those generous hotels for the insomniacs of the "Sleep, Traveller" imperative. Not that daylight will save your hide. *Places Far From Ellesmere* is set in continual daylight. But under that enduring sun the very "I" of subjectivity dissolves into a disturbed and disturbing "you."

Not just sexual but about sex itself, and writing prairie as alternate gender to the maleness of Kroetsch's line. How could his prairie *not* be seen as sexually male when writing the long poem as tantric idea, writing the *delay, delay, delay* of pushing the ending as far away as possible in writing his "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" in *A Lovely Treachery of Words* (1989). Do I mean this as a question or statement? Does that automatically mean that this is the only consideration? Or that delay/prolonging is something that only a male can do, or is in control of? What is the other side of that control? How is the prairie, as Calder says, a boy? As Kroetsch begins his essay:

In love-making, in writing the long poem—delay is both—delay is both technique and content. Narrative has an elaborate grammar of delay. The poets of the twentieth century, in moving away from narrative, abandoned (some willingly, some reluctantly) their inherited grammar. Poets, like lovers, were driven back to the moment of creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself.

There is a macho boy bluster to Kroetsch's line; macho, but so self-depreciatingly charming and disarming as well. There is the same tone of response from van Herk, as much bluster as the boys have, and as much power and knowledge behind. I'm surprised van Herk and Kroetsch's work haven't mated, rutting endless amid the coolies to produce substantial amounts of offspring; perhaps they already have. Perhaps this is where "sexing the prairies" came from, writing all else who emerged after. Where are Calder's comments on these? If this is patriarchy there is matriarchy too, and equally powerful; Calder writes her prairie outdoors and prairie indoors. Is the difference the door? "They could take us girls out," Calder writes in the first section of her poem, "But they didn't." Is this about being left behind? Does her sex hinge on the homestead threshold?

There is sex in the prairies; we know there's sex in Montreal ("I repeat: the important thing was to cuckold Leonard / Cohen."), but is there sex in Toronto, or sex in Vancouver? In poems and essays and stories it seems so less prevalent and romantic somehow than "sexing the prairies," writing piece after piece after piece. Of all the cities in Canada that could be written about outside of Montreal, even Leonard Cohen had his Edmonton poem. Is Kroetsch's influence that large? And if Barry McKinnon is to be believed at all, they only have sex in the north of British Columbia every seven years, from the age of thirty-one on, in a series, but for Kate Van Dusen's piece included in her *Not Noir* (1984), that was exclusively written by boys. While travelling my own west a few years back, from Calgary to Banff to Edmonton, was it the Kroetsch idea of sexing the prairies (after the act itself) that

prompted me to write my own, riffing an old Artie Gold poem in my *paper hotel* (2001)? It's now so far behind me, it's hard to remember.

### **sex in the prairies**

is like love at seventeen, it plies  
deep in the solid bone

at the banff springs hotel, five days  
in alberta we can never return to

the days are long & yr letters few,  
& geography plots against me

a degas painting isnt enough,  
even on a greeting card

it gives no greeting, it only reminds  
of the separations to come

But sex in the prairies is not sexing the prairies; gendering the prairies is not sexing the prairies; it becomes neither as it somehow includes both. Or does it? How does one "sex the prairies"? When I think of "sexing the prairie" in a Robert Kroetsch poem, I tend to think of other sections of his *Completed Field Notes* (1989/2001) Actually, I must admit that I think of, well, *most* of the sections of his *Completed Field Notes* when considering him "sexing the prairie," but somehow, not "Seed Catalogue" or "The Ledger." There are other places I would go. What about "After Paradise" or "Letters to Salonika"? What of the cross-dressing Kroetsch of *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2002)? Old Kroetsch writing his "horn" and his "books" yet again. Still, there are critical junctures we can never meet, and others we can never avoid. There are even those that we can never address. As Fred Wah writes in the introduction to the new edition of Kroetsch's *Completed Field Notes*:

*Notes 3:* One way to hold the moment of composition's attention is to keep asking questions, stall for more time, pose mystery, doubt, uncertainty. How do you grow a gardener, a lover, a prairie town, a past, a poet, "Seed Catalogue" asks.

Or Dennis Cooley, more recently writing the introduction to a new edition of the singular long poem, *Seed Catalogue* (2004), writing:

A muse might be at hand. The poem brims with muses, including Germaine, whose proclivities in coming out of bloomers and into bloom expand the garden metaphor that runs so extravagantly through the poem. The muses are local, inspiration that close, including the poet's mother, intimate spirit of the garden and one of the many Persephones who crop up in Kroetsch's writing.

As Kroetsch would tell you, among so many others, this is the story always being told as it is being re-told. In Calder's poem, she sets the boys up against the girls, writing all the boys on the outside, and her narrator in her grandmother's kitchen. As Calder continues:

Meanwhile, I was in the kitchen with a red-and white checked dish-towel growing soapy and limp in my hands. My grandmother was up to her elbows in sinksuds and my aunts were packing leftover jellied salads into Tupperware. The rainbow: orange jello with carrots and pineapple; green jello with fruit cocktail and maraschino cherries; pistachio pudding with dreamwhip and coconut. And vegetables. The jellied salads were all on beds of lettuce.

\*

Back on the ranch, the boys were ranching. Riding their horses hard and puttin' 'em away wet. They thought they were pretty smart until they fell off their horses. Then they thought they were smarter.

When one boy fell off, he broke his leg. "That was the fault of this prairie," he said. "She broke my leg. I'll have to shoot her." And he did. That prairie was shot so full of holes you'd think a colony of nuclear-powered gophers had moved in.

"I had to do it," that boy said. "She was asking for it."

What is *in* this inherent maleness she ascribes (and the violence they display), and needs to respond to? She moves back and forth from the boys outside on the prairie to the girls in the kitchen; as much prairie inside as outside, for certain, but the inference is a dismissal of same, whether first by the boys, or seconded by the girls. Or is it a lack of comprehension on the boys' part she talks of? My own father, Glengarry County eastern Ontario Scottish Presbyterian farmer, knew the whole world he lived in until he walked in the house, and became somehow incapable, lost in the domestic worlds my mother and I shared. It's not just a prairie problem/concern.

The prairie has maleness, sure; the prairie has plenty of it, Kroetsch and Cooley and Sproxton and Barbour and Budde and Fiorentino. But hasn't she read Markotić or van Herk or Holbrook or Williams or Hartman? (I know she has; just look at the book she edited with Robert Wardhaugh, *History, Literature, And the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* (2005). Or is her poem supposed to be ironic? Am I somehow missing the entire point?) How can you respond to one but not the other? How do you sex the prairie? Is it the lack of femaleness she laments or maleness itself? Is this a femaleness in her own relationship with the prairie and prairie writing she has yet to reconcile? I know she knows different from this; how is she reading the prairie? How, for that matter, is she reading the prairies? What does she know there that I don't? Probably a whole lot more than she lets on. Is this more a Winnipeg maleness she responds to, of Kroetsch and Cooley and Fiorentino writing prairie down by the Forks? Maybe Winnipeg needs to be closer to Calgary, where poet Julia Williams lives and works, publishing a part of her long poem-in-progress "*HOOK-HAND PELE*" in a special issue of *dANDelion* magazine, "the poetic project," writing:

None of these sits gentle on the tongue. I have a taste for exoticism, for uncomfortable language. Fine, Pele, accuse me of name-dropping but remember: the elastic mind seeks expansion, tension. What confuses you is not the arrangement of letters, but the disorder of shapes and colours.

mosquitoes clash with hot, dry sheets

welts and freckles, salt and lye  
yellow sulfur smudged with black coal

Can I help it if my original cells have flaked off? Can you help it, Pele, if your red  
veins no longer extend to the sea?

Original cells, like McKinnon's seven-year-itch before he writes another "sex at \_\_\_\_" poem, writing thirty-one, thirty-eight, forty-five, fifty-two, etcetera; the seven years before the body has regenerated and replaced its cells; the amount of time he waits before a poem can be written from a whole other experience about sex, and a whole other body. What is Calder reading into when she begins with her "lines not found"? Is the prairie text predominantly male or is that simply how she reads it? True, Laurence Ricou only included two women in his anthology *Twelve Prairie Poets* (1976), the poets Elizabeth Brewster and Miriam Waddington. Brewster and Waddington? I know there were other options; where were they? At least old Cooley, far more wiley and open than Ricou, included poets such as Elizabeth Allen, Pamela Banting, Kate Bitney, Norma Dillon, Kristjana Gunnars, Helen Hawley, Lala Koehn, Brenda Riches, Barbara Sapergia, Anne Szumigalski and Crosier in his *Draft: an anthology of prairie poetry* (1981). It's as though Calder writes her prairie on the back of Kroetsch's; whether or not she needs to, I don't know. There is more than one prairie. Calder's poem moves further, writing:

Things I learned about nature in the Fuchs Wildlife Exhibit, Highway 16,  
Lloydminster:

- what you can't shoot, trap
- what you can't trap, poison
- what you can't stuff, pickle
- what you can't pickle, petrify
- what you can't arrange in a natural, life-like setting, dress up in little clothes  
and glue miniature decks of cards and musical instruments to its paws

What does this have to do with sex?

Got sawdust between your ears?

Lloydminster, named after the minister, Lloyd, who saved the original settlers when their leader bailed, well over his head in the just-Saskatchewan wild. In the context of maleness versus femaleness, Calder responds to the falseness of artificial prairie settings; what is it that sets her premise of two conflicting sides? What *does* this have to do with sex? The fragment is a variant of what of former Alberta poet Susan Holbrook wrote in the piece "from the museum of old bones" from her first poetry collection, *misled* (1999), writing her alternate (perhaps) to the bones of the same museum through nearly twenty years of Monty Reid poems; Reid writing Drumheller, a province over from Lloydminster. Maybe writing Lloydminster isn't writing any other part of the prairie except for what Kroetsch has already done, layer and layer of unending, shifting dust. Writing a prairie dust that shifts and resettles but is never unsettled, in a prairie and a writing constantly in motion. Got sawdust, she asks? What does *this* have to do with sex?

i went to the dinosaur  
museum and saw

the Human Journey  
exhibit, amazed to find  
every figure, from  
the Cretaceous Insectivore  
to Homo Sapiens Sapiens,  
female, a guy gawking up:  
does this mean Man's going  
to turn into chicks?

*The surrounding  
sediments tell the story.*

Modern Woman towered over me  
blue power suit / eyes, heels  
fluffy blonde hairdo, big  
*These frills* briefcase. all i saw  
was a composite of fetishes  
wished she could have been

*served as a means* a poet or palaeontologist  
*of display* looked with a longing at the bare  
feet of animal skin shift  
of Neanderthal. i went to look  
around at all the bones in that  
place. i peered at bones,  
bonebeds, the ice age, the age  
of reptiles, walked around and  
around in my white skin, Jurassic  
trundled along with white

*Only the color has no* tour groups, Triassic  
*foundation in the fossil record.*  
everything under glass.

As Holbrook tells us, "*The surrounding / sediments tell the story.*" In the same way, the absences in Calder's poem speak as loud as the presences, writing her story of prairie. Calder ends her poem, finally, with these three fragments, opening with a line that could easily have been Kroetsch's own, writing:

"We got to cover that prairie," said those boys. "We got to get her covered."

They made up a shopping list: railways, towns, churches, brothels, schools, plows, oxen, cows, horses, chickens, pigs, shotguns, tractors, combines, augers, quonsets, fences, mail-order houses, mail-order brides, crops, more crops, big trucks, smaller trucks, medium trucks, pesticides, herbicides, gophercides, homicides, genocides, indian agents, residential schools, Mounties, the police, ballcaps, cruise missiles, the KKK, Monsanto, McDonalds.

Here's what the prairie said: tornados, droughts, floods, hail, thunderstorms, lightning strikes, blizzards, frostbite, isolation, mosquitos, black flies, warbles, ringworm, leeches, prairie fires, dust storms, blight, rust, pigweed, grasshoppers, gophers, magpies, skunks, coyotes, more gophers.

The prairie was sowing her wild oats.

\*

Here's what I learned in the kitchen: Saskatchewan is a country of geometry. This prairie was built on the principle of the grid. In fact, it was built on the principle of the square. Lemon squares, chocolate squares, date, turtle, butterscotch, vanilla dessert, cherry cheesecake, Betty's Best, chocolate chip, peanut butter-miniature marshmallow, brownie, graham cracker, grasshopper pie, Dora's, Mildred's, Ethel's, zucchini, carrot, banana, walnut, apple crumble, butterscotch, Hawaiian, pumpkin, Shirley's died-and-gone-to-heaven squares. Baby squares, wedding squares, funeral squares. Square dances.

The square was the model. If you don't believe me, look out the window of the plane.

\*

Those boys are crowding at the kitchen door, pushing each other forward and hanging back. "Come on in, boys," says my grandmother. "There's plenty of dish-towels for everyone."

But those boys aren't coming in. "Looks like work," they say. They'd rather be shootin' and hollerin' and having pissing contests over in the barn. They'd rather have a chaw and beat each other up, manly-like.

I sure wish they come on in. We could sit down right here at the kitchen table. We could look out the window, past my grandma's daylilies to the green and endless promise of the horizon. We could drink some coffee. We could have a good talk.

There, she admits it; the prairie as female, but for what the boys have done. Covering her gender and replacing their own. Is that the difference? How does one re-sex the prairies? As Shane Rhodes responds in a recent interview I did with him in the third issue of *ottawater*:

From my knowledge of Canadian literature, the prairies aren't an exception to some orgy of discourse going on in all other parts of the country. The prairies are enigmatic of the whole, what you would expect from its largely WASPish origins and influences. One thing that I first loved in Canadian literature and now have grown much more weary of is humour. When sex is written about, when love is written about, when almost anything is written about it is with humour. It is with a grin. It is tongue in the cheek or with a sense of faux-shock. You can certainly see this in a generation of male writers such as Kroetsch or McKay or Bowering, for example — much less in female writers of the same period.

There, too, Calder admits and reiterates her own prairie, reading and writing Saskatchewan, the province between the bluster of Kroetsch and Barbour's Alberta and Cooley and Fiorentino and Sproxton's Manitoba. Where is the gender in all of this? Why not respond to Anne Szumigalski or Lorna Crozier or Sylvia Legris, or even the maleness of Steve Ross Smith? Is it the strength or the largess of the texts that compel? Alison Calder, who's

biographical information in *Breathing Fire* says she grew up in Saskatoon; what does this have to do with Lloydminster? Learning her country indoors, and what she learned in the kitchen that the boys just never figured out. What does she know that they don't? What does she know that I don't? As Sylvia Legris writes in her long poem "earth, critical earth,"

12

leaving colour; leaving breath.

fingers blood-damp move earth, roots. this ground a heart—opens  
her lungs, wind-fluid. air; pools accumulating (well her gaping heart).

emulate this white moon, this garden. leave it all: paperwhite, peony,  
rue. this garden, elemental

(a lament)

Is this all, as Rhodes suggests, just nonsense then, creating a west where west already existed? What *does* this have to do with sex? As Markotić suggested in an email between drafts of this piece, "gophering their desires all over flat, bumpy prairie po-ummmmmmmms." As Bowering has suggested, the east is where all the history sits, and in the west, geography. Do all of these definitions fall down as arbitrary as self-definitions? But, one could easily ask, aren't these older considerations of how one reads writing? After modernism and post-modernism, haven't considerations of geography and "place" become one of the past? What are the further considerations referenced by Fiorentino and Kroetsch in their *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry* (2005)? What are these considerations referenced by the two in their introduction, but not entirely explained. As Fiorentino writes in the introduction:

To put it another way, the "home place" is where it's not: there are elements of a vernacular inclusion project in this anthology. The inability of many readers and literary scholars to see an emerging poetics of a new prairie, the post-prairie, should not be surprising—there is a reason the prairie is thought of as the domain of the rural, the wheat field and the grain elevator. This most obviously has something to do with its history, but the persistence of this imagery also has something to do with cultural capital—that is, there is a marketplace-based reason many people continue to think of the prairie as a fixed notion of "traditional" landscape. Perhaps it's easier to sell the prairie as such a simple place, located in some past golden page of a "simpler" life. In order to desimplify this notion, to figure out what we were getting at by gathering the elements of this anthology, where we were getting to, we, the editors, needed to dialogue.

If all this, then, is about needing to dialogue, or the ongoing conversation that each new writer and reader merely enters; if Kroetsch's geography/writing west is to be referenced or reconsidered, so too, the considerations of the late Eli Mandel, prairie poet and critic, writing his essay in the 1970s on the work of Saskatchewan poet Andrew Suknaski in "Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain" (the same place Red Deer College Press found the name of their 1980s poetry series). Do his notions of prairie still apply? What does *this* have to do with sex? Perhaps the only way to leave this is to leave it open, writing as a continual question or argument, and to end with Mandel's words, writing:



Some years ago Milton Wilson suggested that the real virtues of Canadian writing might very well lie in our often criticized colonialism and regionalism. Our perspectives, he suggested, have something to do with boundaries and contrasting patterns; not with place so much as with motion:

The nomadic culture of contemporary N/A makes the wandering poet the norm, and in as varied a country as Canada he is always having to set his digestion on fresh images—from 'Dawn on Anglo-Saxon Street' to 'Dusk on English Bay', from the ambiguous Avon flowing through Stratford, Ontario, to an equally ambiguous streetcar running down Main Street in Winnipeg, from the 'blue men of Saskatchewan' to the 'blue women of Quebec' and more than back again, from Newfoundland to the Last Spike. Indeed, the poet who moves west (or returns west) already has a niche in our gallery of poet archetypes right opposite the poet who can never get out of Montreal.

I must admit that before recalling Wilson's remarks I was a bit uneasy about presenting myself as a Western writer. Ten years in Toronto, it seemed to me, hardly qualifies one as a poet of the prairies. But if Wilson can be taken seriously, it is not place alone that matters but a direction, an attraction—something like the movement of a compass needle; not where it is, but where it points matters. My image for the prairie writer then, at least as a point of beginning for this account, is not necessarily the one who is in the west, or who stays here, but the one who returns, who moves, who points in this direction.

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rob mclennan's biography:

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**“Alchemists of the Human Experience”:  
An Interview with Vincent Ferrini.**

Interview by Michael O’Driscoll

On a spring day in 1999, I made what by then had been a long anticipated pilgrimage to the town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, erstwhile home of the great American poet Charles Olson, and the celebrated community of *The Maximus Poems*. A chance conversation with the painter John Di Marino (in the very pub that was scene of Olson’s funeral wake) led me to the door of Vincent Ferrini. At that point, I knew Ferrini only as many of us have known him: at once both the object of Olson’s scorn in the opening letters of *The Maximus Poems*, and the person to whom that epistolic adventure was first directed and who had thereby, in a sense, made possible Olson’s enduring life-work. Ferrini, so my new painter-friend promised me, was likely to be unhappy about any interruptions to his work; however, nothing could have been further from the truth. Vincent was welcoming and talkative during the course of a two hour visit, and invited me to continue our correspondence by mail and return when possible.

So began the friendship that led to the following interview, conducted away from the thronging crowds of New England tourists on an August afternoon in 2000, in the modest dwelling that Vincent called his home for over half a century. Vincent’s East Main Street abode was decorated with the artwork, sketches, and scribblings of a lifetime colored by creative companionship – a true treasury of local and literary history. Behind his home, the former frame shop where Vincent made his living for so many years had become, until recently, the repository of a voluminous correspondence and archive of working papers. Surrounded thus by the records of a poetic life that was both central and marginal to the history of twentieth-century poetry, Ferrini spoke with the authority of one who has truly lived a life of poetry.

On December 24, 2007, Ferrini died of complications that followed a heart attack and a bout with pneumonia. He was ninety-four years old. As Henry Ferrini, his nephew, reminds us in his own obituary note, the poet’s “vigor, unbound creativity and compassion kept him publishing for over 67 years producing 31 volumes of poetry, four volumes of plays and an autobiography”<sup>1</sup> That corpus includes Ferrini’s *Know Fish*, his epic meditation on the town of Gloucester, its place in history, politics, and the social life of a nation gone astray but still replete with hope.

With Ferrini’s passing, it seems high time that this previously unpublished interview see the light of day. “There really are,” Ferrini once told me, “two poets of Gloucester.” As the surviving poet of that pair, Ferrini offers here his observations on poetry and the obligations of the poet, education and politics, and of course his heated and heartfelt relationship with Charles Olson. I offer Ferrini’s words now in his memory, and with the friendship and respect embodied in his own characteristic salutation: “with both hands.”

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<sup>1</sup> See “OlsonNow: a blog on the poetry and poetics of Charles Olson,” edited by Kelleher and Ammiel Alcalay at <http://olsonnow.blogspot.com/2007/12/vincent-ferrini-1913-2007.html>.

MIKE O'DRISCOLL: *I thought it might be nice to start with your most recent work, and discuss the volume The Indweller.*<sup>2</sup>

VINCENT FERRINI: Well, that's not goin' too well. Even my closest friends are all, "hmm..." They're perturbed. They're liking a poem here and there, but they don't say much about it. Except for Peter Anastas, he understands it.<sup>3</sup> He and his wife read the whole book together. There are people like that. So I've been pleased with it. But on the other hand, there's a woman by the name of Maggie Jaffe.<sup>4</sup> You ever hear of her? She's a poet from San Diego. She teaches there. There's a magazine called Split Shift; it comes out once a year. The second issue is devoted, there's a couple of pages, to this Maggie Jaffe. She sent me a copy of her book How the West Was One. She's strong, very strong. I like this stuff. So we exchanged books. Then I got this card from her. It said, "Dear Vincent, I just love No Smoke."<sup>5</sup> You know the poems? It was reprinted after fifty-eight years. They did a great job. [Vincent retrieves a copy of the book.] I was so pleased because, when it was first published, it didn't have much of an audience. Very few people reviewed it. On the left, hardly anybody. But those remarks on the back, gives you a good picture of the people that brought it out.

MO: *Fantastic. It's in the great tradition of the poetry of the particular: Whitman, Sandburg, but also Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology.*

VF: Yeah, all that. And so, I sent that, a copy of that, to her, and she wrote "I just loved No Smoke. Its humanity and specificity of important details. Forgive me for not yet getting to The Indweller. I am overextended," and so forth. This woman here, I think she's a radical. I think she could be a Marxist, you know. In San Diego. I get a feeling that, that book there, is something that she would have to *think* about, and, she wouldn't want to think about it because it's in another vein. So she's not, I told her that she's not ready for this, this vein that I'm in. Which is kind of sad in a way, but then, on the other hand, that's how it is.

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Ferrini, The Indweller: Laughing Gold (Bedford, NH: Igneus Press, 2000). Publications subsequent to this interview include The Mysterium of Matter (Anabasis P, 2003) and Ferrini's selected poems The Whole Song, edited by Kenneth Warren and Fred Whitehead (U of Illinois P, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Anastas is editor of Maximus to Gloucester: The Letters and Poems of Charles Olson to the editor of the Gloucester Daily Times (Ten Pound Island Book Co., 1992). He is the author of Glooskap's Children: Encounters with the Penobscot Indians of Maine (Beacon Press, 1973) and Landscape with Boy (Kite Books, 1974). His fiction and criticism have appeared in numerous journals. He lives in Gloucester, MA.

<sup>4</sup> Maggie Jaffe is a lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University. She is the author of several volumes of poetry including The Prisons (Cedar Hill Publications, 2000), 7th Circle (Cedar Hill Publications, 1999), and How The West Was One (Burning Cities Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> No Smoke was first published by Falmouth Publishing House, Portland, Maine, in 1941. The second edition was published by The Curious Traveller Press, Gloucester MA, in August, 1999.

MO: Well, it's a very long way from No Smoke to The Indweller. The Indweller offers much more of a cosmic vision. It offers more abstraction. There's a place for the particular in The Indweller, in your letters to the editor of the Gloucester Times, for example, but there's also something that seems to me to be much more along the lines of a kind of Blakean cosmology, or Yeats' A Vision, particularly in the final sections of the poem, where you begin to work out "The Wheel of Love."

VF: Right.

MO: And that seems to me to be something very far removed from the poems of No Smoke.

VF: There was a guy by the name of Jack Hirschman.<sup>6</sup> He became the editor of a magazine called Left Curve, which comes out of Oakland. He said "Vincent, write like you wrote No Smoke." And I said, "Okay, commissar of culture, so you want me to go back to where I started. You don't want me to grow. Well, fuck you."

MO: So, how have you grown? I mean, has your universe expanded, then, from Lynn, Massachusetts to something much more sweeping?

VF: Well, you get No Smoke, shoes, you get Know Fish, fishes, okay? I'm covering two worlds. No Smoke was written in that vein, and Know Fish was written in this vein.<sup>7</sup> So you get two styles. Different. And the pitch is still there. For both. But this latest one, I wanted to expand about the fact that there are more things than in Heaven and Earth than comes out in our philosophy. And so I started to move in different dimensions, 'cause I'm trying to find out what the hell this is all about. So I had to come to grips with my perceptions about where I was, what's happening to me, and sometimes it was too far out for people, y'see. So, I had to go with it, I had to do it.

MO: And would you do it again?

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Hirschman has published more than 25 translations of poetry from eight languages, and currently assists in the editing of Left Curve and is a correspondent for The People's Tribune. In 2006 Hirschman was named the poet laureate of San Francisco. Among his many volumes of poetry are A Correspondence of Americans (Indiana U. Press, 1960), Black Alephs (Trigram Press, 1969), Lyrpol (City Lights, 1976), The Bottom Line (Curbstone, 1988), and Endless Threshold (Curbstone, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> The poem is published in seven volumes: Know Fish, Volumes I and II, (University of Connecticut, 1979), Know Fish, Volume III: The Navigators (University of Connecticut, 1984), Know Fish, Volumes IV and V: The Community of Self (University of Connecticut, 1986), and Know Fish, Volumes VI and VII: This Other Ocean (University of Connecticut, 1991).

VF: Well, right now, see, I'm working on a book with this girl, a twenty-one year older. I'm working on a book, I've got a great title for it – I tell it to you, you forget it. It's gonna be called "The Invisible One and the Wedding." It's in two parts.<sup>8</sup>

MO: *Wonderful. "The Invisible One and the Wedding." Can you explain the title?*

VF: Explain the title? The Chinese say that there's a multiplicity of things. The one and the many. Everything is, so clouded with so many details, you get lost. But it's hard to see the one. The one that holds it all, is invisible. Y'get it? I love that title because people have to think about it. Do I have to explain everything?

MO: *No, I don't think so. I think it's good to leave people thinking.*

VF: Yeah, because, if they're going to think, they'll think. If they're not going to think, they won't think.

MO: *Well, okay, but then I have a question for you. One of the things, it seems to me, that you pride yourself on, is writing in a tradition of poetry that's deliberately anti-intellectual. Like you said to me before, you don't like schools.*

VF: No, I don't like them.

MO: *But do you think that writing a volume of poetry that requires that people think goes against that in some way? This is a demanding volume of poetry. Do you think a poet of the people should be writing demanding poetry?[Laughter.] Now, that will tell us what you think about the people.*

VF: Yeah, but see, now you stick me into a category. I don't consider myself a poet of the people. I'm already *in* the people. You gotta get away from that, if you stay with those demarcations, you're putting me in a category, you're putting me in a prison. Like I said in the first book, I can't do that because, hey, I'm different from when I wrote that, that first book. Because if you don't see me growing, you see me stuck. And that's what most people are. And you know what? Education wants to put people in categories, and they *stick* 'em. Y'get it? I'm loose and free. My nature's anarchistic. But I believe in order. Because if I don't believe in order, chaos will destroy me, see? So, that's my feeling about education, because it doesn't allow people to move at their own pace. And then you get these poets who fit into categories, into styles. I remember the first time when I was reading, ah, Peter Anastas gave me, well, first he gave me Phillip "Wrath," I

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<sup>8</sup> *The Invisible One and the Wedding* has yet to be published.

loved Phillip “Wrath.” You know, Phillip Roth.<sup>9</sup> I call him Wrath. I love Roth/Wrath. And then he says, “read Kerouac.” Well, when Kerouac was publishing his books, I was publishing mine too. But I didn’t get involved in the Beat Generation. I was not in the Beat Generation. So I didn’t read his novels because he was too close to my own way. So, if I’d have moved into that category I would have been in among the beats. Then they’d know where to place me. Education, teachers, professors, whoever they are, they want to put people in categories so they can explain ’em.

*MO: That’s right, that’s how they make their money.*

VF: Exactly, exactly, that’s how they make their money. But that’s not the real stuff. The real stuff is to see the openness of the human experience. And when you see that openness, you can accept it on its own terms. So they can’t, they don’t know where to place me. I’m elusive, you know why? My life is elusive. Everyday is different. I’m breathin’ my own soul! So if you put me in a category, you shut me up. You destroy me. You can’t destroy me, before judgement. Once you do that, if you read my stuff, and it disturbs you, fine. If it makes you think, fine. If you say, “Well, I can’t get this,” too bad. You don’t get it. But, the real education comes when some guy or some girl picks up this book here. Holds it. Reads it. [Pretends to read the book, then slaps it down.] Does that, and then someone else picks up the book. [Pretends to read again.] “Hmm, interesting, yeah, interesting. I don’t get it, but I’ll stick with it.” They stick with it and then they say, “Well, Jesus Christ, there’s something in this book here that’s fantastic.” One guy, he asks me for the title, and I said, “it’s The Indweller. And the author is Laughing Gold,” and he says, “that makes me feel good.”

*MO: Okay, that’s a question I have for you. The author of the volume is cited as “The Emperor of Mars,” and the author is also named “Laughing Gold,” is that correct?*

VF: That’s right. The Emperor of Mars is the author, his name is Laughing Gold. Because that’s his name! Before I used to call myself “Laughing Iron,” because Ferrini means “little iron.” Now I’ve gone beyond the Iron Period, I’m into the Gold Period. Y’get it? This whole experience in life is conditioned by money! You understand? Money, money, money! That’s tough. So, here I am, I got the gold! See, if I got the gold, others can get it too. And poets can get it. There’s a poem in here about the alchemy of...

*MO: “The Alchemy of the Human Experience.”*

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<sup>9</sup> Phillip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1933, and is among the preeminent chroniclers of Jewish American life and culture. His many award winning publications include *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories* (1959), *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), and *The Counterlife* (1988).

VF: That's it, exactly.

*MO: "Poets must become Alchemists of the Human Experience." I loved that line.<sup>10</sup>*

VF: Right, right. Now, once you understand that, you see that the whole process of existence is a form of finding out the base elements in your personality. And then you go through the firing of experiences. The up and down, I mean. Something happens while you're going through those experiences, and then you blossom. You change. You're developing. Finally, you jump out of the experiences that block us in. From the time you're born till the time you die, you're locked up in these things here. Finally, when you feel it, my god, that the gold is in you, "I'm the richest man alive! I love my body, my body loves me! Hey! God!" When people feel that way, they won't feel trapped by the exigencies of day to day life, and the need to get trapped into working to get the money to buy the things you need. That's a waste of time! I don't believe in all that, see. I believe, now, that I am the gold, and I've always been the gold, then I'm able to show people that I'm not only gold in that sense, because, I mean, it's just marvelous to me, where I am, is that, suddenly, people can't figure out where I am. And they get incensed that I'm in another place where they aren't. And they feel troubled about that. There's nothing I can do about it, except just continue to be who I am. Those who know me, know me like you're getting to know me, they appreciate who I am, and they learn from who I am and what I do and how I do it. They see, that it's possible for anyone to move in that direction. So that, suddenly, instead of going out for the money, they find the gold that's in themselves. When you find the gold that's in yourself, you see what this whole experience is teaching us to be.

*MO: Towards the conclusion of that volume, you use the phrase "real gold," and it has to do with recognizing the male and the female principles, unified, inside. Is that an example?*

VF: Yeah, I'll give you a perfect example of that. One time a guy in the Saint Ann's church asked me if I would give a talk at mass, at Catholic mass, on Sunday morning. Oh, Jesus. I said, "are you sure?" He says, "yeah." So, I went down to the church there one morning, ten o'clock, and I had my hat on, and the priest said "you have to take your hat off and go down to the pew there, and when we give you the sign you come up and you speak for three minutes." So I said, "okay," and the time came and I went up there and the first thing I said was "Mary Magdalene was the thirteenth disciple." Right off the bat. And I said, "You have to take the triangle of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the triangle of the Mother, the Daughter and the Holy Spirit, and you put them on top of each other and you make a star." And I said, "Each of you have to make that star alone." As soon as I said that, the two priests behind me said "Aaaaamen!" Y'see they just

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<sup>10</sup> Ferrini, The Indweller, 31.



wanted to ship me right out of that church. So, I mean, I took a simple image, see, I gave the persons an idea about how to move into an “image definition” that would help them be more than they are. Now, that symbol, there’s an old symbol, it goes back long before the Jews picked it up. And, so, then I saw that the lower triangle is the female, and the other one the male, see. So, once you understand that, you understand what you’re going through and how to get there. Once you get there, you feel united. And when you feel united, you’ve got your two feet on the ground, you feel good! You’re at the center of the whole creation.

*MO: Is “The Wheel of Love” another image definition?*

VF: Yeah, that’s right. The Wheel of Love, for instance, you come out of the dark, you come into the light part of it, and you go back into the dark. So it’s a real circle. That’s how I see life. You can see that as reincarnation. You can see that as society, when you become that circle, where the light and the dark are complete, just the light and the dark, and then there’s movement. So, everything is in motion. Once you see that, you feel that “I’m there.” Then you’re at peace. So, basically, what I’m concerned with is the art of living. When your life is the poem, you’re there, whether you write it or don’t write it. That takes the power away from the universities. I’m sorry to say.

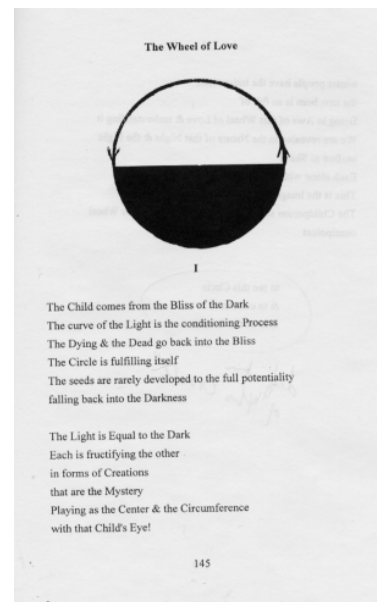


Figure 1: “The Wheel of Love”

*MO: I understand. Who else does it take the power away from?*

VF: Who else? From the money system. The money system is, you go to school, you find an occupation, and you become rich. The point of life is to become rich.

*MO: Kind of misses the point, doesn't it?*

VF: Misses it all.

*MO: Okay. The volume's divided – you were talking about the elements of yourself – the volume is divided into nine different sections. Three main sections, with three sub-sections in each. Door, Air, Fire, Mercury, Water, Nightlight, Earth, Gold, and Journey. Are these the elements, is this the “primal nine” that you talk about in “Below the Deep”?*

*so I am an agent to the cause  
of that Invisible & its dictations  
the 3s the hub of the primal 9  
speaking of that impeccable power<sup>11</sup>*

*It seems to me this may be another image definition.*

VF: It's another image of the Three. The Three is very important in Marxism, and materialist philosophy. Thesis, antithesis and synthesis: that's the three. And the nine is the primal nine, where all things are included in that number. So, when you reach that point where the three and the nine are inside yourself, then, suddenly, before you know it, without even thinking, something is happening to you. A sense of innate security is coming forward. I read in the paper about Indigo Kids, the Indigo Children.<sup>12</sup> They have certain colors you know, and the indigo colour is primary, and they're exactly where they are, at that time in their life, and they lose it, as they get older. As they get into the schools, they have to conform. And once you start to conform, about the direction of your life, then it's all over. You've lost it. So when you work with numbers – the one, the two, all the numbers are highly significant, y'know. They're all pieces of music, see. And once you lend yourself to all these experiences, your life is enriched. And they could do that in school, they could do that in universities, but they'd have to break down the system that supports it. An anti-professor, "Professor Anti-professor," suddenly you start teaching these kids something. You know what they say to me? They say, "What you talk about, they never teach us in college." They don't teach us in college because it's not appropriate to carrying on the system. Basically, for me, there's no system. There's only a way of living.

*MO: What if I was to teach your work in college? What would that do to your work?  
What would that do to the college?*

VF: Good question. Good question. There's a guy, a young guy, twenty years old, and he wrote me a letter, after he heard at Lynn's Historical Association about No Smoke and other poems, and he wanted to speak to me. He's going through this tremendous conflict, and he doesn't know how to deal with it, because he wants to be a writer. So he wrote me this letter, and I said, "You're on the track, your letter is on the track." And then he came to see me. And we talked about where he's at, and he finds himself alienated in college because he wants to do certain things that are not appropriate, see. But then he

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<sup>11</sup> Ferrini, *The Indweller*, 80.

<sup>12</sup> "Indigo Children" are deemed to have unusual physical, mental, and spiritual abilities that herald an evolutionary shift in the human population. The accelerated genetic development of these children is said to make apparent the long dormant abilities all humans possess. By the same token, proponents of the phenomenon describe the incredible obstacles faced by these children in standardized and secularized education systems.

wants to get his degree. So I told him, well, where I am, you shouldn't listen to me, because if you listen to me you'll say "fuck the college." So I said, pick up certain things that you can use, and what you can't use, don't use. If you've got to go to college and get your degree, do it; in the meantime, listen to what you're experiencing. Listen to your heart and your head. Write a journal. And eventually you'll find your signature as you experiment in the journal. I just heard from him, about six weeks ago. Now, he's gonna find out for himself. Two things can happen: he can become a professor, because he's got the learning and he loves literature, he can teach literature; or he can become a creative writer. If he becomes a creative writer, he won't stay in the university. Unless he does what you do, be with the power, and yet be wholly creative in your occupation.

*MO: Sometimes I wonder... At the beginning of my contemporary literature class, I walk in and, without announcing who I am, I read Ginsberg's "Howl." Out loud. So I get to shock the students, and I get to say all the things that will immediately de-mystify the students about what the class will be about, and what being an English professor is about. And I think of that as being a powerful and positive thing to do. But I don't always know if somehow it escapes the institution that it takes place in anyhow. I just don't know whether that is more powerful than the institution in which it's taking place.*

VF: Exactly. The university is more powerful than that poem. But the poem has a power of its own, for those who will understand it and work with it. But you're caught in a dilemma between going with the power of the poem, and going on your own way. Otherwise you stay with the university and you get your degree, and you find a place in life. Your method is a good method. If you can stimulate them, fine. But, if you go outside the track, you might find resistance. One way you can do it, for instance, you can teach contemporary literature, then when you get a response from them, and if they fail, you know where they are, and therefore they're discarded, don't do it, because they're going to fail at it anyway, see. But if some of them learn it, they make great progress.

*MO: One of the things I like about The Indweller is... well, let me put it this way: it's been more than three decades since you began writing Know Fish, and in some ways I see this as being a continuation of that project, even though I understand that there are some differences. But all along I see, in this poem, after years of you working on your poetry, an unflagging optimism on your part, in, for example, "The Water Rites":*

*there are no signs for  
the Hound the City Fathers  
nor the sleight of mind reporting & Print Power  
cannot chain  
or temper the seizures of blinding*

*Light*<sup>13</sup>

VF: Yeah, that's great.

MO: Or, as you write in a letter-poem to the Gloucester Times, dated October 2, 1998:

*For the last three years I have seen a change of  
Consciousness, a different kind of horizon.  
Now in the hands and minds of people who care and think  
about that caring.  
Only because this place is the dream inside each one of us,  
that it does exist and we have to nurture and Nourish by Acts.  
That this is happening is a rise of the roots Gloucester on  
another dimension!  
Ah, the words are clarity and full of action!*<sup>14</sup>

VF: Yeah, see, there is a chemical process that I am participating in, in my life in Gloucester. I see it happening. I see the difference, I get a letter in there [ie. in the Gloucester Times], and there are certain observations made, and people who read it, pick up on it, and they're affected. It goes in through the eye, or the ear, and suddenly they feel that something's going on. Without their knowing it. I don't want to use the word "magician," but it's a way of alchemizing the life experience. So you get people, who are so conditioned against themselves, you understand, that they can't make any progress. So I have to use words in such a manner that the words stand out, the lines stand out. My letters are a combination of prose and poetry, but I don't think of them as either one or the other. I think of them as words loaded with information and image, and when they see it, people get disturbed, angry, they react, and something happens. That's my role here in Gloucester. Because, that's been my life all along anyway. I mean, in No Smoke, I had the people say "Well, Jesus Christ, we're going to have a problem." But the factories are telling them what to do! Inanimate factories are telling these people what to do! The factories are talking! I'm doing the same thing with fishes. These people don't know fishes. The fishes are inside their bodies. They don't know the sea because they don't know their bodies. If they knew their bodies, they would know what it means to be a part of the universe with the water next door. But then, what goes wrong? What is it that's interfering with our growth and progress? Then they realize that it's their selves. See, a concern with the self, the family, and society. Those three elements, three, those three elements are confused. They're at loggerheads. You're a Canadian. I find the Canadians far more advanced than the Americans. All the Canadians I've met so far, their outlook is different. They have more of a universal outlook than the Americans. So, it's one of those things that I have to not be dumbfounded by it. And so, that's how it

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<sup>13</sup> Ferrini, The Indweller, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Ferrini, The Indweller, 35.

is. Literature, words, light! Harness light! That's what I say about fame. You reach fame, you stop. Nothing stops. Even if you die, nothing stops. So, the big problem here is how do you stimulate the changes that you find yourself in? That's why a lot of people, some people, hate me.

*MO: Is it that money and fame, things that we keep coming back to, are about end-goals, about product and not about process? Is that another way to put that?*

VF: Yeah. In other words, my brother, my brother Dante, who is close to me, he says "Jesus, why don't you write a dirty book and you'll get all the money coming out of your asshole." I said, I can't write a dirty book, I don't feel like it, see. So, he's playing the horses for sixty years, he's been playing the horses, and he says "I'm going to make a killing some day." That's the dream, that's the American dream. The lottery. So, if money was my Alpha and Omega, I'd be a very rich man. Cancer people are rich. I'm a Cancer. They're rich. The United States' government is a Cancer country, it's rich. I'm not into that. I'm into the fullness of the creative life. For everyone to move in that direction. When you achieve that, the whole value system collapses.

*MO: And so, do you see evidence that "the alchemy of the human experience" that poets perform as taking hold sometimes?*

VF: Oh, it's moving. It's moving. The people in Gloucester, are taking an interest in things that are happening here. They're participating in the process of growth and development. I tell ya, it's fantastic! It's beautiful! They're doing it on their own! They're moving and participating in government. The government of this city here. [Slaps his palm.] It's great!

*MO: Yeah, it's nice to see. I came from Walden Pond yesterday, where people from around the world gathered a few years ago to raise money to stave off development there. And I stood in the waters there, where Thoreau swam naked, and there were people there, but there were no buildings. There were trees and there was water, there were people enjoying themselves, and it was a wonderful thing. And it made me think of you, and Gloucester.*

VF: Now, this is the big thing. Here I am in Gloucester. I participate in government. I go to council meetings. I write letters. Imagine, if every city had a person like me moving the city, to move in the directions of total fulfillment. That's where education is. The poets don't do that. You know why? Fuckin' ego. "I want to be a famous poet." That's the wall, the wailing wall. In this case here, it's the "hurrah wall." What a feeling it is, I mean, Jesus, this thing is a, well, if you're in a big city like San Francisco, take a neighborhood. Start somewhere. If it's a small town, that's even better. Leave the big cities go to small towns.

*MO: So we're into the obligations of the poet.*

VF: Responsibility. Responsibility to life and to democracy. That's our responsibility. We have this government that's occupied and run by two parties. If you can teach that, okay, the door is open. You just teach literature?

*MO: Hm-hmm.*

VF: Well, tell one of your poets, find a place.

*MO: Sometimes I do. I tell them that they might have a hard time being students of literature and poets at the same time.*

VF: Yeah, good for you.

*MO: They should be students of life!*

VF: That invigorates you. When you become invigorated with this idea, you transmit it to these students. Like these kids I met, I mean, the Indigo Children, they're already humanists, they're conceptualists, they're artists in the inter-dimensional. Kids! They got it!

*MO: They're still close to the beginning of that "arch of light" though, having just come from the darkness in the "wheel of love."*

VF: That's right. Kids have it. You know what? I still get it. I'm an Indigo Child. Now imagine a people who, instead of going after the money, went after that kind of a life. The world would be far richer. Curiosity would move them all the time. Yeah, I'm Laughing Gold, I'm laughing at this goddam fucking money machine! They'll go for the money and I get the gold. It's ironic.

*MO: Wonderfully ironic. At one point, in a letter to the Gloucester Times, you asked the question, what are we living for, and what does Gloucester mean, and where are we going. And I think you've answered those questions.*

VF: Yeah, and now you know it. It's good that a guy like you comes to see a guy like me. Just to find out where the hell I am, so you know where you are. Marvelous.

MO: I told a friend a couple of days ago that I don't feel like a very old soul, I don't feel very wise. In fact what I said was that I feel like I get less wise everyday. Less wise, because I keep finding out how much I don't know.

VF: Yeah. That's good. At that point, you start to see things. Things come into your ken, 'cause you're open for it. It's when you're closed, you're closed minded. Oh, you see so many of these close minds, they're locked in, y'know. They have their own ideas, and they're fixed. Terrible. You see them everywhere.

MO: Is this, as Olson writes, "I had to learn the simplest things last"?<sup>15</sup>

VF: Yeah. Y'know, he had a horseshoe up his ass, that's an expression, y'know.

MO: I didn't think he really did. [Laughter.] I took it as an expression.

VF: Well, anyhow, he got me noticed, because The Maximus Poems are strong, out there. But he attacked me, to destroy me, because he figured that I had something he didn't have. I do have something he didn't have. I'm also a scholar in my own right. Unlike these ones that are trained. But I read. There's a poem in the Collected Poems called "Ferrini - I."<sup>16</sup> [Retrieves copy of Olson's Collected Poems.] Here's a poem, eleven pages, eleven pages. Look at it. [Long pause while the interviewer reads.] Havin' trouble with it?

MO: No, I don't think so.

VF: Good.

MO: There are luminous moments. When was this written?

VF: Oh, some time before he died. It wasn't published, and George Butterick found it, and put it in the shape that it's in.

MO: What did this poem mean to you when you read it? How did it make you feel?

VF: I read it three times. Didn't get it. [Laughter.] Three times. But, I went to the Dictionary of Mythology, and I got it! It's a great poem!

MO: What did the Dictionary of Mythology tell you?

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Olson, "Maximus, to Himself," in The Maximus Poems, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Olson, "Ferrini—I," in The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, ed. George F. Butterick. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 571-81. An unpublished poem from a typescript dated January 4-15, 1963.

VF: Olson mentioned Glaucus and Polyeidus, a seer. The *Dictionary of Mythology* tells us that “Minos of Crete commanded him to restore his dead son, Glaucus, to life, the child having died from falling into a vat of honey, Polyeidus saw a snake approaching the dead child and killed the snake. Another snake appeared and seeing its mate dead went away and returned with a herb which restored the snake to life. Polyeidus used the same herb on the dead child and brought it back to life.”<sup>17</sup> And then he came across the passage, here, y’see, he did a job on me. But, he saved himself.

*MO: Olson returns you to good graces, brings you back to life, later in the “Maximus” poems.*

VF: But he does it better here [Ferrini reads]:

Freud who did not know the Germans were  
officialdom—and did not therefore properly  
interpret dream. Co-kings, Hines-Orpheus and  
Dewsnap-Ferrini: Dewsnap means impartial  
beauty. We rule, beyond the mare’s hooves.<sup>18</sup>

On the name “Dewsnap” Olson read the *Gloucester Daily Times* and when my daughter Deirdre’s obit appeared on the back page there was an announcement of the birth of a child named “Dewsnap.” That’s the fact: Olson uses whatever fits his scheme of the poem in process. [Ferrini repeats, with emphasis]: “We rule, beyond the mare’s hooves.” “Co-kings”!!

*MO: The two of you.*

VF: Yeah. Capricorn and Cancer. And to this guy, who is working on the relationship between Ferrini and Olson, I said call it “‘Co-kings’: A study of Olson and Ferrini.”<sup>19</sup>

*MO: An excellent title for it.*

VF: I hope he does call it that. So you can see what Olson did there, see, he realized that, y’know, Cancer has what Capricorn doesn’t have, and visa versa, there is elements of each in each, so you can see that in the long run...

*MO: Is this “the place where you can meet”?*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Evans Bergen, *Dictionary of Mythology: Mainly Classical* (Lincoln: Centennial P, 1970), 207.

<sup>18</sup> Olson, *Collected Poems*, 580.

<sup>19</sup> The “guy” is Kenneth A. Warren, poet and editor of *House Organ*, a magazine of poetry and reviews.

<sup>20</sup> Olson concludes the scathing criticisms in “Letter 5” of *The Maximus Poems* with the following lines:

It’s no use.



VF: There's a book, it's called Astrology: The Divine Science.<sup>21</sup> There's astrology and mythology. There's a section here called "Cancer vs. Capricorn: Moon and Saturn." It shows how these two forces are opposed, and how they work together. One is the basic meaning about the two, one is "excessive action," and then there's a second called "deficient action," and then there's "resolution." You get through astrology how these two aspects are moving towards a sense of unity that defines the mystery of existence. And you notice how everything moves and how it works, how things happen; Jung touched upon it: synchronicity, a law of the unconscious. The last time I went to my nephew's wedding party I danced with four women simultaneously, and had a great time. And I wanted this woman to come into my life, twenty one years old. What I feel, what I believe, what I want, what I desire, and the things that run me, happen y'see. So you get this thing here, the fact that Olson came into my life, I came into his life, it happened. There's an energy, there's a power, that's moving all the time, see. Some people don't know it, some people do know it. Now, there's a guy, for instance, pretty good poet, he tried to translate Dante's Divine Comedy, he's very imaginative, his name is Herbert Kenny.<sup>22</sup> I sent him that book. For a long time he didn't respond. When he first met me, he read No Smoke, he said, "Vincent, join the Catholic church and become a great Catholic poet." Well, I sent him that book, and he didn't answer for a long time. Then he sent me this card. It says, "Vinny, at the heart of poetry is metaphor and mystery. The ideal life for you and me, here and for eternity." He's got it!

*MO: Metaphor and mystery...*

VF: Yeah. So, now, he really knows who I am, so he doesn't need to push me to join the church. [Laughter.] It's interesting, all these things happen correctly. If he wanted me come, to go, I couldn't go into the church there, I mean, Jesus Christ, I'm in church as it is. So, he comes up with that, he finally saw exactly what I am, where I am, he's at peace. Can't beat it! This is the mystery of existence. It's the poets, and the rest of poetry, and all that, and, Jesus Christ, Man. Everything is poetry. But they want to be known as poets, y'know, they want to claim it as poets! And then you read them, and then you forget about it. You read them and you forget about it! I want to get into the skin! See changes under the skin, the skin of the body and the skin of the brain. It's

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There is no place we can meet.  
You have left Gloucester.  
You are not there, you are anywhere  
where there are little magazines  
will publish you.

<sup>21</sup> Marcia Moore and Mark Douglas, Astrology: The Divine Science (York Harbor, Maine: Arcane Publications, 1971).

<sup>22</sup> Following this interview, Ferrini sent forwarded a message noting that Herbert Kenny passed away on Good Friday, March 29, 2002.

exciting. People know that when they see me. I transmit that energy, that divine energy. Blake had it. He did those drawings. Those drawings. Beautiful bodies, beautiful human beings, y'know. That's his dreams! We can move in that direction. There's so many things that we can do that we can't do because we're bred and we're on a track. And that track has only one destination: Fame and Fortune.

*MO: Fame and Fortune...*

VF: Education is the most revolutionary form of activity there is.

*MO: The right kind of education...*

VF: Exactly. The time will come when the kids will rush to go to school. Because they're going to be enthralled, they're going to enjoy things that they never knew before. They'll participate in it! How can you beat that. It's like making love, you can't beat it. It just bliss.

*MO: Back to Olson for a second?*

VF: Go ahead.

*MO: When you mentioned love and, when you were talking about the way that your life and Olson's life infused each other, it reminded me of a passage from "In the Arriving," in which you respond to the attack in The Maximus Poems, in which you talk about that very thing, about the two of you interacting in a certain way:*

*I say this*  
*so it sticks*  
*in the mind's craw*  
  
*each*  
*in his own*  
*weight*  
*& specific*  
*value*  
  
*on his individual terms*  
  
*to be hammered*  
*out on the*  
*anvil*  
*of*  
*experience*  
  
*into his usable metal*

*thus  
created  
from his  
ore*

*so each one  
counts*

*...  
love does not  
judge  
he*

*is  
too busy  
making*

*anew.*<sup>23</sup>

*This strikes me as a poem of incredible graciousness, with which you responded to his attack.*

VF: When I first met him, I liked him immediately. I liked his energy, I liked his awareness. There was something about him, there was something forward, he wasn't an ordinary poet, y'know. He's just, he had a lot of that stuff. So I responded to that. So then, when he attacked me I said, well, okay, I read it, see. And, well, it was severe. Then I said, what the shit. I wrote this In the Arriving. Not "arrived," I mean we haven't arrived, we're all arriving...

*MO: Process not product...*

VF: That's right, exactly. So, finally he said, well, he said, "That's the greatest poem you ever wrote!" [Laughing.]

*MO: Well, I have to admit that I also like it very much. I also think it's a great poem. It's not just a love poem, though, it's also a critique, of murderous judgement, of the domination of one voice by another. Of closure.*

VF: It's a dialectical dialogue. He said something, I responded to it. Get it? Between the two something new comes out, and fact that the people see it, and then you get something out of it. You benefit from it. You can't beat that trinity there: thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent Ferrini, In the Arriving (Liverpool: Heron Press, 1954), 13-14.

MO: *Is that also the idea that love is not judgement, but that “love makes anew.”*

VF: That’s right. Exactly. Yeah, I never judged him. But he had to take me down. And he did it because he wanted to teach me a lesson. That’s what he said.

MO: *Thanks very much! There’s got to be better ways to do that!*

VF: “Thanks very much.” [Laughter.] That’s pretty good.

MO: *Cid Corman brought you that volume of Origin 8.<sup>24</sup> Was that the first time you saw Olson’s “Letter Five”?*

VF: First time I saw letter five.

MO: *Was that a tough day for you?*

VF: Well, it was at Helen Stein’s house there, when I read it there I thought, Jesus Christ, the marker falls on me. I said, well, I’ll just have to let it sink in. Then when he died, I wrote that eulogy for him, “The THEIA MANIA of Charles Olson.”<sup>25</sup>

MO: *Oh, okay. I know which one. Well, you also wrote, in your autobiography there’s a chapter devoted to Olson called “A Frame” that, I think, is a rewrite of an earlier article from Maps #4, which is also very generous.<sup>26</sup> It’s very warm, in spirit.*

VF: I loved the guy.

MO: *It was a great friendship.*

VF: Yeah, a great friendship. I mean, when his first wife, I knew well, I remember one time the three of us took a trip to Maine there, it was enjoyable. Then when he had his second wife there, well, he never married her either.<sup>27</sup> Y’see, Betty was a lovely person, and, I liked her and she liked me. And, one time there was an incident, well, I don’t want to go into it.

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<sup>24</sup> Corman – along with Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Duncan, and others – is typically associated with the Black Mountain school of poetry. He has been the editor of Origin Press for over fifty years, and is the author of over one hundred volumes. From his home in Kyoto, Japan, Corman played an absolutely central role in the development and establishment of many seminal poets of the mid-twentieth century United States.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Ferrini, “The THEIA MANIA of Charles Olson,” in Selected Poems, ed. George F. Butterick (Storrs, CT: U of Connecticut Library, 1976), 94-95.

<sup>26</sup> Vincent Ferrini, “A Frame.” in Hermit of the Clouds: The Autobiography of Vincent Ferrini (Gloucester, MA: Ten Pound Island Book Co., 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Augusta Elizabeth (“Betty”) Kaiser was Charles Olson’s second common-law wife, and mother to Charles Peter Olson. Their relationship began in 1954 at Black Mountain College and ended ten years later with Betty’s tragic death in an auto accident.

*MO: Okay, let it go...*

VF: Y'see, she was a painter, y'know, and she was kind of stifled. And, ah, he made up his mind to go to Buffalo, and she didn't want to go. He suspected she wanted to stay here because she wouldn't be under his domination, and that I would be seeing her, because I liked her, and she liked me. And then, I was driving them to the south station, and, she hadn't made up her mind to go, and Charles Peter was there, the kid, at the very moment before we were in the south station, she made up her mind to go, against her own will, that was force, force is fascism, any form of force, psychological, emotional. Anyhow, when she got into that accident and killed herself, again my time was down there, and, I was there, for a few days.

*MO: Did you go to see him at any other time when he was in Buffalo?*

VF: No, I stayed there during that period, and after the ceremony, I stayed a few days. Then I went to see him in the hospital. That's when he told me to go down with Peter and get certain articles from his house there and bring them to him. So we did.

*MO: Right. Were you there when he passed away?*

VF: I left just before he died. His daughter was there. He was in the hospital, he had one sheet over him, y'know. He wrote to the "Human Universe" a paragraph of words, with a trembling hand. When I came back I was so exhausted, y'know, and I gave a copy away, and I forget now who I gave it to. He was a driven man.

*MO: Can you say what his friendship meant to you, what it means to you?*

VF: It means that he's a, he's a big person in my life and, in fact was a truly good poet. I like the fact that he was sharp, and could really get to the beat of what it was he was concerned with, what I or anybody else was concerned with. I liked his ability, I liked everything he did, except his relationship with his second wife, Betty, and his son. His son, about a year ago, maybe two years ago, he came in to see me and said, "I'd like to borrow one of my father's books." He'd never read his father's books. He asked for one of them a couple years ago, *Call Me Ishmael*. So he read it, that's the only thing of his father's writing, but he also read Tom Clark's biography *The Allegory of a Poet's Life: Charles Olson*, I'll just show you. [Goes to get the book.] His son gave me this book, look what he wrote in here: "Dated 3.30.91: "To the friend of the author, from the son of the author." Terrible. A great kid. One day he gave me a present, a little ivory boat. And I could talk with him. But he had a big father, big in the sense of size.



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# SCORED SPACE

Space is the writer's medium as much as the black lines of language.

The gravitational pull between the “blank” spaces and the “inscribed” spaces of narrative signifies the powerful role of scored space. We might also think of scored space sculpturally – that a volume of words is dependent upon a corresponding volume of space just as a marble carving depends on the contrast of surrounding air. A drawing and a written narrative are even more similar in their necessitating a balance between spaces and markings.

All marking = indecipherable blackness.

Curiously, space refers to both tiny, incremental units as well as to the great masses — the universe itself. For centuries the printing press made space seem as concrete as the blank pieces of lead type used to separate words and characters.

Scored space, however, signals the dynamic, multi-dimensional world between the letters comprising each word, between each word, and between the narrative of words and — as Charles Olson defined it — their surrounding “field.” As writers we work within this energetic world — currenting among blank spaces, inscribed spaces, and the intimate environment they create between the writer/reader.

Every line of prose and poetry embodies this energy arcing back & forth between blank & inscribed space. Consequently, every line asks to be scored appropriately to convey the particular intervals, resonance, emphasis, and rhythm required by its narrative context.

## **Negative Space**

The units of space between and around letters, words, and punctuation are the negative spaces of written language. Inscription is impossible without them, just as a table is not a table without absence. The lack of a solid form beneath the table – the open space in which chairs are moved in & out — defines the table’s existence as much as wood, metal, plastic, Arborite, or glass. Negative spaces in a black-and-white photograph are as crucial to establishing meaning as positive spaces. Film noir’s heightened use of darkness, shadow and light created a form of narrative as important as plot and dialogue.

In written narratives – inscribed scored space conveys an event, image, a character, idea and “blank” scored space evokes the unknown, the unspeakable. One of the most interesting exercises I have created for exploring these different forms of narrative is the “Negative Space Poem.” A poet selects a poem he is drawn to but in which he also senses something is missing. He then literally writes into the negative space of that poem to see what it is silently holding. In the first example below, the poet has simply inserted eight one-and-two word pinpoints that poignantly attach his two pre-existing stanzas to the page like a butterfly in a display case.

**“Untitled”**

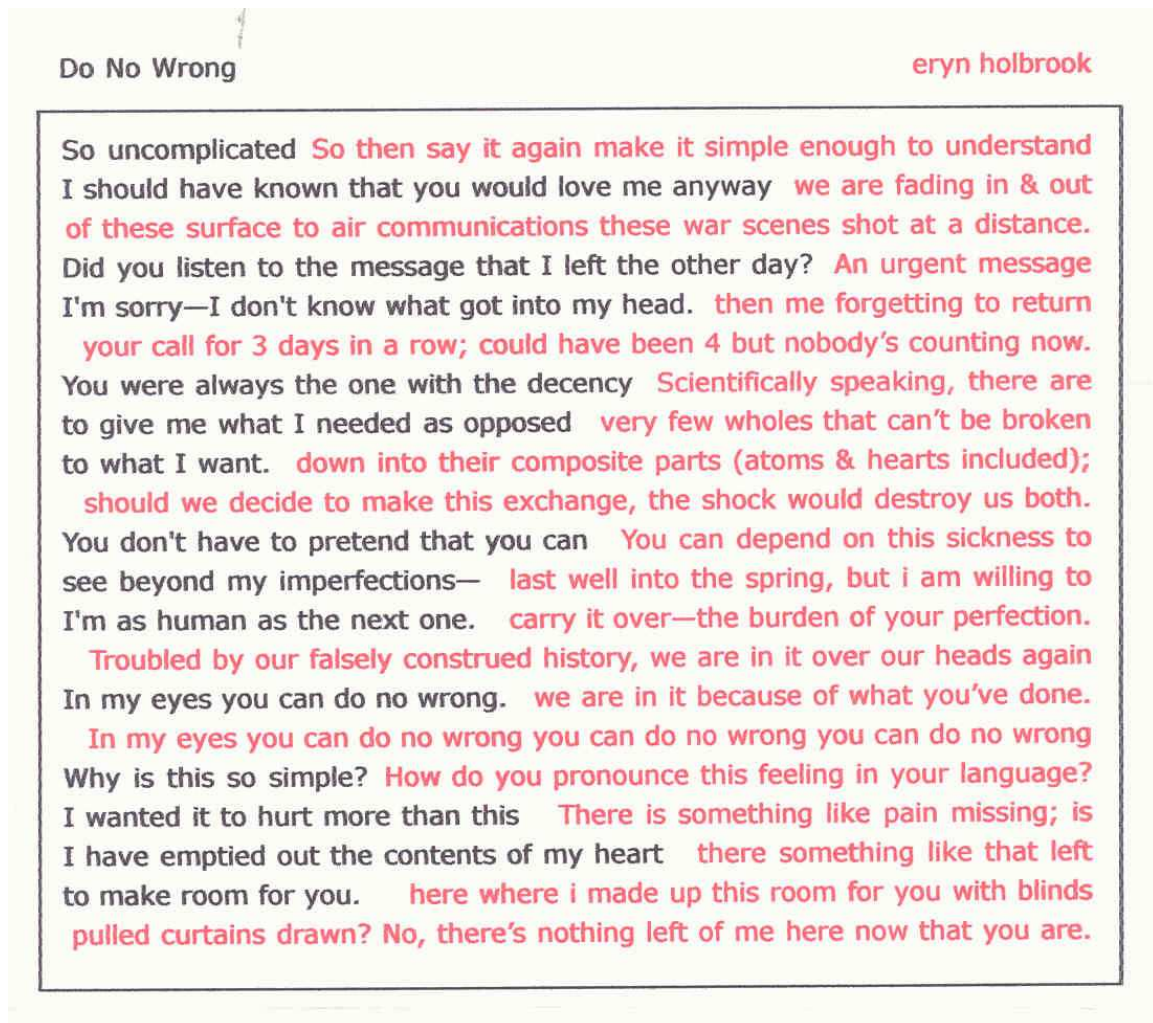
[Neil Friedenberg]






His use of scored space also “acts out” the drama of approach/retreat and inscription/silence.

The following Negative Space Poem occupies the entirety of the previously existing poem’s blank space, creating an appropriately claustrophobic sub-narrative.



Holbrook has inscribed the “meaningless” space of the page with the presence of the person whom the narrator is addressing, which in turn, draws the reader into a far greater sense of their shared, complex, claustrophobic history.

 The Negative Space exercise always proves to be an intriguing one. It may strengthen and alter the original piece, or it may create an independent but necessary, related piece. Choose an unfinished poem or page or two of prose and write a companion piece in its literal negative space. You can occupy and articulate the negative space in any manor and to any extent that suits the original piece.

## **Scored Space Keeps Us Honest**

Scored space acknowledges and signals the unknown, the unspeakable, the withheld, the censored, the assumed, the deleted, the gestured at, the taboo, the denied, the forgotten, the obliterated, the unrealized, and the beyond-language of the sacred.

When we write, we are faced with a vast vocabulary we call silence.

These irrefutable silences mean different things in different contexts at different times with different people. They convey as much as the inscribed text, cue the reader how to interpret the print on the page.

Scored space is a language that is never neutral.

Observe how in the following lyric prose text the writer re-scored her text to be faithful to the tension in this scene.

### **“Man on a Red Sofa”**

[Camilla Pickard]

I meet with him. It's in a coffee bar.

Plaster of Paris gods watch us. He asks too-personal questions about my life and I answer them all, all of them, truthfully, as if he'd recognize my lies.

Where did you grow up?

What's your family like?

Do you have a brother?

Your first boyfriend...?

What kind of relationship do you have with your father?

So, you were – a good girl?

What has this got to do with film-making? Does it matter? I can't conceal anything, so he keeps asking. My opinions on sexuality, love, desire. Men I've enjoyed and disliked: their habits, affectations, their preferences. Like an embalmer, he removes everything from inside me, precise and tolerant: brain hooked out through the nose, viscera through the mouth. In two hours, he has possession of my secrets. He's made me his intimate friend.

Pickard's use of blank scored space signals the narrator's "naked" vulnerability when she suddenly finds herself being unexpectedly baited by a series of fly-fishing questions. Then she spatially intensifies the inscribed spaces as the narrator is being reeled in as she divulges her life.

As we can see, the scored spaces of poetic line-breaks, line placement and structure, stanza and paragraph breaks, fragmentary and continuous prose narratives creates a pacing and rhythm indicative of the nature of each narrative's pulse and trajectory.

Historically in North America, the majority of writers, publishers, readers, and reviewers have appeared to be uncomfortable with writers who compositionally score space on the page. This seems rather ironic given that we migrated to this continent with an urgent need for space. Perhaps we non-indigenous people still genetically carry a fear of the expansiveness and unfamiliarity of this continent our ancestors “settled” (“settler, pioneer Old French, a foot soldier sent out to clear the way”). Just as the prospect of open spaces is alluring, we are equally anxious to fill them.

With our compulsion to fill space, our writing often becomes a wall of words that drives our readers away, or at best, results in readers skimming countless stanzas and passages. Solid prose texts can be written in a way that is more porous, varied in pace, tone, and texture, leaving room the reader and narrative to interact with one another. Scored space allows readers to sense for themselves the “telling” gestures signaling narrative’s shifts and inferred meaning.

Heightened awareness of how to score the inherent space of each text opens up a mutually shared space in which the reader and writer (for we become readers after the first draft) are free to absorb what is being articulated, discover our own associations, emotions, and illuminations.

Meaning is interactive. Meaning accumulates and articulates itself in the tiny increments of a letter & a pause; a word & a poignant empty space.

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Betsy Warland has published ten books of poetry and prose. Her latest book, *only this blue* (The Mercury Press 2005), is comprised of a long poem by that name and an essay on poetry. “Scored Space,” one of the twenty-three essays, comprises her manuscript *Breathing the Page* (to be published in 2010). In her increasing attempt to understand virtual space, see <http://www.betsywarland.com>, and her new blog, <http://betsywarland.blogspot.com/> where she writes “The act of writing is as fascinating to me as what I write.” Can she stop writing about herself in the third person, now?