

# 17 seconds ( : 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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**Joe in the Balkans: (An interview with Joe Blades, Canadian writer, publisher and artist)**  
By Tatjana Bijelic for „Putevi“

## ПУТЕВИ РАЗГОВОРИ

### ЏО НА БАЛКАНУ

(разговор са Џоом Блејдсом, канадским писцем, извођачем и умјетником)

Џо Блејдс често се појављује као аутсајдер на разним скуповима, предавањима и научним конференцијама, и још чешће путује. То је тек мали дио његове "посматрачке мисије". Сва своја запажања записује у дневнике више од двадесет година, од којих су неки ручно израђени. Материјал који одлаже у те тзв. књиге које не могу да се затворе, а које већ након два мјесеца подсећају на широм отворену лезу, састоји се од разних фотографија, разгледница, визит-картица, постера, позивница... и, наравно, од његових биљежака и поезије коју пише у том периоду. Кад попуни одређен број дневника, Џо Блејдс дестилира огроман корпус запажања и објави нову књигу. Случајно сам сједила у његовој близини на једној конференцији у Нишу и гледала како непрестано записује њему занимљиве цитате с предавања, као и своје реакције на исте. Можда то и не би било толико необично да није стално окретао ноге и своје забиљешке спонтано низао у различитим смјеровима на папир.

**Путеви:** Већину читалаца зачуђује начин на који ваше pjesме добијају коначни облик. Које фазе су садржане у процесу стварања и обликовања pjesама, и да ли често мислите да се налазите у стању непрекидне pjesничке креативности?

**Џо Блејдс:** Понекад пожелим да се налазим у таквом стању. Проводим много времена бавећи се администрацијом и препорукама, јер сам хонорарно запослен у Банци умјетничких дјела у Њу Брунсвику, тако да данима ништа не напишем, нити урадим нешто креативно. Док сам на послу сматрам успјехом ако на површини наслутим неку слику или pjesму. Ако успијем да то запишем у дневник, још боље. Такве ствари се не дешавају пречесто, али дневник увијек носим са собом. Оно што последњих година додатно подстиче моју креативност уско је везано за ангажман у неколико краћих интерактивних јавних умјетничких гостовања, која обично трају седмицу или двије. У Фредериктону сам учествовао бар на четири таква гостовања, што ми је помогло да напишем збирку *Casamate Poems* (Отава, 2009). Неправно су ме ангажовали у књижари "Зечја пула" (*Rabbit Hole*) у Гранд Прерију у

[Note: This interview was conducted by email in February–March 2009, during the last of 18 months that Joe Blades was under contact to the New Brunswick Art Bank as their technician. It was translated into Serbo–Croatian by Tatjana Bijelic and published in „Putevi“ (Roads), No. 6–7, [August] 2009 in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska (BiH)]

Joe Blades frequently appears at various gatherings, lectures, and academic conferences as an outsider, and is on the road even more often. But that's only a small part of his "surveillance mission." For more than twenty years he's been filling up his sometimes handmade sketchbooks with many of his daily observations and experiences. The sketchbooks, or the [latest] "book that doesn't close" (because in two months they become so thick that they remind us of wide-open fans), are replete with differently attached photos, postcards, business cards, posters, invitations...and they, of course, brim with the notes and poetry that he writes down in a particular period. When he's completed a certain number of sketchbooks, Joe Blades distills a huge corpus of the slices of his life and publishes a new book. I happened to be sitting next to him at a conference in Nis, Serbia, watching him constantly jotting down parts of paper presentations, together with his own reactions to them. It may not have been so unusual hadn't he rotated his notebook very often, writing his notes spontaneously in different directions.

**Putevi:** Many readers are intrigued by the peculiarity of the creative process in which your poems get into shape. What are the stages of this process, and do you find yourself in a state of constant poetic creativeness?

**Joe Blades:** Sometimes I wish I was in a state of constant creativity. I spend so much time doing administrative paperwork or driving on my part-time New Brunswick Art Bank job days that I don't write or do anything creative. On those days I'm doing good to have an image or poem thread surface. If I can get it written into my journal, that's good, too. Doesn't always happen but that's why I try to keep my journal with me. One thing that has worked for me in recent years has been my acceptance into a number of short-term (usually one to two weeks in duration) interactive public artist residencies. I've done at least four of them in Fredericton and wrote *Casemate Poems (Collected)* (Ottawa: Chaudiere Books, . . . [forthcoming 2010]) there. My most recent public residency was in the Rabbit Hole Bookstore in Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada. With manual typewriter, journal and laptop computer side-by-side, I wrote 24 pieces of "Storefront Poetry" in the course of a few afternoons. It's an intense way to write—almost "binge poetry"—but it seems to be working for me. Mind you, I also write many individual poem first-drafts in my journal, and write articles and fiction (towards a hopeful novel) on computers.

**Putevi:** A critic called your latest book a "road book," alluding to Allen Ginsberg's influence on you and your writing. To what extent do you agree with this statement, and do your other books contain traveling material? Would your writing be possible without globetrotting?

**Joe Blades:** In actuality, the George Elliot Clarke quote on the back cover of *From The Book That Doesn't Close* is from his review of an earlier poetry book of mine titled *Open Road West*. I would agree with his statement in reference to both of those books. Travel has been an essential and integral part of my arts practice. I wouldn't call it globetrotting where I've only been on two continents and have not gone around the world. Ginsberg and other Beat writers and their travel stories/poems have definitely been an influence. I would have had to have lived a different, more stationary life to see what writing might have been done without travelling anywhere. Life's journey does require physical travel but it certainly helps to have a level of awareness and observation.

**Putevi:** Although you don't seem to imitate other poetic voices, certain literary influences, old or new, could probably be traced in your writing. Can you single out any of them? Are they American, Canadian, or . . . ?

**Joe Blades:** Certainly there are Canadian, American, and British literary influences because that was the majority of the poetry and fiction studied in public school or experienced in the real world. While living in Toronto in 1980 I was active in several writing workshops with poets including Milton Acorn, James Deahl, Maria Jacob, Pat Jasper, Bev Daurio, Gerry Shikitani, Ted Plantos and Sha(u)nt Basmajian, *et al* and repeatedly heard poets and writers from around the world including The Four Horsemen (bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton and Raphael Roberto Riveria), Czeslaw Milosz, bill bissett, Stephen Spender, Dorothy Livesey, Phyllis Webb, Robin Skelton, Pat Lane, Alden Nowlan, Lorna Crozier, George Fauldy, *et al*. I'd definitely also consider the Beats to be a positive influence. Later, at art college, I happily studied the Dadaist, Surrealist, Expressionist, Futurist and other European artists and art movements of the last century, plus Jamaican street theater, contemporary Canadian and American arts and artists, performance arts practices and so much more. While a museum's curatorial intern in New York City I also heard writers including Robert Creeley, Maggie Esteppe, William S. Burroughs, Anne Waldman, John Giorno—some of whom I'd been reading or hears for decades. I've also taken writing workshops with Allen Ginsberg, Phillip Whalen, Fred Wah, Lillian Allen, W.O. Mitchell, Richard Lemm, Yvonne Trainer and many other writers.

**Putevi:** Some critics praise you for your “exuberant experimentation and openness of all sorts.” What do you find experimental in your poetry, and are you alone in such experimentalism on the Canadian poetry scene?

**Joe Blades:** Well, I don't feel I'm marching to the same drummer that the streams of grad students in creative writing programs march too. I deliberately didn't enter the English Department as my road to knowledge. I met, heard, read poets, writers and artists wherever I lived in Canada. After my first travels in Europe (four months of wandering in 1983), I applied to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and was accepted for 1984. NSCAD didn't include creative writing but my art experimentation there certainly opened up my writing—especially visually and print production-wise. Getting to play with lead type, letterpress, graphic cameras, offset printing. I had started Broken Jaw Press in name-only the months before starting at NSCAD and soon was doing a zine, *Bourbon Street Journal*, filling with collage and found material along with some poems and stories. I really like cut'n'paste work to rearrange and recombine texts and images. Today, much of that type of experimental writing artwork is done in Photoshop on computers. I do some audio art and sound poetry, have made videopoems and curated a screening of videopoems for a film festival and, general, I believe, stay outside the canon. The free-fall nature of my writing in public, a sort of performance artist/poet activity, is seen as experimental by many so-much-more-private writers.

**Putevi:** (Can you give a brief account of contemporary poetry scene(s) in Canada? Who writes poetry nowadays, and who reads it? Are you optimistic about the future(s) of poetry?)

**Joe Blades:** I think there are many different things happening in Canadian poetry and it would

be a major essay to give deal depth to an answer. Some writers are newly enamoured with the lyric narrative. Others have discovered or rediscover forms and call themselves neostructuralists or other labels. There are still people's poets and romantics and sound poets who are distinct from spoken word/performance poets. Francophone poets in Canada have multiple streams too and of them, locally, I best know the Acadian poets.

**Putevi:** (A slightly feminist question: One of the italicized parts in your new book says: . . . *there is the lack of a clear demarcation as to the behaviour between poets and women*. Does it mean that poets are exclusively men and that women are other to poets? On the other side, some of your poems support the traditional belief that muses are exclusively women. What lies behind such sporadic "misogynist" ideas? Do you think gender is important in poetry reading / writing?

**Joe Blades:** This is a somewhat gnarly question. Some of this could be oversight on my part as I was working with other texts and with some of their assumptions. It's hard seeing myself called emancipated on one hand and now a misogynist on the other. Misogynist is not something I'd want to be or see myself as being. If those two poetic statements (above) make me a misogynist then I've a serious problem. If those two poetic statements had been included in a woman's poems would they be called a misogynist too? If I eliminated illusion of women (or referred to "poets and men" or claimed the muse as male) would not those writings have their own questionable or inappropriate baggage from accumulated culture and language/languages? For the French, and other languages/cultures, everything had been assigned a feminine or masculine gender. English might appear less engendered but is it? In the case of the italicized texts on the top of the pages in *From The Book That Doesn't Close*, I was attempting riffs on an English translation in the Japanese-English bilingual *The Teaching of Buddha*. Japanese is even firmer than French in gendering everything. It certainly is not my intent to state or imply that all poets are men or that woman are not poets or that the Greek concept of the female muse is an absolute. I find all of these positions or statements to be absurd and damaging. To me it would be equally bad to use "poets and non-poets", "artists and non-artists", or "creators and non-creators" . . . implying a belief that some people are not in the slighted creative or artistic. I fear it's a question of belief and that possibly my exercise attempts to rewrite them have not always been sufficiently successful.

**Putevi:** Besides being a poet, you also run a publishing house. Do you find it difficult to combine writing with publishing and promoting other people's work? Do you have time to read things for your own pleasure, and who are your favourite authors?

**Joe Blades:** I find it very difficult balancing the demands of being a publisher with the need-urge-desire to write or create anything whether poems, fiction, art, articles, film props. As Broken Jaw is such a small publishing house, I spend too much time being a "disappointment artist" saying no to all the author queries and unsolicited manuscripts from around the world. I do manage some reading for pleasure or relaxation—anything from poetry to literary fiction, from nonfiction (especially art and personal essays) to science fiction/fantasy—but often feel I don't read enough. It's a problem of working too hard and then simply feeling the need to stop. I've never been one to like naming favourite anything—whether authors, food, movies, music . . . . On the other hand, many of the writers named in my answer to the third question could be included in my favourites.

**Putevi:** You've attended many academic conferences. How mainstream / traditional is academia today, and what ideas caught there draw your attention and feed your work?

**Joe Blades:** In fact, I don't have a history of attending many academic conferences. I have attended and participate in a few—usually as an artist outsider—but likely in the future I will participate in more academic conferences as I'm looking to return to university to further my studies in recognition of the work I've been doing outside academia..

**Putevi:** You've spent some time in the Balkans, and two of your books have been translated and published in Serbian editions. Can you tell us something more about your activities there? Are you familiar with the poetry scene in Serbia?

**Joe Blades:** Džo in the Balkans! Four visits. Three Belgrade Book fairs. Two of my poetry books translated and published in Serbia since 2004: *Pesme iz kazamata* and *Recna svita*. One YACS Canadian Studies Conference (in Niš). Many talks and readings at cultural centres, language schools, libraries, and universities in Serbia and Bosnia. Several press conferences and media interviews in Belgrade and Kruševac (where I was the first-ever overseas author to give a reading). One hardcore dancing of Bulgarian dances with a Bulgarian theatre troop in Serbia. Many long, rough bus rides. Several receptions at Belgrade City Hall. One Serbia girlfriend. Many crossings of the Srbjia–Srpska border. Many police registrations. One wallet stolen (and returned less the Euros and dinars but leaving the Konvertible Marks, ID and credit cards). One funeral attended on my birthday. One extended teaching gig as a lektor in the English Department of the University of East Sarajevo in Pale. One Dalmatian puppy exercised by runs along the river Tisa with me riding an old Russian folding bicycle. Many pivo, shorts of brandy, and cevapcici.

I would like to be exposed to more poetry from Serbia and Central–Eastern Europe. It's happening slowly as I'm not anywhere close to being fluent in Serbian, but I'm meeting an ever-growing number of writers from the region with some work in, or translated into, English. Currently I am collecting poems and short stories (in Serbian and in translation) from Serbian writers living in Canada for a folio that I'll edit for the Fredericton journal *ellipse: textes littéraires canadiens en traduction / Canadian writing in translation*.

This past winter I also recorded several telephone “oral history” interviews for the Central European Association of Canadian Studies’ “Central Europe in Canada” Diaspora Project including one interview with a person born and raised in Banja Luka who now lives in here in Fredericton, NB with her family.

**Joe Blades**



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## Conversations with John Newlove

Just going back in my mind to that wonderful and unforgettable afternoon in a bar in Ottawa in June 1993, I can still see John Newlove sitting in front of me. As handsome as I could have ever imagined, with curious and intelligent eyes and a wry smile, Newlove told me some of his juvenile experiences although in a very digressive, disordered and elusive way. First of all he told me that he was forced to move almost every year from village to village in the Prairies where his mother was a teacher in the elementary school. There, he even had some loose relationships with the First Nations around and whom he could easily meet because, like them, he and his mother used to live in the same poor neighbourhoods.

His curiosity was stimulated by the entire reality around him, constituted not only by the shy and distant First Nations, but also by the “limitless”, “never ending” Canadian plains.<sup>1</sup> In our conversation, he defined the Native people, he had met when he was a schoolboy, as “shy and distant”. He explained that it had been difficult for him to create any kind of ties with any of them. They seemed to avoid a real contact and, at that time, he could only think that they were shy. Of course, in his adulthood, he could discover and understand why they were “shy and distant”, and he was still regretting his lack of contact with them, in those old days. Nevertheless, the Native People appear in his poems, contributing to constitute the link with the past, that Native heritage, or the heritage of their pride, that Newlove defines as “the grand/poem/of our land, of the earth itself” in his long poem “The Pride”.<sup>2</sup>

Canadian nature creates a powerful imagery in Newlove’s poetry, as he had confirmed to me in our conversation in Ottawa and as can be easily detected just by reading his poems: if “[the] plains seem secure and comfortable”, as he says in the poem “The Double-Headed Snake”,<sup>3</sup> in his last poems and especially in his long

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<sup>1</sup> John Newlove, “The Sky”, in *Lies* (1972), in *The Fat Man, Selected Poems 1962-1972*, Toronto, McClelland And Stewart, 1977, p.100. On the topic, see: C Comellini, “The Land in John Newlove’s Poetical Imagination”, in A .Anastasi, G. Bonanno, R. Rizzo (eds.), *The Canadian Vision/La Vision Canadienne*, 2, Villa S.Giovanni (RC), Edizioni Officina Grafica, 1994, pp.153-168.

<sup>2</sup> John Newlove, “The Pride”, in *Black Night Window* in *The Fat Man, Selected Poems 1962-1972*, cit., p.72.

<sup>3</sup> John, Newlove, “The Double-Headed Snake” in *Black Night Window* in *The Fat Man*, cit., pp.48-49.



poem, *The Green Plain*,<sup>4</sup> the Prairies become a metaphor of renewal, or a symbol of hope, and they symbolize a sort of Garden of Eden in Canada.

Because of his childhood and youth spent in the Prairies, in Newlove's poetry the Prairies own revitalizing qualities and work as an underlying allusion to the cycle of human life and to the seasonal cycle, as well as to the cycle of the whole history of the world and humanity. Then, by reading Heraclitus, the grown up Newlove found a correspondence between the Canadian nature and Heraclitus' everlasting dynamic interaction of the four elements, air, earth, fire, and water, in endless opposition. The Canadian nature, as well, is simultaneously constituted by oceans, rivers, lakes, rocks, woods, forests and plains, all merging into the same image, as is reflected even in the title of his poem: "Rocks, Wood, Seas".<sup>5</sup> In Newlove's poetry, Canada is recurring in all its real and metaphorical aspects: there are not only seas, oceans, lakes, rivers, forests and prairies but also the weather, and the theme of survival. Survival is strictly related to both the imagery of nature as a mother (because of the beauty of the country and of the related idea of renewal) and a step-mother (because of the bad climate with cold and windy Winters and hot and dusty Summers). And, as Newlove elusively suggested with a mysterious smile in our conversation, he had experienced both the physical and psychological survival. Survival, which occurs in connections with the difficult and often harsh conditions of some geographical Canadian areas, imbued with solitude and death, can be attained only through the preservation of dreams, harmony with nature, in hope that the past - and the First Nations are part of this past - can play a role as important as that of the present.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, for Newlove, the continuity of life and consequently of humanity is manifested by the memory of humanity's past and dreams, a memory mingling the

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<sup>4</sup> John, Newlove, *The Green Plain*, Lantzville, B.C. Oolichan Books, 1981. Carla, Comellini, *La verde piana di John Newlove* (Italian translation with an "Introduction" and a "Bibliography" by C. Comellini), Abano Terme, Piovan Editore, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> John, Newlove, "Rocks, Wood, Seas", in *Apology for Absence Selected Poems 1962- 1992*, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, Inc., 1993, p.157. On the topic, see: C Comellini, "The Land in John Newlove's Poetical Imagination", cit.

<sup>6</sup> See: C. Comellini, "Canada in John Newlove's Imagery", in A. Nikcevic-Batricevic and M. Knezevic (eds.) *Exploring Theory and Enhancing Practise: Cultural Issues in English Language and Literary Studies*, Montenegro, Niksic: Faculty of Philosophy, 2008, pp.149-162.

history of humanity and its dreams, as he suggests in *The Green Plain*. Thus, the memory of the past becomes fuel for the present, while the present keeps transforming itself into fuel for the future, as is shown in the poem “The Prairie”, from the collection *The Cave*, reprinted in *The Fat Man*.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Canada ends up by representing an image of hope, a land where fulfilment occurs, as is testified by his poem, “Home Town”,<sup>8</sup> that he had sent to me by letter in March 1994:

This country is so old that no one can remember  
its history. The sky blooms and the rocks flower.

Pacific, Atlantic, Arctic, Prairie. The oceans  
surround us, blue, grey, white, green, the land

goes on for ever.

Canada is my home town. Trees fill the mind  
and people look at me sideways and smile.

In this poem, Canada seems to be endowed not only with those qualities of a “secure and comfortable” place as is suggested by the idea of “home town”, but also with the image of Canada as an earthly Paradise, as is shown by the serene atmosphere of happiness evoked by lines such as: “The sky blooms and the rocks flower”, or “Trees fill the mind and people look at me [...] and smile”. In this poem, land and humanity seem to share the same feelings of joy and to participate in the same full blooming.

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<sup>7</sup> John, Newlove, “The Prairie”, from the collection *The Cave*, reprinted in *The Fat Man*, cit., p.80:

One compiles, piles, piles  
these masses of words, verbs,  
massifs, mastiffs barking meaning,  
dried chips  
of buffalo dung, excreta from beasts

the prairie fed, foddered,  
food for generations; men roaming  
as beasts seen through dips  
in history, fostered by legend,  
invented remembrance.

<sup>8</sup> John Newlove, “Home Town” is a poem that Newlove had mailed to me on 3 March 1994. Later it appeared in the chapbook *THE TASMANIAN DEVIL and other poems*, published by Rob McLennan in 1999 (Ottawa ON); later it appeared in full in *Groundswell: best of above/ground press, 1993-2003* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Broken Jaw Press, 2003). Moreover, I’ve published “Home Town” in my essay, “Canada in John Newlove’s Imagery”, in A. Nikcevic-Batricevic and M. Knezevic (eds.), *Exploring Theory and Enhancing Practise: Cultural Issues in English Language and Literary Studies*, cit.

Moreover, the explosion of colours – “blue, grey, white, green” – contributes to emanate a joyful atmosphere while, thanks to its layers of history – “This country is so old” - and to its limitless space connected to the idea of infinite – “the land/goes on for ever” - it represents the everlasting continuity of life in all its aspects.

Above all, since his prime, Newlove’s curiosity was stimulated by any kind of words, and he said that he was interested in whatever was connected to words. And he added that he was attracted by any kind of writing and that he used to read everything: from the sign “wanted” in the pictures to the words written in the medical papers with drugs information, from booklets and library books till when he was so lucky to be allowed to use one of the private libraries of the area. Then, he could start to read almost everything, without any prejudice. Then, as he was telling me, he could get in touch with Heraclitus, Shakespeare and many other authors.

Perhaps it is this sensibility towards words that contributed to create his great capacity of mastering the language, a capacity which had led Margaret Atwood to define Newlove as “a master-builder” in style, since the early seventies. Moreover, it is worth reporting here that on Newlove's impressive versatility Atwood wrote: “He's in control of his words, he can move easily and convincingly from clipped, terse epigrams to flowing lyricism to something like a grand manner, his work is often a demonstration model of how it should be done.”<sup>9</sup>

As Newlove was revealing to me, it was the sound of words which could make him able to perceive the feeling of poetry even in other languages: it was thanks to the sound and the rhythm of the Italian language used in my translation that he could perceive that the ‘dance of words’, characterizing his long poem, *The Green Plain*, was perfectly reproduced also in my Italian translation, *La verde piana*, published in 1990. He was so happy as to thank me for the translation and the copies of *La verde piana* I had sent to him and that he “judiciously distributed” “to friends here and in the States”, as he says in his 1992 letter. In fact, as he told me in our conversation in Ottawa, without knowing a word of Italian, he could appreciate my Italian translation

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Atwood, “How Do I Get Out Of Here: The Poetry of John Newlove”, *Open Letter*, ser. 2, 4, Spring 1973.

of his long poem *The Green Plain*. He himself had already written his appreciation to me in his 1992 letter, with these words: “Did I say how pleased I was that you were able to reproduce the effect, changing a noun into a verb, of first using, then not using, the commas in the first line of the last bit of The Green Plain?” With these words, Newlove was alluding to my choice of turning the noun “variation” of his text into the form *che muta* of the Italian verb *mutare*, that is the equivalent of “that changes” from the English verb “to change”. Moreover, his appreciation of my choice of “not using” commas refers to my solution of substituting the comma, dividing the two coordinate sentences (“Dreams surround us, preserve us”) with the Italian conjunction *che*, so to create a subordinate clause in the Italian translation: “Avvolti da sogni che ci preservano”.

Just because of the sound and the rhythm of the Italian language which appealed to him so much, Newlove could penetrate not only some poetry of *La divina commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*) by the main Italian poet Dante Alighieri, but also some poems by the Nineteenth Century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, as he told me in that sun-filled day in Ottawa. He also confessed me that he would have liked to own a copy of Leopardi’s poetry books because he felt a sort of attraction for the sound and rhythm of the lyrics by Leopardi he had read in Italian. And curiously enough, one could add that, he and Leopardi not only share the same kind of sensibility, by building their poetry on the antinomy of hope and despair, but also a great capacity of mastering respectively the English and Italian language.

For Newlove, words were a sort of panacea giving pleasure and constituting a kind of drug against the boredom of a prime and a youth spent in his loved Prairies where solitude and the scaring immensity of the land are the main elements: a boredom defeated only thanks to the pleasure given by words and consequently by the correlating acts of reading and writing. About the loneliness suffered in the “limitless” Prairies, he told me a joke which is commonly used over there: “don’t be afraid of missing your dog, because you will see him/her running in the flat Prairies for at least three days”.

Even his job in Ottawa was strictly connected to words: in fact, he had to correct the English language in documents and administrative acts. At least, this was what he said to me while he was complaining about this boring job, or “this damned job I loathe and need”, as he had defined it in his 1991 letter to me. In our conversation, he reiterated that he had to keep that job he somehow hated because it was the best and easy way to earn money for a poet in order to survive. “Boredom” and “pleasure”, which metaphorically can be compared to death and life, or despair and hope, seem to be the main pillars not only in Newlove’s poetry, but also in his entire existence: thus, any effort (even the alcohol oblivion) had to be done not only to avoid boredom, but also to get pleasure in his own life. He himself had already affirmed his attitude in his “Preface” to the anthology of Poetry, entitled *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era*, he had edited in 1977 and where he writes: “For myself, confronted with so many choices, I decided to assemble a book, that has both a survey and a source, and one that could be read with pleasure. (This is an emotion sometimes neglected in poetry today)”.<sup>10</sup>

Then, in front of me, he was ironically smiling in adding how much he had loved women in his entire life and how many troubles had been created by this. He was also confessing me how much of his inner, deeply hidden side the series of his poems entitled “Autobiography” were ironically and paradoxically revealing. At that time – June 1993 - some of the poems, entitled “Autobiography”, were unpublished. He had previously sent me two of them in the letter dated 1/1/1992. One of these poems, entitled “Autobiography” that he had sent to me, was published in his last collection of poems, *Apology for Absence*,<sup>11</sup> in 1993. Later on, I translated it into Italian and published it in a literary magazine, *Il Tolomeo*,<sup>12</sup> in 2005. The other typed “Autobiography”, sent to me in the January 1992 letter, was published by Robert

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<sup>10</sup> John, Newlove (ed.), “Preface” to *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> John, Newlove, “Autobiography”, in *Apology for Absence Selected Poems 1962- 1992*, cit., p.181.

<sup>12</sup> John, Newlove, “Autobiography/Autobiografia”, translated by C.Comellini, in *Il Tolomeo*, 9, 2005, p.4.

McTavish in *A Long Continual Argument: The Selected Poems of John Newlove*, in 2007.<sup>13</sup>

During our pleasant conversation in Ottawa, we went on talking about our dear friend Joe Rosenblatt, who had organized our meeting, and about Rosenblatt's visits to Italy and readings of his poetry there. Newlove confessed with regret that he would have liked to live the same Italian experience as well. We exchanged opinions on the poetry and prose of other famous and less famous, at that time, Canadian writers on whom I have written. Thus, we kept on commenting upon the craft of Margaret Lawrence, Irving Layton, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje, and of Canadian painters such as Emily Carr and the Group of Seven. We also went on gossiping a little bit on the artistic life in Ottawa and in Toronto, in comparison with the USA. Suddenly, I became aware that I needed some more pieces of information about some obscure, at least to me, passages of his poems, concerning the First Nations, that I intended to translate into Italian. He reiterated what he had already written to me in one of his previous letters and that concerned the fact that I could translate everything he had written into Italian. Moreover, in his 1991 letter, he had already suggested the title, *The Pride*, for my book with the translation of his poems, linked by the theme of "Indian/Inuit". In another letter, dated January 1992, he had also confirmed that I was completely free in the choice concerning the poems to be included in my anthology, with these words: "the selections and decisions are yours to make". Unfortunately, I could not ultimate this anthology before Newlove's death: I'm still working on it.

Then, he said that it would have been very boring to discuss all this during the lovely conversation we were having, enjoying ourselves, although we were drinking only soft drinks - he added sarcastically - and not that wonderful *grappa* that Rosenblatt had celebrated to him with great passion. It is worth adding here that Rosenblatt even wrote a poem on *grappa*, the typical Italian alcoholic drink, made

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<sup>13</sup> This and all later poems also appeared (in the entire of *Apology for Absense* as well) in *A Long Continual Argument: The Selected Poems of John Newlove*, ed. Robert McTavish, (Chaudiere Books, Ottawa ON, 2007). One can find links to such on the Chaudiere Books website, and a couple of poems as well as the afterward to the book by critic/poet Jeff Derksen, appear online at Australia's *Jacket Magazine*.

from grapes. While the allusions to drinks were subtly evoking the ghost of alcoholism, he smiled ambiguously saying that he had to quit with alcohol because he had undergone a very serious surgery, where “they took out” his “gall bladder” and “an inflamed mass”, as he had already written to me in November 1991. Moreover, he had had another “operation”, as he had announced to me in the letter dated 1/1/1992. Then, he added that he was very lucky to be still alive. Immediately I had a flash of some lines of his poem, “The Double-Headed Snake”, where he writes: “beauty is to be alive”, but only when “the adrenalin runs” and it is “fear” “to make the adrenalin run”. It is that fear - Newlove says - that makes me, “civilized man”, shiver in the mountains at night not for the cold air, but remembering “the stories of the Indians,/Sis-i-utl, the double-headed snake.” Thus, it is the memory of the myth of the First Nations, layered in the land, that makes the “plains/seem secure and comfortable/at Crow's Nest Pass”, as well as it makes “in Saskatchewan/ the mountains [be] comforting to think of”.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, he promised he would have answered all my questions by letter, and he did it, as he had done before as is testified by the two letters which are here included and where it is possible to read some answers to my questions. In my opinion, what it is really interesting, is that, in the November 1991 letter, Newlove compiled a list of poems which could be possibly gathered under the topic “Indians/ Inuit”, thus offering a useful answer to my questions related to the translation into Italian of the poems somehow ‘linked’ to the First Nations. It is also curious that in another letter, dated January 1992, he was wondering why he had put his poem “The Big Bend” “on the tentative list” he had previously sent to me.

Back to my hotel in Ottawa, I received a phone call by Joe Rosenblatt who was curious of my opinion and feelings. I could only say: wonderful! One of the best experiences in my life! I would never forget this conversation with John Newlove, while I consider myself very lucky to have had this opportunity.

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<sup>14</sup> John, Newlove, “The Double-Headed Snake” in *Black Night Window* in *The Fat Man*, cit.

To enrich this memory of John Newlove, I include two letters of two pages each which he had sent to me, with one containing two poems. In my opinion, these letters can be very enlightening in outlining Newlove's profile and in entering the depth of his poetry, apparently so easy, but which is on the contrary so complex, dense and stratified and one of the most interesting Twentieth Century expressions of poetry in English.



John Newlove  
105 Rochester Street  
OTTAWA, Ontario  
Canada K1R 7L9.

27.xi.1991.

Dear Carla:

Thanks for your letter of the 16th.

Not much happens to me: still slaving away at this damned job I loathe and need. I can't stand being ordered about, especially by lunatics. So, your letter was a ray of sunshine.

Thanks for the news about La verde piana and the anthology; I look forward to both.

Of course I agree to your plan about poems involving, reflecting, among Indians and Inuit: as you please. Are there very many of them? I'm in the reluctant process of putting together another selected poems (the old one is out of date, and, towards the end, I didn't have much say in it); I'll look through the manuscript I have on my desk. I don't have copies of all my earlier books -- or, if I do, I can't find them -- so it's a confusing process.

I'll add notes to this.

Do you have a copy of The Night the Dog Smiled? I have a spare one.

I am a very boring lecturer — nothing but a series of uninterrupted interruptions of myself. But, yes, I would like very much to do some readings and I am always willing to sit about and answer questions from anyone.

Last spring they took out my gall bladder and what the surgeon called "an inflamed mass", whatever that means, and a tumour, which turned out not to be cancerous.

You've probably seen Rosenblatt more recently than I have, but I will say hello if we're in contact.

Best wishes,

John Newlove.

INDIANS/INUIT etc.

The Common Root

Crazy Riel ("those miserable men": "Miserable Man" was the name of one of the Cree involved in the Riel Rebellion. He was hanged. A jackfish is a pike.)

Ride off Any Horizon

Indian Women

The Double-Headed Snake

Samuel Hearne in Wintertime (I got the name of the place wrong; it should be "Bloody Fall", not "Bloody Falls". The parenthetical matter in Part 3 is direct quotation from Hearne's Journal, but where I no longer know. "tittimeg, pike and barbie" are fish.)

The Big Bend

The Pride

Doukhobor

Dream ("Bees won't fly)

It doesn't seem much, though I know I've missed at least one from my last book. This is a selection from a selection. Perhaps poems about the land would also fit in -- the West and the mountains, the loneliness.

What do you think of The Pride as a title?

There is some unpublished stuff. I'll look through things later and write again. Now, back to work for the government, complicating people's lives unnecessarily.

Oh. Let me know what you decide to use: there are some tricks, like a quotation from Trotsky in "The Pride".

JN\27.xi.1991.

John Newlove  
105 Rochester Street  
OTTAWA, Ontario  
Canada K1R 7L9.

i.i.1992.

Dear Carla:

Further to my letter of 27 November, I see that in my notes I had worried about the amount of material available for a translation of stuff with references — at a tangent or otherwise — to Indians and Inuit, but I wasn't thinking straight. Of course, en face, there would be more than enough for a nice little book.\*'

I don't really know why I put "The Big Bend" on the tentative list I sent you. In any case, the selections and decisions are yours to make.

Did I say how pleased I was that you were able to reproduce the effect, changing a noun into a verb, of first using, then not using, the commas in the first line of the last bit of The Green Plain?

The copy of the anthology and the copies of La verde piana arrived safely, and have been judiciously distributed to friends here and in the States. Thank you.

I wonder why Lampman used "Oh" instead of "O"?

You wanted to use "Autobiography". That's fine. It was in Quarry last Spring. If I can find the last version -- a matter of line arrangement -- I'll send it to you. What you have may be the final result.

One more operation, in a week. The muscle the surgeon had to cut through last time has torn apart and they will put a tire patch or something on it. This is becoming a nuisance.

Best wishes/

Carla: Here are a couple of "Autobiographies" I found in a pile:

**Autobiography**

I am a technician of the absurd,  
I am a comedian of death.

I am the man your mother warned you against,  
I am the man my mother warned me against.

**Autobiography**

Embraces turned friendly,  
the friendly kiss on the cheek

-- God damn friendship! --  
and life became bitterly normal.

**Carla Comellini**, Associate Professor of English Literature (Bologna University), is the Director of the Canadian Centre “Alfredo Rizzardi”, Dept. of Foreign, Modern Languages and Literatures (Bologna University). She is also on the board of the Doctorate in Modern, Comparative and Postcolonial Literatures (Bologna University). She was a Fulbright Scholar (California University/S.B.) in 1981-82; she won two Grants of the Canadian Government (Toronto and Vancouver Universities 1988, 1993) and two Italian CNR Grants (USA: Library of Congress and California University, 1991; Cape Town and Durban Universities, South Africa, 1996-97).



Her books are: 1) *D.H. Lawrence, A Study on Mutual and Cross References and Interferences*, 2009 (1995); 2) *Invito alla lettura di Greene*, 1996; 3) *I.V. Crawford, Un Nuovo Eden*, 1990; 4) *G. Greene: le forme del narrare*, 1990.

Among her critical editions there are: 1) *G. Greene: The Tenth Man*, 2003; 2) *Fra le culture: l'Italia e le letterature anglofone* (in *Bologna, la cultura italiana e le letterature straniere moderne*) 1992. There are essays and articles on British writers (G. Greene, D.H. Lawrence, M. Lowry, J.R. R. Tolkien and L. Durrell), on Canadian authors (I.V. Crawford, I. Layton, M. Laurence, J. Newlove, E. Hay, Al Purdy, J. Rosenblatt, M. Atwood, E. Alford, T. Findley and M. Ondaatje), on South-African (John Ross), Australian (A. Marshall), North-American Native writers (Lance Henson) and the Nigerian C.G. Okafor.

She has translated several poems by John Newlove and his long poem: *La Verde Piana/The Green Plain* (with an “Introduction” and a “Bibliography”) 1990. She was on the editorial board of *Il Tolomeo* (Venice University) 1996-2004 and in the Scientific Committee of *Prospero* (Trieste University) 1998-2005. She has been on the Board of Directors of *Englishes* (Rome University) since 2000.

## Horologic

Delay'd the—what was it? Leftover, almost said mainspring locution off-putting —  
lifting's effort of red-wire modest stratagem.

*Gem's Spa* (Ninth & 2nd), chocolate folio under which egg-cream air  
he told you — sutured with tape and geranium rose — his

secret stutterer scrapheap, "...if only we'd...". Said he wasn't spiritual  
but could feel the awe — that little Yes material — script pierced (& pierces).

+

Sleep's end of it, rose geranium whistle-stop nape of neck thistle.  
Down fallow mind of page — delay'd early sphere theory.

Margins: Stella begins rebuke. Torn shirt, Stanley's & white.  
Silent movie-talk ending a few true blue decals

in the projection cabinets. Abuse of reliable matter (embossed), how  
"A" connects to its wire. One glance — marron glace, when she talks.

+

"Frame theory," the game-bird's heartbeat under glass (fluttery to her)  
as a pamphlet or flock of blank ink, wings tied-off.

Song's rebuke rescinds the variable. You often measured  
pretense between face and thread, when she demonstrated

linen. Corner understood (unsafe on-camera) reading him:  
delay'd erasure, giving him 0 or 1. Syllabic temptation.

+

of yesterday's waving particle. Lawd low Atlantis shallow.  
Wrong obsidian lesson & axis ladder & hairpin do not "hold sway."

Kid integer dot picture folds up playground early. Witness pulling,  
her inviolate back a'shine as effacement mirror not seen.

What passed in dark's sidereal cloud chamber— festoon'd with giddy scars—  
is past & perfect. You write "Dear Sir: wherever you be,

please map us there..." ( open side of resilient moon yaw,

for J.H. (2000)

surveillance of

# LECTURE

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Kathleen Fraser



## **pre-operation**

On the day of his killing certain footage was  
elaborate like working  
with the whole telephone's tenuous  
surveillance connect the nation state video  
police month release most  
senior tractions camera precaution.  
This in-high leader of movements  
without attracting media formation  
would include intention. You (the rest)  
eased into place.

# **INTELLIGENCE[in telligence]**

convincingly  
to have identified  
approximately 17 some 30  
portions depict  
nearly 30  
some six people  
on a daily basis  
the operation has been almost  
of release spotlight force  
has been that which is still so far  
in the 22 hours  
of a period spanning  
the assassination team's  
minute surveillance  
by last count  
that

## **from the hit**

some new  
confirmation of  
speculation tied to  
the steadily later claim  
can be killing and discussion  
a tactic USING involvement  
responsible for this utilization of  
human-based surveillance  
would have had to show  
having required the team story  
using

## **the news police astound team**

has been through location  
footage suspected of  
information assassination  
or managers'  
sources and physical monitoring  
done in ways:

22 hour period capabilities  
depicted, if not years  
hardly tells  
his agency to pinpoint  
technically, in any case

## **the most**

In the  
the  
The  
and  
&  
of the  
the fact and the  
weeks after  
a tremendous  
generating driving  
cycle and keeping releasing  
the arrival of amount of  
ex-filtration of

**this place for normal  
routines anticipates a  
clandestine limitation**

## **because his electronic number**

would most influence putting him  
in her “natural” environment such as  
they could obtain on physical arrival,  
Other People movements would limit  
a critical part in the familiar  
arrested surveillance  
and as many have the target as  
their rival operational knowing

( from a work-in-progress )

Bio : **KATHLEEN FRASER**

Kathleen Fraser's published work includes recent Artist Books, *S E C O N D LANGUAGE*, a collaged text with painter JoAnn Ugolini (forthcoming in *JACKET* n. 40), and *—ii ss—* with NY painter Hermine Ford (due from Granary Press, Fall 2010). Fraser's next full collection will be out from Nightboat Books in Fall. 2011. An interview / conversation appears in the on-line journal *JACKET*, n. 33. Fraser has lived for part of each year in Rome since 1982, lecturing widely on American poetry and translating recent Italian writers. She is currently co-editing the *Collected Poems of Frances Jaffer* with Rob Halpern.



*Photo courtesy of  
Jeannette Montgomery Barron*



## Love, Anne Carson

: a fictional essay in the wrong order  
(for Iainna)

Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition.

— Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

### 1. *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)

Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it.

There are the great subjects, the critics have told us: love, war, death. In her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson talks about how "It was Sappho who first called eros 'bittersweet.' No one who has been in love disputes her." What is it about love that gets us, guts us? How does Carson manage to write so tangibly on the intangibles of the heart? Are all her books about love? For Carson, perhaps, it's eros, love, beauty. Or is this all about desire. She writes in her preface:

The story concerns the reason why we love to fall in love. Beauty spins and the mind moves. To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.

An interesting opening salvo, for Carson, potentially shaping all the books that follow. Is this all about the Greeks? A decimation, an idea they took from Latin, another of their favourite roots. Perfecting it. A massacre so great it had to be measured by tens, a measure of punishment to a cowardly army, killing every tenth man. What did these Greeks say about love, about eros? And just what is the difference between the two? Is eros just a matter of how the Greeks approached the nuances of emotional complexity?

*Love is just a feeling*, you said. *You don't have to "do" anything*. I stumble over the word "just." I stumble over many things. I collapse into a stack of bone.

*Desire*, as John Newlove wrote, as opposed to passion, love or longing. Carson continues in her text:

But no simple map of the emotions is available here. Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling (*mignumi*) and desire melts the limbs (*lusimeles*, cf. Sappho fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs proceeds to break the lover (*damnatai*) as would a foe on the epic battlefield [...].

Does destruction signal the beginning of lack or an essential component before starting to rebuild?

Perhaps there are as many ways to answer this. One comes clearest in Greek. The Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' 'desire for that which is missing.' The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay.

How perfect, to talk through the Greeks on love, on *eros*; those who talked about the Arabic invention, zero. Your mother tongue, coming in through your own discrete absence, and the Greek Parmenides, who talked about the impossibility of the "non-being," citing the presence-absence paradox. How does this contradict zero itself, the number known by its own lack, its absence through this, a part of the elements that make up love, that *eros*, that bitter-sweet; contradicting halves that make the whole? How does Carson even begin to express the facets? As Newlove himself wrote in "Love, and other affairs," originally delivered to the Saskatchewan Writers Guild in 1988 as the very first Caroline Heath Memorial Lecture (later published in *Canadian Notes & Queries*, number 55):

I write about desire, which often means to think about right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. I praise endurance.

What is it about desire? This is where she begins. Is it impossible to desire what you already have? This seems contradictory, somewhat. An over-simplification. I have desired what I have had, but desire is temporal, love is not. One can love and let love, but desire is further wanting, later. I desire you now because of where you might eventually be. Is this the romantic love of Don Quixote, tilting further down his dusty trails? They say, if you love someone who knows you completely and still loves you, then everything else is going to be okay. Is this any different than desire? Carson writes:

It is a compound experience, both *gluku* and *pikrom*. Sappho begins with a sweet apple and ends in infinite hunger. From her inchoate little poem we learn several things about *eros*. The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time).

*I believe in free love*, you told me, back at the beginning. *Everything costs*, I said. I thought you almost naïve, and secretly envied that. Have I inadvertently managed to change your mind?

## 2. *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001)

Beauty does not rest.

What was it Keats said about love? Love, and giving in to desire, what Carson calls surrendering to beauty. When is love mere surrender, to beauty or anything else? Is love a giving or a giving in? Giving in to desire, you should, but first your own. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson writes her "fictional essay in 29 tangoes," writing Roman numerals through the Greeks; between Keats and this husband who is no more. A book/essay on love through its beginnings, middles and inherent failures through the end. Didn't you tell me you hadn't found anyone who had a perfect romantic relationship? I don't even know what that means.

Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.  
As I would again

if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.  
Beauty makes sex sex.  
You if anyone grasp this — hush, let's pass

to natural situations.

*The tension between temporal desire (suspended hope) and love is irreconcilable, you said. What is perfect? Is it lack of pain, feeling, a stillness? An unchanging state of concrete bliss?*

*I could deny you almost nothing, you told me, least of all more words.*

Beauty does convince, but doesn't always cohere. Certainly not alone. It always needs to be mixed with something.

This is a book about love through theft, infidelity, betrayals and divorce. Even writing out "hopeless" is admitting an echo of hope. Is this Carson exploring failure for the potential of something further?

you used to say. "Desire doubled is love and love doubled is madness."  
Madness doubled is marriage  
I added  
when the caustic was cool, not intending to produce  
a golden rule.

I know what it's like to have been married, or at least some equivalent, back in my own, nearly two long decades behind me. *Past turns to memory, mutable*, you said. How much do I remember of my own? How much do I remake? Is this what all past becomes? Whatever we wish it to. A mutable fiction, a story told to ourselves; we all become the heroes (or villains) of our own lives. *Am I speaking directly to you or only to myself?* Carson writes, "The seduction of force is from below."

Kissing her, I love you, joys and leaves of earlier times flowed through the husband and disappeared.

Presence and absence twisted out of sight of one another inside the wife.

They stood.  
Sounds reach them, a truck, a snore, poor shrubs ticking on a tin wall.

His nose began to bleed.

Where do imperfections reveal themselves best but through the result of poor romantic choices? It is often through failure when we learn ourselves best. *You, in Alberta, so dry that your nose begin to bleed, changing a headlight on your little blue car.* Throughout the poem, he cheats, she cheats, and love crumbles. They remarry, but not each other. The Greeks would have loved that, and probably did; not a betrayal but an added nuance. Old Greek married men who helped young men find sexuality and subsequent wives. Carson's is a fictional essay of

betrayal and beauty, as opposed to one, it would suggest, that is true. It begs the question: what is a true essay?

She had to unlock him she said.  
Meaning sex.  
I guess.  
You know what's good for that is tango.

What is this tango she talks, of this dance she mentions, some twenty-nine times? A dance done in pairs, danced either in open or closed embrace, connecting either chest-to-chest (Argentine tango) or at the upper thigh/hip area (American and International tango). Carson writes, "Love is not conditional. / Living is very conditional." *This seems to relate to your earlier comment about inaction.* Or back to Carson's opening lines, that include the fact that "A wound gives off its own light," and further down the page, writing:

What is being delayed?  
Marriage I guess.  
That swaying place as my husband called it.  
Look how the word  
shines.

### 3. *Autobiography of Red* (1998)

Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do.

Why an essay in the wrong order?

Carson's *Autobiography of Red* retells Helen of Troy through other eyes. Like Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, seeing its alternate and inevitable conclusion through the framing of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the spaces he left. The story of Helen, and the destruction of Troy, reordering all those points of view into something new and singular. The face, they said, that launched a thousand ships. Is this, itself, a love story or dire warning? Is this a romantic tale or story of revenge? Is this an extreme form of Stockholm Syndrome that only the Greeks could relay, thousands of years before given the name? Adding themselves to the mix.

No it is not the true story.  
No you never went on the benched ships.  
No you never came to the towers of Troy.

The titular section sub-titled "A Romance," problematising "true" against "love." Is this telling or deflection? Is this her herring, red on inevitable red? Like blood spilled on the carpet. Death and then, *what else* but sex. Taxes and death. What else we could never learn to protect ourselves from.

This was also the day  
he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things  
particularly his own heroism

and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted all outside things.

*Sex is certainly taxing*, you said, tongue planted firmly in cheek. In yours, when it wasn't in mine. In French, the "little death" we never recover from, in that half-moment before potential creation. One half feeding into the other. *Where are you now?*

The tale of the affair and relationship between young Geryon and Herakles, and what developed; rewriting the red monster into something else, a boy. A photograph in Polaroid, slowly fading into view. Developing. What is it the light contains? "The human custom of wrong love," Carson writes. Is she an optimist or a pessimist, exploring such failures, or are these choices oversimplified, outdated? A set of extremes book-ending what we no longer believe.

*You are a romantic*, you said, from driver's seat, eyes wide. Amazed at the revelation. *Am I?* (Isn't everyone?) *So what does that make you?*

"How does distance look?" is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless within to the edge of what can be loved. It depends on light.

What is it the light contains? A throw of particles. A throw of particulars.

#### 4. "The Glass Essay," *Glass, Irony and God* (1995)

Everything I know about love and its necessities  
I learned in that one moment  
when I found myself

This is the essay she wrote around what could be seen. Her search through glass. Or is this about the glass itself? As Guy Davenport writes at the beginning of his introduction to Carson's *Glass, Irony and God*:

Anne Carson begins her *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), a book about love and learning, with a fragment of Kafka's in which *ein Philosoph* tries to catch spinning tops, "for he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things." *War die kleinste Kleinigkeit wirklich erkannt, dann war alles erkannt.* Our planet spins on its axis; atoms spin; the liveliest equilibrium seems to require vertigo. An earlier *Philosoph* who also liked to be around playing boys thought that Eros, himself a boy, was necessary to philosophy, a *love* of learning. Behind Kafka's *Der Kreisel*, half a page long, are Greek boys tossing knucklebones, watched by Sokrates, who knows that as long as they are playing their minds are spinning and alive and open to intelligent questioning.

Love and learning. Isn't any great love also education? What each can bring to the table, learn from the other, growing into a single merged point, combined sum of their parts? You have become my other half. How do any of these conversations begin? She spins her

theories like silk, a series of threads. The vagaries of love, the many splendoured shapes and purpose. Writing about the Brontë sisters in "The Glass Essay," Carson notes:

Whatching a north wind grind the moor  
that surrounded her father's house on every side,  
formed of a kind of rock called millstone grit,

taught Emily all she knew about love and its necessities—  
an angry education that shapes the way her characters  
use one another.

This is Carson writing about marriage through *Wuthering Heights*, and about one sister's love for the other, including Charlotte's introduction to her sister's posthumously-published novel. This is Carson writing a narrator recovering from a love gone wrong. How does one text shake apart another? Carson writes the spaces between the Brontë sisters, Emily and Charlotte, the spaces between *Wuthering Heights*. This is not Monty Python performing parts of the novel in semaphore, or Kate Bush singing, the space between two distant hills.

To see the love between Law and me  
turn into two animals gnawing and craving through one another  
towards some other hunger was terrible.

Perhaps this is what people mean by original sin, I thought.  
But what love could be prior to it?  
What is prior?

What is love?  
My questions were not original.  
Nor did I answer them.

*Wuthering Heights*: first published in 1847, a novel of frustrated and eventually thwarted love, compounded by Heathcliff's cruelty. This is Carson, shaking the text into parts. I have no interest in cruelty. How does love so easily turn? The opposite of love and hate is indifference, a pendulum of rising and lowering passion.

Does it matter what the author thinks about love? Can such a position even remain fixed? Does thinking vs. biography make much of a difference to this poem, this essay written on, or even through, this unknown, unknowing glass? I can see right through you. Do we expect authors to live and think the same as their poems? When Leonard Cohen's selected poems and lyrics *Stranger Music* (1993) did so well in stores, bestseller lists didn't know where to place it. Some placed the title in "fiction," and others in "non-fiction." Where does poetry place us?

What was that you said, in response? *It allows us to choose for ourselves.*

In a piece about Carson on the *Arx Poetry Magazine* website, Catherine Joyce writes: "We come to such a poet not for music, not for lyric intensity but for the art of fearless observation." Carson writes her narrator and mother going to visit the narrator's father in

hospital, suffering Alzheimer's. "There is no known cause or cure." This is the narrator's mother in a cab twice a week for half a decade, visiting a husband that no longer knows her.

Marriage is for better or worse, she says,  
this is the worse.

Carson's poem exists in the first person, blurring the distinction between author and narrator easy to confuse. Is this glass half-empty or half-full? What does this say about love? Is her glass simply the wrong size? Is this something on the other side, or our own reflection we see?

It is generally anger dreams that occupy my nights now.  
This is not uncommon after loss of love—

*Love doesn't require intellect*, you said. *The mind and the heart have two different agendas*. Not always, I responded. And then you silent a while.

How do these conversations begin to hold? *Any relationship exists in compromise*, I told you. That doesn't have to mean a loss on either side. A meeting, instead.

This is the poem returning back to a life lived, post-everything else. This is Carson, writing:

I stopped watching.  
I forgot about Nudes.  
I lived my life,  
  
which felt like a switched-off TV.

This is Carson, at the end of the same page, the end of the poem:

It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.  
It walked out of the light.

Again I ask, what is it the light contains?

##### 5. *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001)

Philosophers say man forms himself in dialogue.

There is that oft-repeated quote from the Greek historian Heraclitus that George Bowering likes to use, including as epigraph to his collection *Curious*, writing "Men who love wisdom / should acquaint themselves / with a great many / particulars." Whose particulars, here, are even whose? As the book copy reads, "*The Beauty of the Husband* is an essay on Keats' idea that beauty is truth, and is also the story of a marriage. It is told in twenty-nine tangos. A tango (like a marriage) is something you have to dance to the end."

I am married again now. To hear myself say this. The nerves know. I tried to stop it happening.

Here is Carson on love, and Carson on marriage; is there a difference, or are they shades of the same thing? The narrator of Carson's poem aware of just how she moves through knowing and unknowing, seemingly unable to stop the contradicting schemes of the heart and the mind. A few lines further, Carson writing:

I thought changes were holy. I spilled them like grain. How could I know. How could I know she would lose.

So this is the strong part.

This is the book written around marriage and Keats, but written as much around the lines Keats had written outside of his poetry, at least twenty-nine Keats quotes from marginal notes, lesser known works and letters to friends. An essay on love around Keats just as much around what was peripheral. Outside the central issue; what might have been. Is this about beauty and truth or something more? Is it merely something beside, aside, an extra? As John Thompson wrote in his *Stilt Jack* (1976):

I'll read Keats and eye the weather too,  
smoke cigarettes, watch Captain Kangaroo.

The rain hits the ground so hard it bounces. *Today I am arrow-proof*, I tell myself.

The arrows of Apollo, you told me, that signified both love and disease. *When you see that arrow coming*, you said, *don't assume it's love...* Can I no longer distinguish? Have I confused it again? On an episode of *The Simpsons*, Grandpa Simpson unable to tell if he's in love or if instead he's had a stroke (it was love, in the end, as his gurney rolled out of the back of the ambulance).

But today arrow, not bullet, proof. The Superman of Ancient Greece, refusing to be even the least bit affected. Will it even matter?

Keats, throughout his life, wrote many things, including these lines from "Ode on Melancholy":

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

Writing on *The Beauty of the Husband* in *Jacket* magazine, Nadia Herman Colburn notes that "...Carson shows language itself to be a medium of desire..." What is it Keats himself wrote about love? In a letter to neighbour, fiancée and later, wife, Fanny Brawne (1800-1865), Keats wrote:

Love is my religion - I could die for  
that - I could die for you. My Creed



is Love and you are its only tenet -  
You have ravish'd me away by a  
Power I cannot resist: and yet I  
could resist till I saw you; and even  
since I have seen you I have  
endeavoured often "to reason against  
the reasons of my Love." I can do  
that no more - the pain would be too  
great - My Love is selfish - I cannot  
breathe without you. (13 October 1819)

Should we hold him to all? Is one expected to be personally responsible for every word? What is it Diane Schoemperlen wrote, in her novel *Forms of Devotion* (1998)? "Remember that love is blind. This is what you know." In another part of her book, Carson asks, "What really connects words and things?" The connections exist, but only if we see them. And then this section of the poem, just at the end:

Well life has some risks. Love is one. Terrible risks.  
Ray would have said  
Fate's my bait and bait's my fate.  
*On a June evening.*  
Here's my advice,  
hold.

Hold beauty.

#### 6. *Glass, Irony and God* (1995)

My religion makes no sense  
and does not help me  
therefore I pursue it.

What does a classicist want or need with God? We could talk about Emperor Constantine; we could talk about faith, the whole point believing in something that can't be proven. I don't know if this is what her light holds. All of her subjects knew God, to be sure. One has to admit the existence of God, I suppose, before claiming the deity dead. You can't hate and deny in the same single breath.

Some people have to fight every moment of their lives  
which God has lined with a burning animal—  
I think because

God wants that animal kept alive.

All her poems are about men somehow, even her Sappho, writing men out through the absences. Her poems about "TV Men."

TV is inherently cynical. It speaks to the eye, but the mind has no eye.

Do the eye, then, and the mind have different agendas? It might not matter, if they exist in constant negotiation, as opposed to conflict. Otherwise, the whole body might fail.

TV wastes nothing, like a wife.

Again, Carson writes out her Greeks. Again, I return to George Bowering, as another writer using one archetype with which to navigate human experience, writing and rewriting the same base phrase throughout his *My Life: A Poem* (2000):

Classical  
relation makes a family of us all

We are obvious constructions of history, both ours and that of the world. In relation, both in family and how we relate to the world. This is Carson, working her own sense of classical relation, recognizing her world through a particular broad filter of history, through Dante, Proust, Marco Polo, Isaiah, God and gender. What is it the light brings, that gaze of some thousands of human history?

From Marco Polo you find out

exactly how to get to China.

From Herodotos,  
a theory of why

Egyptian women urinate standing up  
(because the men do it sitting down).

Or, as Neil Gaiman wrote in an issue of *The Sandman*, speaking through his lead character, "All of our stories will return to their original form." The wolf eats grandmother, and later on, young Red, before folk tale added cloak and a hood, crouched naked by the fireplace. Cinderella's step-sisters die horrible deaths; what Walt Disney told but the fable's first half. Atlantis and Avalon go back to Ur, and stories of the Biblical flood. Hans Christian Anderson's little mermaid dies without legs or voice or tail or a soul, her body turning into the tide's final foam. From Herodotos to the classics, from the fall of Rome, from Sappho to Sokrates to sleep, Carson moves her way over, around and through familiar territory. Where is it she's going, and are we smart enough to keep up?

Before the robin's red surmise we were at the prison gates  
on Sokrates' death day.

Like Silenos discovered asleep in his cave  
by two boys

who fetter his enemy legs before he awakes  
lest he

once more deceive them in their hopes of a song, Sokrates

opens his—

eyes stacked with the motions of roses in that other dawn  
and a torn coolness—

reluctantly. It is so early,  
why are you here?

7. *The Economy of the Unlost* (1999)

There is too much self in my writing.

Exploring the lives and the works of the ancient Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos and post-WWII Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan, apart from her original *Eros the Bittersweet*, this is Carson's most straightforward book-length work, writing a relatively straight essay. But by removing herself, how does she manage to appear far more often than before, subversively present underneath each line? Is this, again, Parmendes making his zero-theory known?

Carson works best in mixture, in combination of connections that blend perfectly in her volcano-painting hands, but wouldn't necessarily occur to anyone else. Carson's essays and poems are like Richard Brautigan novels, blending what otherwise would have water and oil been, including his *A Confederate General in Big Sur* (1964), *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* (1971), *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (1974), and even his selected poems, *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (1968). Springhill, Nova Scotia, known both for the mine disaster, and as the birthplace of chanteuse Anne Murray, made somehow infamous throughout America by a four line poem by Beat poet Brautigan that gave title to his selected:

When you take your pill  
it's like a mine disaster.  
I think of all the people  
lost inside of you.

In Brautigan, it was pure hippy surrealism, mixing concepts and things that perhaps shouldn't have mixed, a la Jack Spicer perhaps. For Carson, it is a way of looking from such a long and interested distance, that even the seemingly-irrelevant begins to connect. This is all about having the larger perspective. One needs, in Anne Carson's case, the longer view.

But the question remains, What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?

It is in the combination of ideas that new elements are introduced.

In her essay, Carson writes economy as both brevity and commerce, writing about Simonides of Keos, said to be the first poet in the western tradition to not only take, but demand money for his compositions, a poet who emerged around the same time as the

invention of money itself. Taking cash instead of trade, barter or gift. What has this to do with love?

*I understand now that love requires pain*, you said. You begin to say. *That freedom and safety aren't at all the same thing*. What is it Carson says? "For the Greeks, memory is rooted in utterance [...]." Why do I feel as though speaking your breath? If only I could speak to what I think I remember.

According to myth, Kastor and Polydeukes are brothers (one mortal, the other immortal) who could not bear to be parted by death and so divide a single eternity between them, spending alternate days on and under the earth, infinitely half-lost. "Now they are living, day and day about," says Homer. Mortality and immortality continue side by side in them, hinged by a strange arrangement of grace. A poet is also a sort of hinge. Through songs of praise he arranges a continuity between mortal and immortal life for a man like Skopas. And although Skopas believes he is paying Simonides a certain price for a certain quantity of words, in fact he acquires a memory that will prolong him far beyond all of these. He will be one of the unlost. Gratitude is in order.

There is halving, there is that space between lost and found, called unlost. *Where are you now?* This is a story that, of two brothers, lost and unlost, almost echoes that of Gilgamesh and his lost "brother" Enkidu. The idea that a person by themselves can remain halved, can remain incomplete. Lost, but unlost. I write your name in blue ink all along my left side.

*Everything costs*, I said, wondering earlier if I had managed to change your mind on the concept of free love. *It costs so much*, you replied, *I doubt you get change*. But there is a difference. A maturing, perhaps. Learning the cost of anything is realizing value. What else can I tell you?

#### 8. *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)

Even in the off hours, men know marks.

This is my favourite of Carson's texts. Writing a poem about war, Carson is back to Virginia Woolf, the Greeks, Lazarus, Sappho, Augustine, Longinus, Edward Hopper, Artaud, Van Gogh, Catullus. Just who are these figures, men or otherwise? Just what is it she wants us to know? How many texts can she shape from these same sources? How does she not grow weary with her own repeated retellings? There are mythologies she points to, like significant fictions, telling in and around her own stories. Just what is it, inside of that light? What does it contain?

Audubon understands light as an absence of darkness,  
truth as an absence of unknowing.

*If I say anything enough times, I wonder which one of us might start believing first*. I wonder if one of us might stop. What do either of us know about hope? Carson even asks the question through the voice of Catullus, asking "Why does love happen?"

Dear old red eyes, what did you hope—

Later on, through the voice of Hara Tamiki, Carson writing "Love made me endure." Is it a weakness she creates, or a strength? Don't you know that it's both?

*You ask too many questions, you tell me. And provide not enough answers.*

It almost makes me think that Anne Carson already knows you. I have said barely a word.

I wanted to run away with you tonight  
but you are a difficult woman  
the rules of you—

She writes Augustine and Edward Hopper; but what does Hopper have to do with Augustine's *Confessions XI*? These are the measures, she suggests, that we take. A concept of risk, and a concept of just what can be gained.

For in what does time differ from eternity except we measure it?

In the space of Carson's hours, there is Tolstoy, desire, and the question of desire. This is her men in their downtime, away from the main thrust of their lives. Or is this simply men as they're "off," documenting imperfect moments, captured like image to film? Is this, through Tolstoy, where the poem begins?

Desire, the trees are rags. Desire, streaks of it  
scalding the fog.

Desire, and the indiscreet dreams of her TV men, writing the author of *War and Peace*, and his nameless wife, "After his death she dreams of roses and bones." Carson's voyeuristic poems write an action that she, as writer/narrator, is a passive instead of an active part. But even the watcher, as someone said, alters that which is being seen. Carson writing out what happens and has, writing out past in a present tense, and, through the voice of another, speaking (perhaps) her own process:

Yes I admit a degree of unease about my  
motives in making  
this documentary.

The poet and classics scholar Anne Carson writing out her documents, her long poem, her documentary, her (as Dorothy Livesay once coined it) "documentary poem" on men that exist on her own fictional television screen, what Ed Sanders later termed "investigative poetics." Carson writes out a poem investigating things that happen, happened, and documented, to historical figures. But even Carson writing Carson exists in the past. Just how far back must a poem go? Even here, where Carson moves back into God, Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and the dead man listening to the silence of the women's own voices; the recently-dead-and-buried Lazarus, as Carson peers through these archival bushes, instructed to stand up and walk.

There is gender even through writing out an absence of such, Carson's poem and poems on men, even as Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* wrote out the story of women. Back to the story of zero, mistaking capital *Ob*. When Gaiman tells a story passed from father to son, there is the acknowledgment of the absence by the father, of a version of (potentially) the same story passed from mothers to daughters, that only they know. Even through *not* telling, the story is women-built, just as Carson's poems talking of men. Just who are these men? Who are these two men, for example, she writes Russian poet Anna Akhmatova marrying, even as another female in her list of TV men, in the opening of Carson's Akhmatova poem?

Do you love him? I don't know. I believe he is my fate.  
    Inside the church ikons glowed vastly.  
Out on the steps the fog hustled people away, in groups or alone.  
    At last only she was left. She had tossed her wing  
over one arm. Poetry has no such use,  
    and starkly paced inside her.

This is one marriage and another one, Akhmatova's son jailed once and then a second time, unheard of and then even unheard from. One document leading quickly and directly into a further one. Everything connects. Carson writes her poetic forms through screenplays, scripts and film sets, setting the stage for television, documentaries, film and war. In the voice of actress Catherine Deneuve she tells us "Beginning are hard."

*What do you want?*  
*Want to be in the same room with him.*

Is this desire or love, eros or marriage, or something else entirely? Is this just following some kind of script?

Sappho stares into the camera and begins, *Since I am a poor man—*  
Cut

#### 9. *Short Talks* (1992)

The actions of life are not so many.

This is the Carson book that introduced her work to Canadian audiences, where we first saw her, this thin volume published out of London, Ontario. These are short prose poem blocks with her (another) painting of a volcano on the cover. This is where we were introduced to Carson the poet, where I was introduced too, and she even introduces herself, in her self-titled "Introduction," ending with:

I have to be careful what I set down. Aristotle talks about probability and necessity, but what good is a marvel, what good is a story that does not contain poison dragons. Well you can never work enough.

The pieces here talk around love, next door to love, talk the next county over, but never directly address the topic. How is it these poems so different than what else came after?

Carson, through her own texts, finding herself, discovering the shape and the sound of her eventual voice.

*Short Talk On Hedonism*

Beauty makes me hopeless. I don't care why anymore I just want to get away. When I look at the city of Paris I long to wrap my legs around it. When I watch you dancing there is a heartless immensity like a sailor in a dead calm sea. Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls.

How are we to know? This is when Carson was still using Canadian spellings as well, unlike all that came after, writing the "u" in "colour," for example. Is this as arbitrary as format, in her only book published in her country of origin? Who can talk of origins? Between Canada and ancient Greece texts, she talks about God, she talks about marriage, she talks about the Brontës, she talks about rain, she talks about Sylvia Plath. What is all of this talking? In "*Short Talk On Rectification*," through the voice of Franz Kafka, she argues again about marriage: "He made a list of arguments for and against marriage, including inability to bear the assault of his own life (for) and the sight of the nightshirts laid out on his parents' beds at 10:30 (against). Hemorrhage saved him."

This is Carson at her most exploratory, moving poetic exploration through the guise of expositions. She is not telling us what she knows but talking her way through what she is trying to learn, working slowly to discover. Where her poems begin, before wrapping up like a dna strand into her essays, wrapping what the poetry of her *Short Talks* started into what the critical thinking of her *Eros the Bittersweet* did, until the two could no longer be separately read.

*Short Talk On Where To Travel*

I went travelling to a wreck of a place. There were three gates standing ajar and a fence that broke off. It was not the wreck of anything else in particular. A place came there and crashed. After that it remained the wreck of a place. Light fell on it.

Is it not what the light contains, but instead, what it illuminates?

10. *Decreation* (2005)

Who can sleep when she—  
hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath  
fan her restless decks.

Here it is, Anne Carson talking by tens, creating something so large that she could only frame in Latin, by way of Greek. Through structural means, her greatest play through poetry, essay and opera, writing through all of her touchstones: Sokrates, Plato, Achilles, Virginia Woolf, John Keats, Homer and Elizabeth Bishop, among others. But Carson seems unfocused, lost even to herself. Has she been too broken and retooled?

When we are children, it is through play that we begin to learn, something discouraged as we age. Changing play into serious work. Doesn't this mean we learn less efficiently, once the aspect of fun becomes removed?

*I wanted to memorize you, molecule by molecule. I want to memorize the shape of you beneath my tongue. I want what I wanted, what I can never un-want.*

[...] To my mother,  
love  
of my life, I describe what I had for brunch. The lines are falling  
faster  
now.

In *Decreation*, Carson talks again of the narrator's mother and death, and of the narrator's father, who died of dementia. See how this goes all the way back to "The Glass Essay," on the dying and death of the father. Is this in fact where destruction leads, back into the personal, and universal?

My personal poetry is a failure.

A matter of recreating and rediscovering self through the death of a parent. A facet that develops through the birth of a child as well. Becoming more of what you already were. Becoming something that relies less than is reliant. Paraphrasing Stein, I am I because my little girl knows me. When child becomes parent, and the cycle continues. A love that isn't halved, but grows out by halves. *To halve*, as they say, *and halve not*.

Heaven's lips! I dreamed  
of a page in a book containing the word *bird* and I  
entered *bird*.  
Bird grinds on,  
  
grinds on, thrusting against black.

This is Carson writing the words that make up the world, that make up desire, that make up belief. *Is this why I wrote all those letters?* I write you now, in the spaces left amid Carson's own words. I write letters, mail them, still, a five-day delay in-between.

*Do you remember still what you dreamed?*

My earliest memory is of a dream. It was in the house where we lived when I was three or four years of age. I dreamed I was asleep in the house in an upper room. That I awoke and came downstairs and stood in the living room. The lights were on in the living room, although it was hushed and empty. The usual dark green sofa and chairs stood along the usual pale green walls. It was the same old living room as ever, I knew it well, nothing was out of place. And yet it was utterly, certainly, different. Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad.



In this book, Carson writing Kant, Monica Vitti, Beckett, Sappho and marriage; has her scope broadened or merely thickening? Marriage: she seems almost obsessed with the word. Why is biography the first place any reader of poetry and fiction wants to go? So bitter, so sweet, and so hopeful, still. Like Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1989), this book almost sees fragments of all her previous texts, where every thread of her writing ended up, but not necessarily end. Where else can she go from here?

It is no simple red, he said.  
Each thread  
spun from a different reason for marrying.

Each thread, then, finding its own different reason. Where else *can* she go? Carson, writing those who have changed not only the shape of text but through their writing, changed the shape of thought.

It was 1930. Marriage was going well with the Sapphic Vita, marriage was going well with the virginal Virginia. Besides that, they were enjoying their affair, looking forward to spending the weekend after the eclipse together at Long Barn (Vita's ancestral estate). Still, totality is a phenomenon that can flip one's ratios inside out.

This is Carson pushing through a destruction, preparing to rebuild. The binary of endings and newly-minted beginnings. Don't you know there is always a certain amount of pain enmeshed in any pleasure? One idea blends into another, one body too, to the point of indistinguishable. A gain, not a loss. We do not lose ourselves, as it is supposed to work, but grow.

#### BLENDED TEXT

You have captured:	<i>pinned</i> upon
my heart:	the wall of <i>my heart</i> is your love
with one glance:	as <i>one</i>
with one bead:	as <i>an exile of the kings</i> of royalty
of your eyes:	<i>my heart</i>
you have something of mine:	a torn thing
again the moon:	<i>now</i>
the rule:	(who knows)

#### 11. *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995)

After a story is told there are some moments of silence.

In *Plainwater*, Carson starts the first section with questions on Aphrodite, goddess of love, suggesting Sappho's own fragments, pinpointing lines as the suggestions of larger, lost verse. She writes essays that float through the poems, placing the two side-by-side, writing that "What streams out of Mimnermos's suns are the laws that attach us to all luminous things." and "Sex and light. Let us consider how they move him." Further on in the same piece, adding:

Like sex, light is not a question until you are in the dark.

How does this add to or further her original query, of what the light holds?

Is it necessary to keep repeating names that Carson brings up? Every writer knows what they know, every person too, and Carson is no different. What is it she's telling us? In the voice of Mimnermos himself, she tells us:

[...] the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period it's not that I don't pity you it's not that I don't understand your human face [...]

In her *Plainwater*, a section made up of what was once her collection *Short Talks*, shortened from her original list and slightly tinkered, including Canadian spellings "corrected" to American. Again, is this a matter of the publisher, of context? And her introduction to same, too, rewritten and altered, as she introduces again what she had already done, writing shades of the former version, which now ends:

I begin to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.

Carson writes of women craving personal and intellectual freedoms and that perfect love, goals that her troubled characters seem to rarely achieve, or achieve with great difficulty, writing her "Anna" in the section "Canicula di Anna":

In the convent  
Anna took the name  
Helena. The nuns  
were content (Preserver  
of the True Cross).  
It was painful  
for them to learn  
she meant Helen of Troy.  
And meant  
the love of innocence.

## 12. *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do.

*You are in another city. I am in this one, waiting for the phone to ring. Are we holding these boundaries merely to cross?*

It is the poetry of those who were first exposed to a written alphabet and the demands of literacy that we encounter deliberate meditation upon the self, especially in the context of erotic desire.

*Bittersweet*, Carson not only said but repeated. What else Sappho left in pieces. Is this the tearing down before something further? You can find examples to go along with any argument. What exactly is she telling us? And the first written alphabet, is this all back to your Arabic roots, my self-proclaimed Phoenician? Was Carson attempting to write us all along?

Desire for an object *that he never knew he lacked* is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for a necessary part of himself. Not a new acquisition but something that was always, properly, *his*. Two lacks become one.

No matter what else, I wait; for what I never knew I lacked. We aim ourselves both to a singular point, the same one. There is the binary, the double, mixed, a dna strand becoming a single strong entity. The thread that becomes so much stronger in turn.

“To reach for something else than the facts will carry you beyond this city and perhaps, as for Sokrates, beyond this world. It is a high-risk proposition, as Sokrates saw quite clearly, to reach for the difference between known and unknown. He thought the risk worthwhile,” Carson writes at the end of her essay. Again, like the Greek, Carson’s dialogue, two-sided. Desire, and not-desire; love, and not-love. Where they both can end up. Where love surely writes itself.

A city without desire is, in sum, a city of no imagination. Here people think only what they already know. fiction is simply falsification. Delight is beside the point (a concept to be understood in historical terms). This city has an akinetic soul, a condition that Aristotle might explain in the following way. Whenever any creature is moved to reach out for what it desires, Aristotle says, that movement begins in an act of the imagination, which he calls *phantasia*. Without such acts neither animals nor men would bestir themselves to reach out of the present condition or beyond what they already know. *Phantasia* stirs minds to movement by its power of representation; in other words, imagination prepares desire by representing the desired object as desirable to the mind of the desirer. *Phantasia* tells the mind a story.

*I understand now*, you said. Working toward our own happy ending. Writing out a new end to the story, there, back at the beginning. Back to the beginning that is *only* beginning, crossing over desire into all that comes next.

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Born in Ottawa, Canada's glorious capital city, **rob mcLennan** currently lives in Ottawa. The author of some twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, his most recent titles are the poetry collections *gifts* (Talonbooks), *a compact of words* (Salmon Poetry, Ireland), *wild horses* (University of Alberta Press) and a second novel, *missing persons* (The Mercury Press). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), *seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics* ([ottawater.com/seventeenseconds](http://ottawater.com/seventeenseconds)), *The Garneau Review* ([ottawater.com/garneareview](http://ottawater.com/garneareview)) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual *ottawater* ([ottawater.com](http://ottawater.com)). He spent the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at [robmcLennan.blogspot.com](http://robmcLennan.blogspot.com).



*photo courtesy of  
Catherine MacDonald-Zytveld*

## INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS COOLEY

by S. Moreland

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Dennis Cooley is the author of numerous books of poetry, including *Bloody Jack* (Turnstone 1984), *seeing red* (Turnstone 2003), and *the bentleys* (U Alberta 2006). He also teaches Canadian and postmodern literature at the University of Manitoba.

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This interview is based on an email exchange which occurred in late April/early May 2008, as well as an in-person follow-up which occurred on the afternoon of Saturday, May 10 at the Royal Oak pub on Laurier Avenue, during a between-session break in the “Re: Reading the Postmodern” symposium at the University of Ottawa. In keeping with Cooley’s insistent poetic hybridity and aesthetics of “improved orality,” and since much of the in-person discussion stemmed directly from our prior email exchange, I have spliced the written and oral components of the interview together, cutting some material in the interest of space and continuity.

*SM: So, we’ve just heard Christian Bök and others define their understanding of postmodernism. When Bök discussed postmodernism, he basically seemed to mean literature predicated on the recognition of a severance of reference, where language no longer represents something outside itself, or no longer refers back to a speaker, a speaking presence. Would you say your work is postmodern in this sense?*

**DC:** No. That conception of postmodernism is much too purist for me. Too limited, too. To some extent, I’m still operating in a lyric mode. What I like to do is mix things, discourses. I’m irredeemably impure, a sucker for whatever could be done. I don’t want to give up resources so totally, or (so it seems to me) so needlessly, as some would have it. You certainly can try to do so (though you never leave reference completely behind, other than very briefly here and there), and that’s a legitimate and exciting thing to do. But I want to retain other options. They may be suspect, or inadequate, but they’re there, and they’re useful. I don’t want to eliminate all sorts of forms simply because we have learned to see them as less than innocent.

*SM: In what sense, then, do you consider your poetry ‘postmodern?’*

**DC:** I’m interested in the postmodern more as it is described by Lyotard—his emphasis on many different language games and the resistance to meta-narratives. But above all I love Barthes, his own lovely sense of writing, and his riffs on letting go and rejoicing in language. That crazy and sweet jumble of language. But also the playful, the disorienting, the incoherent, the unmarked (lacking the guidance of punctuation), the mixed, the unliterary, the regional, the demotic, the lyrical, the vivid. We’ve got a range of forms,

the emotional, the flamboyant, the archaic, the neologic, the heavily rhymed, the understated, the bodily. The metafictional. Aberrant syntax, dispersed morphologies, unorthodox spelling, minimal punctuation, disorienting lineation.

**SM:** *In the essays collected in The Vernacular Muse, you often refer to Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition. I'm curious about the relationship between your advocacy of a vernacular poetics and Lyotard's conception of postmodernism as defined by a resistance to meta-narratives. Can you elaborate on this?*

**DC:** Mostly I had been thinking of it as a way of opposing bullying narratives or claims to universality, preferring a version of local or unassuming language, considered more or less unfit for poetry, but having a potential for speaking what I saw as the unspoken or the unheard, the matter and manner of those whose worlds had perhaps not been accorded much standing in the exalted literary world, or in what we now misleadingly call the “global” world—a word which often simply masks imperialism. I myself came from a working-class family and a strong respect for the CCF [Co-operative Commonwealth Federation] so I guess I was well-disposed toward the move, always winced when I heard of “significant” events in history too. They never included people like my parents. They didn’t much make it into poetry either.

Kroetsch was a big influence, and has continued to be.

**SM:** *In “The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry” you write that “the point is to reopen some space for orality in the face of a print culture which has consolidated itself as the measure of literature, and which in its applications in the prairies works in damaging ways.” Speaking as someone who is fairly ignorant of the history and major voices of prairie poetry (I have to confess here that, like Layton's “Anglo-Canadian,” I hail from Kingston, ON, literally and perhaps poetically also...). I am curious about your predecessors in terms of the poetic exploration of orality, and especially of prairie vernacular. Who are your major influences in this respect, and what is it that you feel you've learned/taken from them?*

**DC:** Whoops, Kroetsch again, he especially. It was he who first began speaking and writing about the use of orality, and he was about the first to use it daringly in poetry. Thing is, from the mid 70s quite a few prairie poets were writing in a fairly colloquial style, a few years before I myself got seriously involved as a writer. Andy Suknaski was crucial too. I take it back, Andy did some of these things before Kroetsch did. Kroetsch combined orality with a wild sense of postmodernism, and that was more enabling to me and I think has had more influence on subsequent writing. There's at least one other writer here you should know about. Barry McKinnon wrote a brilliant long poem, *I Wanted to Say Something*, that Andy put me onto. A dazzling and hardly known text. And then there was arguably the first really accomplished prairie poem, Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy*. It used some conversational lines and it too is a highly effective piece of writing, strikingly contemporary to us in a number of ways. The thing was, from the mid—70s there was a wild literary ferment in the prairies, and it took a particular whirlwind at St. John's College in Winnipeg, where I started teaching in 1973. Those were heady and extravagant days—magazines and readings and presses and

conferences and classes and pubtalk and dreams exploding all over the place, day in and day out. David Arnason was crucial to what was happening, and he too had a passionate determination that people might write out of the prairies, and he too drew a bit upon a vernacular style. You might want to have a look at his first book, a very long poem called *Marsh Burning*. It's an impressive piece of writing.

*SM: Your book Bloody Jack opens with a quote from Julia Kristeva concerning Menippean discourse, wherein she concludes that “the multi-stylism and multi-tonality of this discourse and the dialogical status of its word explain why it has been impossible for classicism, or for any other authoritarian society, to express itself in a novel descended from Menippean discourse.” How relevant has this Menippean discursive legacy continued to be to your work since Bloody Jack? Is this something that consciously stands behind the hybridization of novel/long poem that both seeing red and the bentleys represent? Is this a vein you will continue to tap?*

**DC:** I've used Menippea most prominently in *Bloody Jack*, I think it's fair to say. I hadn't actually heard of Menippea as Bakhtin and Kristeva conceived of it until I was well into writing *BJ*. For years (two? three?) as I was working on *BJ* I had been thinking of it within a theatrical model. It's a play of voices, I'd say, a kind of drama. And then Kroetsch came back from somewhere (this would have been about 1983 or so) and he sent me a xerox of a text he'd just been taken with. And there it was—Bakhtin talking about Menippea, and I realized, my god, that's what I'm doing, I'm writing a Menippea! The reason I'd take the term to be more easily applied to *BJ* than to most of the other books is the crazy array that jangles through *BJ*. The rest of the books don't have quite that same pell-mell of mixed discourses, I think, though I would like to think that the other books are in keeping with *BJ* (which is what I was tempted to call the second edition of *Bloody Jack*). A few of the books—*Fielding* and *Irene*—are much less Menippean. They've very personal elegies for each of my parents and in them I very deliberately refused a clutter of voices, though in their own quiet ways they too are multiply voiced, or so it seems to me.

I'm taken with your observation about the applicability of Menippea to the contemporary long poem. It does fit rather well, doesn't it? It enables us to name that loose assembling of so many different bits of language, and to do so in resistance and celebration.

Yes, I like to work in that mode, and much of the time I work with the thought of gathering material around some site, not terribly concerned about obvious cohesion or decorum, throwing things together and alongside, trusting that the pleasure I take in them will play out in rich and enabling connections for readers.

Allen Ginsberg once said: mind is shapely. I guess I'm acting out of some such notion in my magpie moves, hauling all the shining things into a hoard. There they are, all those shining things. Well, ok, they may look a tad tarnished to some, but to me they shine. I'd probably prefer to think of the constructions as making available pieces that readers might be drawn to and react to.

*SM: Following from my previous question, then, was this extended engagement with earlier novels something you had planned from the beginning with these projects, or did it gradually evolve? If the latter, when was it you realized you were (re)writing these*

*books? Does this para-textual engagement alter how you work, ie, what kind of methods you deploy while working through the poems themselves? How did the structure of these novels affect your poetic process (for example, did the syncretic epistolary form Stoker explores in Dracula, or the diaristic form of As for Me and My House, play a role in the formation of the often fragmentary and polyphonic poems in these books?)*

**DC:** Wow! A fabulous set of questions! I'll try the easy part first. No, when I first started writing "seriously," as we say—though there are more than a few readers who would find it hard to think of my work as "serious"—I hadn't gotten on to that strategy for writing. My first publication was a small chapbook of sorted lyrics, "Leaving," and I remember worrying that I had used up all my poems there, and that I wouldn't have any more, ever. I guess that after that I soon began to write and to gather material around a site. I wrote *Fielding*, the poem for my father; wrote *Dedications*, a collection of poems dedicated to friends; *Perishable Light* around related poems. Where I really got going on the series of closely related poems, in a kind of serial long poem, was with *Soul Searching*. *Bloody Jack* had begun with a rewriting of material from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. I soon bogged down. I wanted to push on, but I had lost momentum. Well, says Arnason, do we have an outlaw? Anyone from around here? We both recently had heard a radio broadcast on Jack Krafchenko, who called himself Bloody Jack, and I was off and running. I found all kinds of wild stuff in the archives but mostly I had a locale off which I could play.

The two texts that draw demonstrably off novels both started at much the same time. In late 1989 I had been working on a series of fairy tale poems (which appeared a bit later as *Goldfinger*) and I was mining that vein, when I began to speculate more widely. Where are there related figures? I hit on Dracula and wrote a poem which at the time I thought would be part, possibly, of the fairy tale sequence. And then Dracula took over and I wrote an unspeakably large stack of vampire poems. I waited for a couple of years before I actually read *Dracula*, which by the way I think is a really fine book, and yes I did then use a lot of what I found there. The links with the Ross novel are pretty strong too, though there, as in *seeing red*, I ran very loosely with the material.

The thing about writing "creatively" is you never have quite the same obligation to your sources as you do when you are working as a scholar. You're looking for something that can set you off. And off I set. When I teach creative writing I am forever urging young writers to locate some "place" which imaginatively fascinates them and then to see where it might take them. Once you get a few permissions and begin to see possibilities you're on your way.

As for the question of form. . . That's a tough one, but I really like what you're on to here. I can't say that I was consciously, or even unconsciously, adapting formal strategies from those novels, not that I can remember at least. I was heavily aware of the point of view that ran through Ross's novel and making use of it, deriving perhaps that painful inwardness and paralysis of my main figure in *the bentleys*. (By the way there is another book, *country music*, which comes from that same manuscript, *love in a dry land*, a manuscript which at its height, before I began to disburse it, must have been up to 800 pages or so, and is still growing, to this day. I'm intending to add to what I've got and to pull a few more books out of it if I haven't exhausted the possibilities). So the diary form may well have nudged me into the frequency of Mrs. B's silent ruminations. What I



knowingly took from *Dracula* was a sense that the discourse of science and technologies, the terms of criminology, the language of banking, and the force of record-keeping (letter writing too?) were closing in on Dracula. So I began to name him as an evasion of those constrictions, a figure of circulation in a world of retention.

*SM: I've got a further question about the bentleys. In an essay on narrative technique in Ross's novel, critic Paul Denham claimed that "the patterns of imagery through which much of the novel's meaning is conveyed are densely and carefully worked. [. . .] If we approach the novel as a poem, through its imagery, or as a model for the Canadian identity, we are likely to find it a very important work indeed." With the bentleys, you have not only approached the novel as a poem, you have turned it into one. What was it about Ross's novel that invited your poetic performance? Was the novel's oft-contested canonical status as a Canadian "classic" important in this respect?*

**DC:** I wasn't in any way concerned with the status of the novel. Well, that's not quite true. I'm a ferocious champion of prairie literature and I am happy to see texts from the Prairies getting attention. For what it's worth I think (and, as I recall, so does Denham) the Ross novel in some ways is a failure, but it is deeply intriguing. I mean think of what Ross could have done with the diary form. He hit on a great idea and then he hardly made use of the diary. I also think the book fascinates readers for the very reasons that it fails—it lacks the kind of anchoring that a realist novel promises. But, to get to your question: yes, I have always been struck with the poetic power of *As for Me and My House*. Dozens of students lament the "dreariness" of the text and claim to find it "depressing." This always puzzles me. Part of the response is naive, I know—the confusing of characters' exhaustion, or depletion in the setting, with the effect of the novel. But I think there is a missing, too, of the remarkable poetry with which Ross writes. Some of those passages just stun me, and (as you probably have noticed) I've come close here and there to simply stealing them.

I think too that I saw in a rewriting of the novel a chance to pursue some of my obsessions as a writer. I confess, in an age quick to shame the love poet (what kind of postmodern poet writes love poems, I ask you?), that I myself am a sucker for that stuff and I write on, endlessly, poem after poem about muses and yearning and loneliness. A carry-over perhaps of my childhood listening to country songs. Hurtin' songs. Country music.

*SM: Given your interest in re-writing novels as poetry, and the formal links you've made use of, do you plan to, or are you ever tempted to, try your hand at writing novels?*

**DC:** No, not really. . . I'm not very interested in writing novels with their long and enclosing arcs, unless that word is understood in a rambunctiously postmodern way. I may one day return to material that I've had laying around for 30 years—something I've been thinking as a long poem on the Estevan miners' strike in 1931. I've begun to think that I could revisit and reshape this material (I've been prompted in part from reading a strange and exciting novel, *Perdue*, by Geoffrey Ursell) as a postmodern novel. I suppose you could read *BJ* as a postmodern novel, and I know that Aritha van Herk, for one, has done so.

**SM:** *The title of seeing red itself emphasizes the visual dimensions of language, and the book opens with a richly imaged allusion to writing (“the ink spreads/ that’s me I sniff slink across dreams,” “your niggling desires ink in / a cape” with its echoes of Hamlet’s “inky cloak”). One of the sustaining tensions of the entire collection seems to be the contrast between this emphasis and that on orality/aurality. How would you place these poems in terms of the eye/ear distinction you develop in the essay “Placing the Vernacular?”*

**DC:** You're making it tough for me, Sean. I'd prefer to turn the question back to you: to what extent for you are these “eye” or “ear” poems? Both I'd say. Certainly I'm happy myself to write both, and do. I'd have to reread the text carefully, but isn't *seeing red* full of many other images too—especially the tactile and the kinaesthetic? Seems to me that that kind of bodily attention suits erotic poetry, and I like to think of my boy, Drac, as being pretty sexy.

**SM:** *I can't argue with that – both the character and your poetic evocation thereof ooze eroticism. So, Drac, Jack Krafchenko, Phyllis Bentley — these poetic amanuenses share in common a kind of foreignness, an outsiderly quality. This, combined with the vernacular idiom and often wildly ludic formal play of your poems, brings to mind Gilles Deleuze's statement (in the essay “He Stuttered” from Essays Critical and Clinical) that “a great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself,” because he minorizes this language, “much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium.” (How) is this conception relevant to your poetics?*

**DC:** I haven't read that essay though I can see at once that I will have to. I have read other pieces in which he talks about a “minor” language and I find the claim quite forceful, for the very reasons you enunciate. If you don't take the language for granted you bring its supposed invisibility into action—as it seems to me you are more likely to do when you are not positioned centrally and comfortably in things, as in easy eloquence you might be. You might well find yourself wrestling with language, wrestling with the angel syntax is what some poet once said.

I have just been reading Charles Bernstein's *A Poetics*, in which he argues that the radical innovations in early twentieth-century verse were led by those who were not entirely at home within the English language, above all not in what Bernstein calls Island English, which informed high British poetic practice.

And so I'm really taken with the title you mention. Stuttered—that's wonderful. A great way of putting it. I've often argued there's a kind of fluency which comes from those who, for the moment at least, are supremely confident in what they are saying, in the security of their saying, in their “already knowing” what it is they are saying. The stutter as hesitation, mark of uncertainty? When you're not sure where you are going or what you might say, nor for that matter what form the words might take or what response they might occasion.

Would this connect?

*SM: I'd say it would, definitely. This is perhaps a stretch, but I've recently become hooked on the HBO series, The Wire. One of the greatest things about the show, for me, is the ability of the writers to combine street pidgin, cant, slang and profanity with this powerful natural eloquence. One scene from the first season, in particular, involves five minutes of dialogue that consists entirely of "fucks" and "motherfuckers," and yet each usage is given a totally different sense through context and body language. I get a similar sort of satisfaction from reading your stuff, especially Bloody Jack—that striking exploration of the poetic possibilities of what is often considering non-literary (or even non-literate) language...*

**DC:** I haven't seen *The Wire*, but I'll look for it. With *Bloody Jack*, I was certainly interested in exploring the possibilities of supposedly 'extra-literary' language, speech and idiom... I often use voices which are semi-literate, but highly skilled in terms of orality. There is an improved, an amplified, orality; the flavour of idiom, without the flatness. At least that's what I'm after—I compress, tart up, elaborate a term beyond its likely duration.

*SM: I'd like to ask a couple of questions about your literary criticism. I was profoundly impressed with your essay on Robert Duncan's "Poem Beginning with a Line from Pindar." What do you think is your best piece of poetry-analysis?*

**DC:** Possibly the Livesay piece, the one on her poem "Day and Night," in the way it integrates contextual and formal criticism. But then there's the one on document in the postmodern long prairie poem. And one on the mother in Kroetsch. Hard to say, really.

*SM: When you consider Dorothy Livesay's political poetry, you argue persuasively against the dominant critical paradigm that reads Livesay's "socialist verse as some form of aberration in what is a body of metaphoric, romantic writing." Many of your arguments in "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry" suggest a strong connection between your poetics and political views (for example, your re-tracing of the etymological origins of the word "plagiarism" in the Renaissance, a word/concept which "has taken us for the last few centuries away from the sense of a shared language whose ingredients were openly available in a kind of verbal communism"). How would you describe your political position? Can you comment further on how this position informs/affects your poetics, and the narrative viewpoints your poems explore?*

**DC:** Pinko. A life-time pinko. As I've indicated a little earlier, I grew up in a CCF family, and that sense has never quite left me. I've adjusted my thinking in many ways, but I still have a strong sense of social justice and human aspiration. Humanism someone will huff, Cooley's locked into a humanist position. But yes, you've identified the affinity with marginalized figures, often eroticized figures, whose forms of protest or entry or self-invention or celebration are heavily verbal. My politics may explain my sympathy for referential and expressive language too. I'm wary of them, certainly as exclusive or exalted forms of language, but I'm drawn to them too. It may be that I myself am marked by a residual romanticism, but in any case I have no interest in producing texts that answer to somebody's strict version of postmodernism.

I'm shamelessly mongrel, unapologetically sullied, in matters of language, and I like to draw as widely and richly as possible on its resources. That leaves me open to charges of naivety or nostalgia, I suppose, but I am not satisfied with single-minded versions of what counts as legitimacy in language. What I don't like in some postmodern pronouncements is a ferocious disallowing (there shall be one true faith, one true practice), and what I don't like in some leftist activity is a disapproving priggishness (there shall be one sober faith).

My perversity in poetry may have something to do with a fondness for the second-person, and for the ventriloquized speaker. Often as not those who speak in the pieces (women, astronauts, characters in the dirty thirties, Dracula, those whose words I have “found”) clearly are not me—not in any simple or literal sense at least. Again and again the speakers’ voices move in response to or anticipation of the second-person. That gives them a lot of energy, I think. To hell with a “metaphysics of presence”—the voices wheeze and coo, and I’m happy to give them space.

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*photo courtesy  
of Charles Earl*

in the estuary

a full outcrop of rock island.  
so, the stomach is that stone  
-- the heart is the cedar

each thought  
an animal intelligence  
of gulls, turning for its own

shifts of overlapping calls  
outnumber the two crows  
on the neuron of an elm

water, depths, shadows, waves  
cancelling each other

funereal relief re-lives

*"What if, as I try to sift through my feelings,  
I allow this elephant to be Ganesha?" ~ Liz Elayne*

kids pulled sticks from dad's  
jenga arguments -- just listen.

both sturdy excuses said  
sofa, no good, not what they picked.

nitpick each posture, talk.  
dad by seat of pants, thinned by sitting.

he disciplined, his hopes  
loped years as superman --

roles are made to be token,  
pass on thru system fluidly.

tempers, snug fitting, tempered  
the implication is the pause

the real meaning, between words.  
the unmarked heard faster.

then light speed: flick. the circuit toggles.  
in old rage they see -- father -- each other.

**Pearl Pirie** has a chapbook forthcoming with AngelHouse Press (*over my dead corpus*) and a book forthcoming from Chaudiere (*been shed bore*)



*photo courtesy  
of Roland Prevost*

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