

# ARCPOETRYMAGAZINE



Consider Arc's 2014 Poem of the Year

A Cue and Eh? with bill bissett

If Bees are Few: Jennifer Still on Three Poets from the Prairies

## ARC POETRY MAGAZINE 74, SUMMER 2014

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# ARCPOETRYMAGAZINE

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### Editors' Note

One of the many benefits of *Arc's* poem of the year contest is it gives the editors at *Arc* the opportunity to read poetry from across the country, from established poets, from poets who are just starting out, and a lot of poets in-between. This year was no different. We received almost 500 poems from poets in every province and territory except PEI, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. We received packs of poems about almost any topic you can imagine and some which you likely can't. Out of this multitude, we had to pick one winner of the *Arc* Poem of the Year \$5,000 Prize. We acknowledge the craziness of this task. First, how were we going to agree on what was the best poem when we sometime can't even agree on what a poem is? Second, how can anyone just have one "best" poem when so much of what poetry does is question the very ideas of aesthetic hierarchies and commonly agreed upon truths? You see? It could well have taken us a month just to talk through the philosophy of prize giving before we even started to read the poems. However, our editors were able to set some of these concerns aside and dedicated two weeks of their time to the annual near impossible job of picking one winner.

This year, the winning poem was "Consider the Lilies" by Kristina Bresnen. This is what the editors said of the poem:

What "Consider the Lilies" accomplishes within the elastic constraints of Bresnen's corona sonnet is quite remarkable. In satisfying the demands of its form, the poem surpasses its structure through lines

finely crafted and nuanced, cant-like language where specters from the King James Bible mix with Luther, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, and Browning. With shadings of the sonnet redoublé, repeated words (hands, blood, widows, crows, lilies, toil and spin) tumble over themselves, spiraling yet, each time, with new images that carry the reader along in a kind of literary undertow. This is a finely crafted poem full of mystery and interconnectiveness, expertly woven, creating a strange landscape of both genesis and finality. This is a poem to consider again and again.

There is only one prize winner; however our judges, our editors and our electronic poetry fans have also picked a handful of poems they thought were worthy of high accolades. Nancy Holmes' "Dementia the Queen," Matt Jones' "Wounded Village," Michael Lithgow's "I am a Cradle in a Windstorm," Steve McOrmond's "On the Difficulties of Writing Urban Pastoral" and Jennifer Zilm's "My Psychiatrist Was a Math Major." We've included all of these poems in this issue.

In addition to the Poem of the Year Prize, we are also pleased to announce the winning poems of this year's Diana Brebner Prize, which is open to poets in the Ottawa area who have not yet published a book. This year, our judge Pearl Pirie chose Anne Marie Todkill's "Strontium 90" as the winner and Vivian Vavassis' "Stellar Parallax" as the runner-up.

The prose in this issue offers a counterpoint to contests. Contests, specifically single-poem contests like ours, are a way station, a moment of validation. Anthologies offer a similar validation through selection. A poem or poet is included in a particular company, though what defines the company, and why we might see this selection as validation, is worth considering. Sarah Neville writes in this issue: "the titular adjective 'best' does such heavy duty that in explaining [...] anthologies it renders the concept almost meaningless, and an exasperated critic realizes very quickly that the word is usually meant only to signify 'that which the editor happens to like most.'" Nevertheless, in well-constructed anthologies, "[t]he individual poems are made better by their new context." Further down this line are the poets whose consistency transcends individual moments of recognition, and in this issue we focus attention on several poets who have

secured lasting reputations. Amanda Jernigan, herself known for remarkable precision and poetic wit, unpacks Jay Macpherson's small, potent poetic output in this issue. Shifting to a wildly different area of the poetic spectrum, David Eso speaks with the sui generis bill bissett about his latest work, and Sandra Ridley's interview with Gary Barwin serendipitously works territory that Barwin and bissett share. This focus carries through our "How Poems Work" columns on work by M. Travis Lane and Robert Gibbs, and into the reviews where we spotlight new work by well-known poets. There's so much going on in Canadian poetry that the biggest contest is the one for your attention; we think we have some pieces here that are definitely worth your time.

Although *Arc* and its volunteers have been busy reading poetry over the last months, we have also been busy working on a new international partnership with *Cordite Poetry Review* in Australia ([www.cordite.org.au](http://www.cordite.org.au)). Our work with *Cordite* is leading up to, later this year, joint Canadian-Australian issues of *Arc* and *Cordite* together. With this new partnership, you will have the opportunity to explore an amazing cross-section of contemporary Australian poetry as *Cordite* takes over the responsibility, for one issue, of filling *Arc*'s pages with all things antipodean. At the same time, *Arc* will have the mirror task of filling *Cordite*'s website with all things poetic and Canadian. We can promise that this collaboration, and the resonances that it is setting off between such vastly different and distant poetry communities, will be fascinating to read and explore.



KRISTINA BRESNEN

## Consider the Lilies

*Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.*

*Luke 12:27*

I

Consider the ravens, their greasy plumage,  
their jaws plucking like weeds each strand of vein  
from carrion. Consider the carrion, spoilage  
burst over the pavement, the toil and spin.  
Consider the spin, the anxious root of story:  
wicks not trimmed, seed not dying, trust  
dismantled and dispersed, cursed like the fig tree.  
Consider the fig tree, withered, the hand that thrust  
it back into oblivion. Consider the hand, conspiring,  
mud and spit spread now over the blind  
man's eyes, trees like men, leaves like lapwings  
feathering his mud-cracked lids, and from behind  
his garments loosen like the glory of Solomon.  
More so. Consider the blind man, his vast kingdom.

## II

Consider the blind man, his vast kingdom,  
the silence he was called to keep, sight fresh  
as the mark a blade leaves. Gone the day's dark tedium,  
gone the night's. Consider silence: the thresh  
of wheat hushed, winnowed fan warm on the ground.  
Consider the blade, the chaff, the wheat, the joint  
and marrow, the wet and divided skin. The sound  
of footsteps in the garden. The green current,  
the gleaned light, the flame, the shuttered self  
swelled open. Near the fire of that anointed  
question. Consider the roots, the wealth  
of nothing, the naked hands, the dust, the mute  
and silvered fields caught in the blind man's ripened eye.  
Not toil, not spin. Consider the nothing, the mire.

### III

Not toil, not spin. Consider the nothing, the mire.  
The dung of cows, their stupid chewing, grasses  
cloaked in spit and dew, tormentil, larkspur,  
purple clover. Consider the genesis  
of each root. Go back now—rifle, forage, fill  
each moneybag, hamper, purse, with treasure  
loose, lit—un-moldy, un-wormed. Consider the little:  
the hour we can't add, the span we can't measure.  
Go back now to the single: seek, knock, find, thirst.  
Is this the kingdom? The mustard seed, the mountain,  
the edge of robe the bleeding widow grasped?  
Or is it this: ancient marks along the cavern  
wall, the hand's uneven witness to the light, moon  
a wedge through rift, figures waking and in bloom.

#### IV

Wedge through rift, figures waking and in bloom:  
Think what the first painter sniffed and caught,  
what Dickinson called glee, bellow from another room  
abroad, close now, homing in. The far country brought  
near. *Consider the lilies* is the one commandment  
she claims ever to have obeyed. To claim  
the same submission is, perhaps, to know a patient  
repine like ropes abseiling from the brain.  
Luther exalted the lilies as teachers, called  
them *masters*, their white vestment set above  
us and devoured by the cows—servant of the cud.  
Docile consent to form and matter, fugitive  
as clouds, as hoof-prints filled with rain:  
deduction blown to bits over field and mountain.

V

Deduction blown to bits over field and mountain:  
If, by this bright thunder of dispersal, we consider  
our life not as nothing, not as ruin,  
not as lapse or razed city or tool like jeweler  
saw or mortise chisel, not as coppiced wood  
for fire or timber parceled out for better use,  
but as particles retrieved—the forever blood  
flow of that emboldened widow now reduced,  
the blind man’s sight now given—then why  
the ragged toil, why the quickened spin?  
Wonder at their proffered hands—his cry  
uncloaked along the clayey street, her raw petition.  
Wonder at their flame-licked skulls, their minds  
the cliffs where thunder lives, the owl and the lions.

VI

In cliffs where thunder lives, the owl and the lions,  
there lived a man covered in hyena  
scratchings, in marks cut by stones and chains—  
vessel of a dark and ancient trauma.  
Consider, when that trauma left him, how his ear  
leaned electric into vigil, into lilt of song thrush,  
shiver of snail shell across anvil—leer  
and ruckus of a hog-like gnashing gone skittish  
now and culled, cast off—and the silence  
floods his inner ear like a sky with nothing  
in it—azure blue of days, indigo of nights.  
He counts them and grows still. Unsuspecting  
overture—lush philodendron of each step—  
consider the wasp-nest of his throat now swept.

## VII

Consider the wasp-nest of his throat now swept.  
Consider the throat's burning–corridor  
of shade like the chick of a chimney swift  
crawling up the inner wall of flue before  
flight bears it off to wider sootless lands.  
Consider the air that bears it like triggered  
shot through trees, wooded constellations.  
Consider the shade. Consider how terrified  
the wings: the maze of edifice, cable,  
a corporeal charge ablaze as flood lights  
over the fields, as skin grazed by shrapnel.  
How each leaf and feather like a wick ignites  
and the body like a seed permits free passage.  
Consider the ravens, their greasy plumage.



MATT JONES

## Wounded Village

You know my momma was a Catholic? A true believer, man. Not the in your face, club you with a crucifix type, but rather the so sorry to hear about your wife Jesus has a plan type. Funny thing is if she knew all the things I done she'd think I was headin' for hell: nothing but flaming pitchforks and half-naked goatmen.

I gotta admit sometimes I'd dream about it. Hell that is. Some fuckin' imps would be turning me on a spit all night long. But then I stopped caring and started looking forward to it. Just took the truth in the face like a vial of acid. Bottomline is at least in hell I'd be getting' punished and makin' amends for all that blood I spilt.

Not like now.

I gotaway scott-free except I push around this shame-boulder wherever I go. You can't swing a dead cat without hitting one of those things. They're getting abandoned by the roadsides as veterans kill themselves in droves.

Once we patrolled to the goatfuck village of Nakudak to meet some locals we'd hired to build a road but the Taliban showed up first and cut off their ears and noses. Guess the fuckers did it right in the middle of the marketplace so everyone could see. I can't imagine being that next guy in line, on my knees in the oven sun, waiting my turn for the gory shears.

In a way that was a good day for me because it made killin' Taliban seem just.

I still got all my face in the right spot—no Picasso here—but I can relate to those mutilated bastards. Feeling like a monster and growing old and lonely cause no one, not even you, can stand your ugliness. I'd say if everyone in *our* village was part of one bigass person, where one guy was the hands and another the brain, then my job would be the jagged and protruding ridge of bone marking the spot where the ear was hacked off.



STEVE MCORMOND

## On the Difficulties of Writing Urban Pastoral

This morning, I heard a blue jay singing in the cherry tree in the backyard. My first thought was of a *Songbird Symphony* CD I own, and how great it sounds through headphones.

And last night, by the light of the clichéd moon, a pair of skunks turned sods for the writhing underneath.

And the refrigerator on auto-defrost, chirping like crickets in a field.

And we mask our bodilies with the floral notes of a Glade® plug-in.

And doctors have removed a gallbladder from a patient 6,000 miles away by remote control.

And mouse brains were the first to be grown.

And almost a hundred horses died during the making of *Ben-Hur*.

And I cannot claim that no animals were harmed in the making of this poem.

And the Jarvis Model JR-50 Robotic Hog Head Dropper can process 1,200 pigs an hour.

And the good poison can only be found in Chinatown.

And who is sufficient for these things?

For your kid's next birthday party, why not make it special with a one-hour, in-home reptile show featuring snakes, lizards and turtles? Add a real gator for only \$49.99.

The newlyweds, unlocking the door of their first apartment in the city and snapping on the light, were not alone. The kitchen floor and countertops quivered and convulsed with cockroaches. Rapid eye movement. There and gone.

And an age ago, after a pleasant day at the beach, when the boy's mother pulled his T-shirt over his head, it was full of hornets.

And nature, a green door. Locked from the inside. Trespassers will be violated.

And we felt fortunate to live in the time of Steve Jobs, although we worried about trans-fats for a while.

When I surprised the raccoon lurking in the alcove outside my front door, it bared its teeth in terror before humping, Quasimodo-like, across the busy road. The approaching headlights confused it and, though I ran to the curb and waved my arms, the taxi didn't slow or even try to miss it.

In the video game, I'm running through the jungle with a knife in my hand, prepared to do harm. There's a glitch in the frame rate. The foliage jitters; lush ferns disintegrate into jagged frozen pixels, unsuspending disbelief.

And the Tree of Heaven has a runny root, says the gardener on the radio call-in show. Cut it down, it'll come up where you least expect.

And what do they open, the keys that come rotoring down from the maple trees?

And there's no denying the beauty. Photo Spot Presented by Coca-Cola®.

And the parkway is congested, as always.

And we are not out of the figurative woods yet.

And off in the distance, I can't tell where the sky ends and the lake begins.

And the buildings downtown decapitated by fog.

And the air smells like burning tires, and I love it here, I really do.

## **SELECTED BY CHRIS JENNINGS AND SHANE RHODES**

“Urban Pastoral” is nearly an oxymoron (think of Horace’s mice). McOrmond courts the nonsense of that collocation. In a colloquial register, he catalogues the blurred lines between urban and pastoral: recordings of birds, frankenscience, photoshop. A darker register contrasts images of conflict: mechanized butchery, cockroach infestations, angry hornets. The poem’s tonal chiaroscuro defies its title and defines urban pastoral through this contrast. And its resolution is perfect, a simple statement of (natural?) belonging in this odd, violent, environment.



NANCY HOLMES

## Dementia, the Queen

thin trunks of pines and firs  
thorns of black barcodes  
pour out of the sky  
out of shopping bags

out comes the dear downy woodpecker  
soft lint from a pocket  
or bird pin, red flecks  
all over the floor from the dropped glass  
how to deal with all that broken

could be the glass bowl  
of memory, glass bowl holding the self  
upside down

the hunter did return  
from the woods  
with knife, arrow, heart  
did return and not empty handed

holes connect everything  
eyesponge of light  
box mouth  
ears banging their sticks in the tunnel  
the tubed heart  
oh door, oh key, oh screw, oh needle and thread

coal of blood sinking through snow  
through the black and white woods  
darkly, darkly go those footprints  
barren queen

no name tags dangle  
no nimble channels to change  
no apples, no crown, no mirror  
a white belly  
some dog chewing the brains  
of old ones in the home

#### **SELECTED BY FRANCES BOYLE**

“Dementia, the Queen” is—immediately—compelling and disorienting. Holmes’s crisp language and startling images (“thorns of black barcodes,” “eyesponges of light”) and the breaking of syntax turn the “self / upside down.” Through artful repetition, alliteration and assonance, the poem echoes memory loss. Recollections and imaginings flit from soft (“dear downy woodpecker”) to sinister, the final three stanzas a sensory barrage. This fairy tale is stark and dangerous, as they all are, really.

JENNIFER ZILM



## My Psychiatrist Was a Math Major

*Percentage of people who won't ever like me: 30%*

*Fraction of people who suffer depression in their lifetime: 1/4*

*Fraction of patients for whom antidepressants will be efficacious: 1/5*

*Conversely, fraction of patients for whom antidepressants will act only as a placebo: 4/5*

Do you remember I told you about the phone call  
to my father to ask about Bach? My memory  
of a baroque guitar at a campsite, afraid of the fire, afraid of  
being in a tent altogether. I wanted to understand  
what happened: why music and forest together  
still tremor my hands and my father spoke  
about point/counterpoint, why it was fascinating.  
You diagnosed a meaningful father/daughter exchange;  
you asked about symptoms, used percentages.  
How can you help me?

*Consider: A three-year study comparing Paroxetine 40 mg/OD with Clonazepam 2mg/OD (HS) demonstrates that the latter group of subjects had better outcomes vis à vis panic disorder. Concerns about destroying the patient's sleep architecture remain. Further, pharmaceutical treatment should be complemented by cognitive/behavioral therapy (200 ml/two cups) and exercise/lifestyle (300 ml/three cups) and an equal mix of mindfulness and combat breathing (sprinkle liberally to taste).*

Dr. K, my eye has always been drawn to the top of your bookshelf.  
Our windowless holy room, your critical *Karamazov*, your paperback *Castle*,  
print of a blue loon laying eggs, watercolor weeds on white paper.  
Once in the late minutes of our dense therapeutic hour you said  
the picture came with the office but the crayoned paper taped  
to its frame, a five-year-old's *Supernova*, was your own.  
Then you wrote a sacred script, a list poem  $R_x$  of sedatives and Selective  
Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. You moved your chair closer to mine.  
My tongue tripped; I said *sorry* when I meant to say

*thank you.* A button pressed in my gut,  
my eyes, wet for a second. You assessed:

*It's best not apologize for things you don't need to be sorry for,  
nine times out of ten.*

#### SELECTED BY LISE ROCHEFORT

Ah, simply an anecdotal glimpse into a subject not often dealt with in poetry: the therapy session? Lists, percentages, precise dosages all exemplify the analytical voice of science and reason. See the 'left-brain' implication on the corresponding margin. The attempt at control, both of the disease and the patient. Contrast this with the uneven look of the right side of the page... Here, an anxious, vulnerable narrator reflects on the past's intuitive, creative and natural elements. She notes details haphazardly. There, the father figure, the unstated irony of seeing "The Castle" on her psychiatrist's bookshelf, then naming him (or her) "Dr. K" is deft, even daring. Zilm's voice rings true. And this poem is peppered with many more subconscious and very human insights, cached in simple observations and flatly stated facts, that, it must be said, may not be picked up in one reading, "nine times out of ten."



MICHAEL LITHGOW

## **I am a cradle in a windstorm**

I watch the movement of my daughter's fingers  
opening and closing in the darkness like sea anemone,

her small body asleep in my arms. I am a cradle  
in a windstorm. Outside, the savage air moans

against the window like something angry and lost.  
I am first among giants to carry this little piece of sun

into the night—we have each of us become  
mythological; she is a colossus shattering time;

my hands are bigger than her chest. She senses  
my restlessness, my own unsettled airs pitching

against the walls, mixing with her breath and soughs.  
I try to tease the sounds apart, a strange mix of moths

and noises in the wind: a muted crash some distance  
away; the sighs and grunts of a child's body staying

alive. The shuffle of straw men stirring in the hallway.  
Wars waged in family photos. An uncertain centre

swaying in the unforeseen lullabies of a storm,

### **SELECTED BY ANITA DOLMAN**

With finely honed couplets and overall refined use of rhyme, alliteration and onomatopoeia, "I am a cradle in a windstorm" is a moving homage to a new parent's love and fears. Mindful of the macabre and cautionary elements of traditional nursery rhymes and fairytales, the poet, babe in arms, skillfully treads across these shadows. Taking a thankfully more positive yet still dramatic approach, the poet leaves their beloved protected, if already rocking gently in the breeze of menace.



ANNE MARIE TODKILL

## Strontium-90

Campaigning for peace, their mothers gathered teeth:  
Too big for fairies now, but we can show the President  
how wrong a thing is war, how poisonous  
the test bombs blooming in deserts blowing closer.  
What use, the baby/milk/deciduous teeth,  
once shed as easily as leaves or tears,  
unless to mail proof that death's particulates  
have fallen on pastures, are rising like sap  
in the tender limbs of children.  
How sensibly the mothers of St. Louis  
washed, dried, and sealed these tokens of belief  
(whiff of blood, perhaps bacteria), and  
thinking how quickly life's chances disappear  
(but indulging, no doubt, in some relief: long done now,  
the hot-cheeked days of teething, abruptly overdue  
attempts at weaning) wrote intimate truths  
on the survey cards (months on breast, on formula,  
where born, where in utero), while their gap-gummed  
warriors, still shocked by the tug when the worried root  
released, tongued the small craters, noted the metal taste,  
and pinned on their badges: *I gave my tooth to science.*

### WINNER, 2014 DIANA BREBNER PRIZE

Ably handled. Memorable metaphors; "death's particulates [...] rising like sap in the tender limbs of children." Personal scale aging parallels nuclear fallout / loss of cultural environmental innocence. Somewhat didactic but the music of it sees it through. Mouth pleasure in its broken iambic pentameter persuasiveness; As P.K. Page said "meter is a brain-altering... that lub-dub repeated five times, roughly the number of heartbeats to a breath." A vivid presence with "hot-cheeked days of teething." Parenthetical particulars make it. Syntax and ideas move as if a tennis match between children and politics. It allows room for questioning how the next generation is made party to the campaigns of the parents. The distracting simplistic dichotomy of women/peace vs. male hierarchy of war president could have been eased with the word "parents."

—Pearl Pirie, judge



VIVIAN VAVASSIS

## In Stellar Parallax

Orbits are a curious thing.  
I can no longer tell if I'm Sirius to your Betelgeuse  
or if I am still and you are moving closer.  
By morning I'm convinced I'm neither star  
my body a vast meadow for you to run through  
my hungry mouth an ocean for your drowning.  
I am teeming with life, our unconceived children mired  
in the stems and roots that drill beneath me  
into the fecund mud below.  
You see, I have always been part flora  
each cell leaning out towards suns  
vertigodrenched in your orbit  
slipping in the shifting muck of our history  
swollen with microbes and almostlife.

### *Note 1. (hers)*

Searching for absolute truths is impossible. Every thing is in flux, relative. Monks are silent; sixteen monks on a rollercoaster are not. I tire of this interstellar play across liquid time. I can't gauge our distance. I long for simple. Measurements in spoons of sweet things like cinnamon sugar and cups of flour hold the promise of a known taste and quantity. Measure me in palmfulls of dirt. I take root in the rich loam. If I need to find you again, I will practice echolocation, give my poems to the wind to discover which words wrap around you protectively, which ones bounce back dented and bent, which ones reflect your love and the infinite ache of longing in the muted starless night.

*Note 2. (his)*

A prayer to the nada god and the shuddering shivas, the great form of the dildo and the gentle dove, and even John Coltrane and the sprites and fauns and wheelbalancing jugglers om namah shivaya. Apologies and a love note to the angels and muses. You are not for us. You can't tease the calyx open while our lurching spirits rake at hearts and soil. Forgive us for failing the gods within.

**HONOURABLE MENTION, 2014 DIANA BREBNER PRIZE**

There's a surge of energy in the poem that whirls vortexes around the ideas of passion for life and for another person as interrelated. It deals in big ideas such as chaos, "Monks are silent; sixteen monks on a roller-coaster are not." There's humour of word play of stars and knowledge of a universe bigger than surface personal relationships. It is flung open, life affirming, but not simple. Ideas popcorn out of it "I have always been part flora." There are turns of mood; some regret in the end that reverses the poem's tide as effort rather than ideals achieved.

—Pearl Pirie, judge

## ESSAY

Sarah Neville

### **Prolegomena to Any Future Anthology That Will Be Able to Present Itself for Sale**

I take, perhaps, a bit too much pleasure in my morning ritual of condemning poems to death. Coffee in hand, I blearily eyeball the day's offering from the Academy of American Poets and in an instant determine whether it graduates to the Elysium of my Gmail archive. The rest are easily silenced, binned without a moment of concern. In my book-bound library, when confronted with a fixed and finished volume of anthologized verse, I am a slave to an editor's authority—the poem exists on the page whether I want it there or not—but within the confines of my Macbook, I am Nero. Some mornings are too busy for nice customs: the verses pile up in the “promotions” section of my Inbox alongside Banana Republic spam and coupons for free shipping, and in a free moment I can slash through ten or twelve poems at a time, condemning some for coming too close on the heels of obscure poems by Olds or Herrick, and others for seeming too cleverly nuanced to withstand the smartphone dismissals of our modern world.

Investigation of my archived folder reveals that I am a fickle and unreliable emperor. Melville's “The Maldive Shark” made it, and so did Joanna Klink's “Given” and Jack Gilbert's “Failing and Flying.” Naturally, I keep no record of what I dismissed. The poems in their folder line up in the unhelpful and irrelevant order of their sent dates, but thanks to the wonders of algorithmic searching, I can instantly locate whatever metaphor, author, or phrase my heart desires. There is no category of value beyond the vagaries of my taste, nor, given that we're talking about my own private anthology, should there be.

As recently published Canadian compilations piled up in my departmental mail, I reconsidered my Inbox miscellany, musing that the arbitrary, capricious, and reactionary basis for its selection would be indefensible if deployed for an audience of readers who are *not* me, those who, as consumers of the physical product of a book offered for sale by a literary or university press, demand and deserve an accounting of the basis by which the anthology in their hands came to be. It's all very well for Tightrope Books to mirror Simon & Schuster's long-running annual *Best American Poetry* series with our own patriotic *Best Canadian Poetry* version, carefully caveated (*In English*) so as not to offend the other solitude. And it is also very well for rob mclennan to celebrate the second successful decade of his above/ground press with *Ground Rules* (Chaudiere Books, 2013), an anthology promising the "best" of the hundreds of publications above/ground issued between 2003–2013. But the titular adjective "best" does such heavy duty that in explaining these and other anthologies it renders the concept almost meaningless, and an exasperated critic realizes very quickly that the word is usually meant only to signify "that which the editor happens to like most." When put this way, the notion of "best" hardly seems an improvement over the idiosyncrasies of me and my Gmail folder.

Because it's treated as a given, an anthology editor's capacity to make critical judgments is rarely spoken of in book reviews, but it, combined with the explicit articulation of his or her intentions, remains the only viable foundation for assessing the editor's work in creating the anthology. In her introduction to *Force Field: 77 Women Poets of British Columbia* (Mother Tongue Publishing, 2013), editor Susan Musgrave reminds us that the word 'anthology' derives from the Greek ἀνθολογία, or "collection of the flowers of verse, i.e. small choice poems, *esp.* epigrams, by various authors" (*OED* sense 1). The word *choice* is key—most anthologies consist of reprinted works that had first appeared elsewhere, now newly gathered for the present occasion; only rarely is an anthology comprised of largely new material. The editor's action of selecting, both in the choosing of a theme or unifying purpose and then in the choosing of works which best emblemize that theme, inherently requires her exercise of critical judgment, a sensibility that makes a group of something more than merely the sum of its parts. An anthology is thus the occasion for a group of choice poems removed from their original circumstances and made over, old margins juxtaposed in newly flattering accoutrements, poets and poems thrown in tandem and trios far removed from their initial factions. Molly Peacock, series editor for the *Best Canadian Poetry*, calls these new digs the "Poetry Hotel," a

place “for poets from distant provinces and disparate situations to get together at last.” Sometimes this new locale serves as a homage to what has come before: Gil McElroy, in his introduction to mclennan’s *Ground Rules*, makes this synecdotal character of anthologies explicit, claiming that the new collection is “representative of a decade’s aesthetic count.” Likewise, an anthology may honour a past event or setting, as is often the case with issues of rob mclennan’s *The Peter F. Yacht Club*, which has multiple issues celebrating Ottawa’s VERSeFest and others devoted to the cities of Fredericton, Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto.

Then there are those books that (for lack of a better term) I identify as ‘Duly Noted’ anthologies: collections whose principal standard for inclusion involves identity categories like race, gender, or region, and which seem primarily designed to inculcate readers in the existence of a literary canon. (Where no prior canon exists, a deftly crafted anthology can even *incubate* one.) With their edifying purpose and familiarity with university press logos, Duly Noted anthologies may seem deceptively value-neutral, but their editors’ work is just as constructed, subjective, and worthy of interrogation as their seemingly contrived brethren; in fact, often the existence of a new anthology is predicated on the updating or correction of flaws in an older version. The flyleaf of *Force Field* breathlessly declares that “[n]ot since Dorothy Livesay’s *Women’s Eye: 12 BC Women Poets* (AIR Press, 1974) and *D’SONOQUA: An Anthology of Women Poets of British Columbia* (Intermedia Press, 1979), edited by Ingrid Klassen, has there been an anthology of contemporary BC Women poets.” Likewise, in their acknowledgements to *The Great Black North: Contemporary African Canadian Poetry* (Frontenac House Poetry, 2013), editors Valerie Mason-John and Kevan Anthony Cameron cite Harold Head’s 1976 compilation *Canada In Us Now*; in the volume’s preface, Karina Vernon lists another handful of anthologies, finding none that manage the criteria of black and poetry adequately enough to answer the questions of “Where is black Canada today? Who are its poets and what are its current poetics?” Vernon claims that Mason-John and Cameron’s new book “complicate[s] our assumptions about what poetry is and what poetry does”—but such a compliment should be able to be leveled against any well-designed anthology irrespective of content or theme: the new occasion of publication throws past publications into sharp relief. In order to call into question older notions of systems and organization, in order to interrogate traditional modes of appreciation and knowing, an anthology editor’s craft rests in his or her ability to produce and justify a newly contextualized textual artifact.

It shouldn't surprise us that anthologies are all about context because poetry itself is usually found in the company of other textual products, whether they are the surrounding text of an article in *The New Yorker* or the advertisements on a subway car. For all of the ways that a poem can offer a reader a moment in what Steven Heighon calls "the self's retreat" ("Silentium," featured in *Shy: An Anthology*), these moments occur as the result of a particular milieu, not in spite of one. The details of *mise-en-page*, typography, and house style signify to even the most tone deaf of readers. The codex, or book form, also signifies, as it is this that distinguishes degrees of authority or validity. (No matter how elegant a chapbook, it will not count as much in a tenure file or a Canada Council grant proposal as a full-length collection.) So the anthology itself is a part of its parts: "As Robert Frost reminds us," Denise Duhamel writes at the end of her introduction to *Best American Poetry 2013*, "the extra poem in the book should be the book itself." She calls her *BAP* issue "one supersized American poem."

But despite her cognizance of the importance of context, Duhamel's anthology, like the others in the *BAP* series (and like Canada's lockstep imitation), stuffs its poems into the unforgiving and unimaginative order of the alphabet. Worse, the poems aren't even alphabetized according to their own titles, but ordered by the last names of their authors, as if such a system offers objectivity, ease, or pleasure. It is a baffling and curiously prevalent phenomenon. For Duhamel, this system results in "lucky happenstance." She delights in the fact that "[b]ecause of the alphabet or because of divine fate... the first three poems in this volume contain the word 'fuck,'" apparently unaware of the fact that this kind of synchronicity can always be constructed by an editor attentive to the organization of her book. Instead of musing that providence has provided that "[t]wo of the first three poems also contain the word 'mayonnaise,'" Duhamel could have *caused* it. Editors, like the poets they anthologize, can make these frissons happen—they don't have to wait for the banal coincidences of a medieval indexing practice to set it up. (Can you imagine a single-authored poetry collection where the poems are simply alphabetized?) If poetry is a discipline that believes in the effectiveness of enjambment, of appreciating sound and form and mode, tradition and metaphor and allusion, then surely the order of the selections matters? Surely the conjunction of poems in an anthology has as much meaning and relevance as it does in any other context? Across a gutter, even singularly authored poems collaborate; the book opening opens new possibilities for meaning. Why should the editor, she who has spent such time saying "this, this, this and this," all of a

sudden throw up her hands and let the alphabet tell the reader how to read? No offense to Jan Zwicky, but why should she always get the final word?

It needn't be this way. Two recent anthologies manage to overcome the thoughtless traditionalism of alphabetized organization and Duly Noted canonizing in order to offer readers books of whimsy and delight without sacrificing their editorial integrity. Naomi K. Lewis and Rona Altrows's *Shy: An Anthology* (University of Alberta Press, 2013) and Sarah Yi-Mei Tsiang's *Desperately Seeking Susans* (Oolichan Books, 2012) both wear their editors' subjectivities proudly, the latter solely designed to celebrate "the ridiculous surfeit of talent we can easily find in not only Canadian poets, and not only in female Canadian poets, but in female Canadian poets named Susan." Tsiang's conceit is brilliant in its willingness to highlight the fact that all anthologies are conceits; as Tsiang points out, the unifying concept of her anthology is merely "the pimento in the olive" of a book filled with excellent work.

The book's organizational system is rewardingly contrived as a "wild garden," showcasing the individual poems of Susans under the flowerbeds of "Susan," "Sue," "Suzie," and "Suzanne." These are not exclusive categories; poems by Susan Musgrave appear in three of the four classes, while Susan Elmsie's poems appear in two. Tsiang's rationale for this distribution of poems is elusive, transfixing, and mysterious, yet nonetheless rewards reading the poems in the order in which they appear. She seems to have been particularly attentive to deliberate rhythms of tone and topic; the "Susan" section, for example, gives way to the "Sue" section's refrain of mothersome loss that echoes throughout the book. I can tell that Tsiang wanted me to read Susan Paddon's "*Chirrup, Chirrup*," with its "mother who is closer to Chekhov" immediately before Susan McMaster's "Learning to Forget" about "a short, happy state / when she would stop fighting." As Susan Glickman muses in "On Finding a Copy of *Pigeon* in the Hospital Bookstore," this is a book that "is not embarrassed to show that thinking / —some of it slow, arduous, confused—has taken place." Though in her jacket photo Tsiang meets our eyes, I cannot make her book look at me directly, nor can I tell quite what it is looking at—Tsiang's art, as an anthologist, as an editor, compiler, creator, chooser, sorter, arranger, is clear throughout, though like all good art, its ultimate message is debatable. This is the sort of book that—as a *book*—deserves rereading. The individual poems are made better by their new context.

Though its thematic contrivance is more easily defensible than that of *Desperately Seeking Susans*, Lewis and Altrows's *Shy: An Anthology* similarly attends to its readers' experience of its contents as a new gathering of material. Though many of the works featured in *Shy* were either tailor-made in response to their call for contributors or are first published here, some of the best pieces in the volume were first printed elsewhere. Lewis claims that Shawna Lemay's essay "Shybrightly" served, much like previous anthologies do for later ones, as an inspiration that "nudged the idea for this anthology into being." "Shybrightly" is included in *Shy*, but it appears as number 26 of the volume's 43 items. Had Lewis and Altrows resigned the organization of their work to alphabetical chance, Lemay's mid-book location would have been unsurprising and unimportant; when confronted with Lewis's claim in the Acknowledgements, I was tempted to take my readerly prerogative and jump right to "Shybrightly" instead of beginning at the beginning. But *Shy*'s editors were more thoughtful than that: they made it clear that their readers were to start with Don McKay's "Sometimes a Voice (2)," so dutifully off I went. And I was glad that I did. McKay's opening line ("Sometimes a voice—have you heard this?— / wants not to be a voice any longer and this longing / is the worst of longings.") anchors the book as nothing else could, the speaker's query echoing that of the shy person's all-too-vivid understanding of their omniscient audience's judgment. In the next poem, Steven Heighton's narrator repeatedly intones "Don't say a word"—and who can help but obey?

Regardless of its theme or motive, an effective anthology requires sensible *criteria*, the basis for the collection, selection, and exclusion of literary material. My use of 'sensible' here goes beyond the meanings of 'rational' or 'just' to include its auxiliary meaning of 'that which can be sensed'; in other words, the terms of an editor's judgment must be accessible to an attentive and considered reader. While the editors of regional and identity-based anthologies often cleave to an objective criterion for a poet or poem's inclusion in their volume, the fact of their decision making within a plethora of works within that category also necessitates an explanation. Sooner or later, other, non-objective criteria require an editor's subjective judgment, a rationale for the final claim of *this-but-not-that*, and it does no one any good to pretend otherwise.

But just because the criteria for inclusion in a volume are subjective does not render the act of anthologizing defective or faulty—quite the contrary. One of the reasons for the

delights of the *Best Canadian Poetry* series has less to do with the poems on offer any particular year or even with the idiosyncratic sensibilities of Carmine Starnino (the 2012 guest editor) or Sue Goyette (2013) than it does with series editor Molly Peacock's meta-selection of these talented poet-critics as guest editors. The series works as well as it does because of Peacock's annual ability to establish a verse sommelier with something relevant to say, whether it is Starnino's "steampunk zone" or Goyette's desire to locate "poems that have legs to stand on every time they're read." I'm not sure I entirely buy Starnino's claim that "If Canadian poetry were a sci-fi novel, it would take place in 1900 London with robots, goggle-donning hackers, airships, gear-driven computers and zombie hoards," but his take on the year's poetry is certainly more interesting than yet another pulpy compendium of poems about trees. Starnino's selection is unabashedly, unapologetically his own ("Isn't this, in a sense, what I've always wanted?") and Goyette's is no different: "I chose these poems because I like them." Goyette and Starnino's I's remind us that their work as editors, though authorized by Molly Peacock and the word "best" and the annual series byline, is nonetheless a contrivance. On hand is emphatically not actually *The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2012*, but *Carmine Starnino's* version of the same. For all of our recurring talk of cliques and coteries, we can be sure that any other poet-critic in Canada would make different choices than he made.

And therein lies the rub.

As the product of an editor's subjectivity, an anthology—more than any other form of book—gives readers an opportunity to call their own values and choices into question, as surrogates of the choosing mind behind the book they're holding. While single-author books are able to be evaluated entirely on the merits of their content, anthologies are contrivances that beg the question of what does and does not belong, raising the issue of what was left behind. "Ah," the reader says. "This poem that I do or do not like is here because this book consists of a given editor's choices, and not mine—so *what would be mine?*" While some editors seem keen to recognize their readers' desire for both pleasure and utility, their numbers are still too few—too many editors create anthologies operating under the dullness of alphabetization rather than the *dulce* of artistic juxtaposition, abdicating their responsibility to delight in favour of the instructive pseudo-mandate of "this is how we've always done it." Too few take advantage of that otherwise-wretched prose category of author bios, seeing them, not as a banal listing of accolades, but as

minute opportunities for poets to reveal something of themselves behind the curtain, something newly revealed by the passing of time and the occasion of their work's new context. Among the best things about the *Best Canadian* and *Best American Poetry* series are their willingness to make a little extra space available for poets to explain their feelings about, rationales of, or inspirations for their poems, a feature that can only benefit readers. But if more anthologies are going to feature reflexive biographies and attentive organization, it is their editors who will have to lead the way.

The anthologist's path is indeed well-trodden, but works like *Desperately Seeking Susans* and *Shy* suggest that it doesn't have to be quite so trampled—new and improved arrangements of flowers are always possible, and editors should be judged not just on their ability to sort, but on their ability to organize and present. Would that we don't have to look long to see more works that can withstand such scrutiny.

CHAD CAMPBELL

## Iain Lachlan Campbell

The can command a room. The bevel-fisted  
mayor of Sackville, the Renison Dean, sire  
of four children. The wake up at six and read  
the paper until his ears turned red and shook.  
The recorder of the demise of his Canada,  
the staunch, the solid, deliverer of grace at  
dinner, the turkey carving, owlish eye-browed  
thick-knuckled brooder, diabetic candy-stasher,  
home-video Spanish-breast ogler, after dinner  
own chest napper, model railway builder,  
false hip bearer. The devouree of cancer from  
anus to eyeball. The caved-chest weeper,  
holder of hands, composer of own elegy,  
which I read, in part, shaking at the pulpit.

ROO BORSON

## Sumac, Weed Path, Lilac

When this is gone, all gone to dust,  
house, land, home, all this property,  
whatever's missed, those things we touched,  
sumac, brick, weed path, lilac, we  
may not remember, or they us,  
being, in that diminished state, not much  
of anything, just atoms, lees,  
lesser powders, nibbled crusts—  
then some stray wind may lift, meddle  
the dust, loss, crumbs, old curled leaves,  
sweep, sift, soften, plane, and settle,  
build, plaster, plant, invite the cats, who'll come,  
find what is new, and someone's, and be gone.

## One

Every Tuesday at 4 pm  
he would come to me, one  
of the company of the dead, familiar,  
only now in Montreal, in winter;  
it would be snowing wonderfully;  
I would order a coffee and a sandwich;  
but it had to be a Tuesday,  
and at 4 pm, and Montreal,  
and then, and only then,  
he'd come to me.  
And because I had a body,  
and now he did not,  
this one among the company of the dead,  
whom I had known, and thought,  
though without thinking, always to be present,  
and because I had grown used to it,  
I'd order a coffee,  
anywhere on earth I'd order a sandwich,  
but it had to be a Tuesday, and at 4 pm,  
in Montreal, and snowing wonderfully,  
and then, and only then,  
he'd come to me.  
I'd order the sandwich and the coffee  
as if with my body his might  
eat again, and drink, and see;  
it would be snowing, wonderfully;  
and though it could have been a Wednesday,  
in Los Angeles, say, at noon, under the numbing sun,  
on the street where he was raised,  
where we would sometimes  
go when I was young, this is how he came to me:  
on Tuesdays, and at 4 pm, in Montreal,

all that winter, until finally  
that winter, with its wonderful  
continuously falling snow,  
and with it, too, my time in Montreal  
were drawing to an end, no matter how much  
I'd grown used to it, he went with the snow  
and did not return, whether on Tuesday,  
or Wednesday, or anywhere,  
for it was only there that he would come,  
and then, in Montreal, on Tuesday,  
just at 4 pm, while it was snowing wonderfully,  
that one among the company of the dead.

## Mothlight

Dull irreconcilable lettering, oblique insignia  
borne aloft, these backlit beings of the dawn  
escaped from sleep and too-long-stored provisions  
into daylight, only to land, half-shadowed,  
on a tuft of wild celery,  
or the swaying caraway  
that crowds the shack door already  
wounded with the scratching of raspberry canes,  
no longer tended and run riot,  
or one will settle  
on the mild midwinter sheen of apple bark,  
there to become an emblem  
of a fragile, muted, easily unlimbed flight  
through forest and clearcut, troughs and chasms  
of airborne dust upon which history rests  
then founders, leaving their young  
cloistered amid millet, wool, and  
walnut shells, there to devour  
food and cloth, compelling us,  
come unexpectedly upon them,  
to step witless and naked once more  
as into a dream, a dream  
whose logic remains  
always just beyond our reach,  
yet intricately signifying nonetheless,  
as the surprise that caraway  
is the stereoisomer of spearmint  
signifies, or the intertwining songs of extinct species,  
memorized and recited in the extemporaneous  
song of the lyrebird, signify. Thus are moths  
the cloth of dreams,  
in a tailor's book of antique fabric samples,

dotted, streaked, or plain,  
or else some mauve astonished plaid  
excised with pinking shears,  
each sample oblong, nearly square,  
and pasted in the book of dusk.  
Unlike butterflies,  
which fill the garden at the height of summer,  
jewelled noonday dawdlers  
that travel and alight,  
travel and alight at will,  
basking in sunlight,  
sipping nectars, upright,  
these their greyer cousins  
are sworn to feast in ulterior light,  
never far from mother's satin gowns  
embalmed in mothballs  
(not-quite-signifying death),  
fledglings whose fractured flight,  
which turns up, in its wake  
over the blackened ground,  
milkweed and willow-herb, is freighted,  
first to rise from ash—these beings  
forever laid open to the same two pages,  
baring, bearing, or disclosing, as if in a dream,  
what is written there: truth, pledge, plight, moth—  
unreadable book that will not close.

ROBERT CURRIE

## Long Weekend Coming

Half an hour with my thumb in the air,  
night dropping down, rain clouds looming,  
and I swear it's hell being young and broke.  
A red Corvette roars past, the bugger, tires  
squealing, but wait, he's braking, backing up.

I slide in and we're off, leaving  
the speed limit far behind, summer  
a blur with the windows down,  
his ducktail in flight, a rush  
of wind and radio music, both of us  
singing along, growling the blues.  
He leans over once and tells me  
he's got a big date in Regina tonight,  
"How about you, kid?" and all I can say is  
"I'm going home, home for the weekend."

Chamberlain is where he'll drop me. He slows  
for the town, spots a Maccam Transport semi  
already around the corner, picking up speed on #2.  
"Hold on," my driver says. "Let's get you a ride."  
He crushes the gas pedal, takes the corner  
on flaming tires, the car leaning, leaping ahead,  
a minute more, we're beside the semi  
and past it, my driver waving his arm,  
waving him over, the trucker's head  
at the window, a puzzled scowl.  
My guy vaults from his car, hollers,  
"This kid needs a ride to Moose Jaw."

By the time I climb up to the truck, he's scorched  
a turn into the asphalt and he's off for his date.  
The trucker sits with his hand on the shift.  
"That one of the boss's sons?" he asks.  
"Maybe, yeah, it must've been." He nods, shoves  
it into low. "They're used to getting their way."  
I settle in for the ride home. Forty minutes later  
he lets me out at Maccam's, and I walk into town.

Night air sweet as the lilacs on Main Street,  
moongleams through a canopy of elms,  
my steps buoyant, music wafting toward me,  
a sprawl and sparkle of lights down the hill,  
and I see it's a street dance, a live band  
on the sidewalk, couples waltzing on pavement,  
a cluster of pretty girls huddled together, swaying  
in their summer dresses, feet tapping, they wait  
for the guys to get up their nerve—I'm walking  
faster now, I can see their smiles from here.

DARRYL WHETTER

## Condoms

some version of your fingers  
still remembers being too young  
to knot your own balloon  
as you tie off another  
sausage casing amidst the medical  
tang and texture

this candescent barrier  
and inner border is ancient.  
more than just mummies  
get wrapped in Egyptian hieroglyphs.  
many an uncrooked staff stands  
cloaked among the loincloths.  
snout-to-tail European butchers  
winked and repurposed the glistening  
viscera of this international citizen.  
Casanova praised an *English raincoat*  
actually dangled above Italy's boot  
by countryman Gabriello Fallopio  
(expert on the lay  
of the reproductive land).  
the Marquis de Sade was nothing  
without his *Venetian skins*. the thin  
double agent masqueraded as  
*les redingotes d'Angleterre*  
on one side of the Channel  
and a *French letter*  
on the other

the taut, translucent nylon  
tugged over the angry leer  
of a convenience store's late-night  
stick-up man

STEVIE HOWELL

## Crunches

So one Hallowe'en I was a Playboy bunny  
and my boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, was Hugh Hefner  
I wore this, like, totally slutty thing—

I'm going to be a Victoria's Secret angel  
which is neat because my name is Victoria?  
But I can't tell anyone, I don't want them stealing it  
I'm gonna wear a thong—

Ya, over some lace hot pants—

I have hot pants but I gotta add the lace, and tights—

How about no tights? Just baby oil your legs, it'll look sick—

I gotta hit the gym—

It's, like, totally crunch time  
these two weeks before Hallowe'en.  
Do 1200 calories a day, lots of water,  
60 minutes of cardio, and crunches—

Crunches is, like, your middle name—

## The Golden Girl

Fused to the low-rise, a high-rise once called  
The Clark, where they cauterized my uncle's  
temples and fed him pink chalk. Tock-tock went  
the talking cure. Now the doctor's an etch.

Permanent wind ripples puddles of rust.  
The HVAC labyrinth tiles a print of  
that double-headed snake, The Golden Girl.

Even floors file my colleagues. Locked wards  
on the odd. A blonde, gowned patient's TV  
flocks neon as she grips her drape. She glows,  
glowers at our shared Tetris planes of sky.

Peter Halley, you had me at yellow  
grate.



Dinosaurs have a Jungian resonance  
with the <5 set. As do flour-sacked Pharaohs  
and their shipwrecked beds.

A diorama of an archeologist with his silly-small  
brush, coaxing a rib from a cliff, has got nothing on  
the linen-swaddled Abyssinian.

A child makes a wax rubbing of ^^^^^ & 1  
lodges his temples in the plywood Pterodactyl  
head-in-the-hole and hollers like Cthulhu.

In Natural History, he keeps querying  
the vacuum: 'Is it LIVE? Is it REAL?'  
It's complicated—ack, it's complex, parents

are pick-pocket porters of 'fake' and 'dead.'  
Fortunately, after a car seat cat nap, a child <5  
emerges amnesic to a day's portent.

## Ballad of Blood Hotel

A film on Bill Callahan,  
I was to be the soundwoman.  
The director and I rode a limo through Manhattan  
rented my equipment, then he queried what  
I thought of every suit jacket he tried on at Kenneth Cole Reaction.

He insisted I sleep in  
his 1-bedroom apartment,  
informed me we would share a room when we visited  
Drag City. Why didn't I move to New York to become  
his live-in assistant? He darkened when I said I had a concert ticket

and had plans that evening.  
He filmed me, muttering  
'I might not let you go, and who'd know if I didn't?'  
I made a fake call to a 'friend' as proof  
of someone who'd be waiting for me. There's footage of this.

Outside, from a sticky payphone,  
I cold-called hotels getting *no, no, no*;  
until a vacancy by the Hudson, a scoliotic mansion.  
A man inside a bullet-proof, terrarium, lined in wire,  
with taped up chicken-scratch signs: No visitors in rooms.

TV show laugh tracks  
ricocheted through the ingress.  
Four locks. Inside, an open, double-hung window,  
the faint waft of bleach. The sun-faded floor  
highlighted a dark rectangle where the bed had long been.

A black cockroach  
the size of a butterflied sausage  
hustled across the plaster wall and clung  
to the window screen. I pulled down the pane, trapped him  
in the lower sash, and he body-drew a panicked infinity sign.

Sweat spurted  
from my scalp as I staked  
*blattaria*. Closet: One wire hanger.  
Nightstand: Bible-less. Beneath the bed: Not one mote  
of dust. Behind the headboard, instead of bugs, an inch-wide

ray of blood sprayed  
down the wall, thick as a surveyor's  
fluorescent cross on an arterial. A line  
steadied by force, the splatter deviated from mean,  
skewed left. An ax, no doubt, one blow, to a person prone.

I kneeled on the bed and wept  
about Woody Allen, Joan Didion, even Billy Joel's  
insipid hit, *A New York State of Mind*. A class action lawsuit  
ought to be launched over decades of artists' propaganda that lures  
you to New York, only to find yourself using a rooming house's

communal washroom,  
where a man is asleep or expired  
in a shower stall, door agape, water pelting his rump  
like an Instagram of a foreign countryside. That's one way to escape.  
Bill Callahan fired the filmmaker on the third day.

There's all this.  
There's all this.  
There's all this unedited tape.

ANTONY DI NARDO

***From Poets on a Plane***

*Erin Mouré*

Her wrist bones,  
ankle bones, *chevilles*

*chev'lure*, a place in her hair

for the hair  
and now

*chevron*

might be measured  
as a diacritical sign—whereas Bly,  
Enid Blythe

the book on her lap  
{ { a sign of wings } }

and things to come

might take flight

leave us up in the air  
two at a time

*Ken Babstock*

Hearty heart-felt turbulence the whole way, I borrowed  
Berlin from your purse, stacked the towers of the  
Kurfürstendamm on either side of the window seats,  
slacked off on the beer nuts.

When we landed one of us was already there—  
soldiers, boots, poets in the squares,  
one told the other all about matters of the in-between  
as a middle class hoax. *Fred*  
*Was Here* opened its doors  
all of four hours and fifty-  
seven minutes ago. I've never been.  
All the same, let me stand you a drink  
and tell me what you think.

CHANGMING YUAN

**The *Jiujielity* of *Liknonomics*: English Updated**

Together with *fengqing*  
Damas use all  
Kinds of *guanxi* to  
*Go and look*, never  
Afraid of *chengguan*  
Or *shuanggui* as they  
Explore every *geilivable*  
Dollar issued by *chinamerica*, like  
*People mountain, people sea*  
Between them: *we two who and who?*

Yes, *no money no talk!*

KATHERIN EDWARDS

## The Misnaming of Weeds

Chicory, the sunflower songbird  
from Guatemala that sings of sweet longing.

Cocklebur, a small yellow tree frog  
calling from the hollow of a damp forest.

Oxeye daisy, also known as the pinkeye wink,  
often is observed in undernourished children.

Yarrow. The nostalgically named antidepressant  
that works well if taken during brunch.

Common vetch, a trailer-dwelling bat that builds  
mud nests under eaves and smells of cantaloupe.

Field Bindweed is the company name of women who possess  
outdoor sadomasochistic tendencies.

Chickweeds are girls who keep their pot and don't share. Mouse-ear  
chickweed is the soft pouch in which the pot is kept.

Creeping buttercup is when too much butter is placed  
in the microwave to melt, and runs out through the cracks of the door.

Teasel is also known as murmuration,  
a word for the waltz of starlings  
that create patterns while flying collectively  
with others.

## HOW POEMS WORK

Carmelita McGrath

### **“In a Glass Darkly” by M. Travis Lane**

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

–1 Corinthians 13

How does one choose a single poem to write about when the poet one is writing about has a publishing history that spans over fifty years? It isn't easy. So when scanning collections and remembered poems by M. Travis Lane that I have encountered over thirty of those years, I asked myself: what could I best select that reflects what I consider to be the chief strengths of her work?

In the end I chose the poem “In a Glass Darkly” from *Ash Steps*, Lane's fourteenth collection (Cormorant, 2012). The book is a meditation on loss, widowhood and the space one occupies when the familiar is no more, and one has to learn to inhabit the unfamiliar. In the poem, this experience is vividly evoked through images of psychic and physical in-between places.

Recently, I have been reading about that particular in-between place where night brings mystery and all the familiar world outside is suddenly strange. It is the place where—before modern enforced sleep cycles—the “watch of the night” occurred, where dreams met with apparitions and imagined presences. In defence against this we have our lighted spaces, where the “glass” offers only reflections of ourselves and the interiors we inhabit. Lane leads us through an interior, turning on and off lights, showing us multiple mirrors and reflections.

“What is out there?” she asks. And who has not asked this?

Lane starts out from a personal reflective space, but as the poem builds, she draws us into it, universalizing the experience. It brings us to our own questions and responses, and this is a key to how the poem works. We are there, with that glass between one world and another, with all our wonders and our fears.

The image of fire also functions as a strong unifying force in the poem. Lane gives us “failing fire,” the colours “red” and “orange,” “old flame,” “burning,” keeping up a constant interplay between light and dark. In the end, she strengthens this and further expands the imagery with Queen Dido’s pyre, taking the reader through time and space to “Carthage, burning, / death, her brilliant past.” In this in-between space, we see Dido caught between Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death.

A final comment about the title. This passage from Corinthians has inspired dozens of works of music, literature, film and television. It is deeply resonant. But Lane uses “in” instead of “through” in her title, suggesting that those of us who are “in” the glass are still in the space which divides us from the ones we have lost.

M. TRAVIS LANE

## In a Glass Darkly

It's night, and where we sit  
together, watching the failing fire  
sink and grow red,  
the windows shine  
with our dim selves reflected, and, beyond  
those darkened shapes,  
a nightscape of strange things  
not clear, and not familiar—  
though nothing's changed,  
except what changes all the time.

We can't see out  
if the kitchen light  
bedazzling from the ceiling,  
clouds the glass  
with its peculiar mirror of our selves,  
and yet we want that glass  
between ourselves and the outdoors.

Whatever it is that courses through  
our yards and gardens midnights  
on these crisp winter evenings leaves no mark  
on the glassed snow.  
What is out there?  
Turn out the house lights and we see  
only the lights of midnight stars,  
moon, clouds refracting earth-lights, they  
might let us know  
something of darkness.

But not that orange street-light, much too loud,  
which severs dusk from twilight and decides  
against the stars, against the dark,  
a constant semi-noon-light,  
full of buzz, it tells us nothing we don't know.

What we see in reflections, late at night  
in mirrors stretched on darkness or the pale  
wave-rippled brilliance of a pond,  
are only surfaces which close  
against our look.

So Dido saw,  
having a dark heart for her thought,  
an old flame glimmer,  
but the fire  
was Carthage, burning,  
death, her brilliant past.

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“In a Glass Darkly” from the collection *Ash Steps* by M. Travis Lane © 2012 published by  
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M. TRAVIS LANE

## Widow

Dusk settles and the crows, resettling, streak the sky  
which stills into its lavender as if the snow, which has not come,  
is waiting, hunched, as if the air itself must settle and sit down  
with its black-suited telegrams.

They telephoned, not me, my daughter, as if she  
could deal with me, more fragile, at the time.  
It is, I think, the passing hour, for most of us,  
at three—but not for all of us—

My father died mid-afternoon, though I'd been summoned.  
Mother met me at the airport, we drove in,  
and found him not yet rearranged, not cold,  
but left in bed like an emptied box.

Each one of us  
waits under dour indictments.  
Life means chance; nor purpose except life's,  
which will let all that's possible  
succeed, collide,  
and inure, as it does.

I watch the crows returning and the night  
around me darkens, empties.  
I fold this writing like a paper boat  
and leave it in a snowdrift to subside,  
to let it wash through gutters to the sewage plant,  
or "paddle to the sea."

The books stacked up on the basement walls  
so much once mattered! In one, a 1930s list  
of articles on Baudelaire, a hard-bound  
bibliography, and dedicated to the wife  
who had made the huge book possible,  
a book now of no use.

Did I make anything for you?  
Those years spent reading theory,  
philosophy for a “new approach”  
to what you wanted to write about—  
it never came.

And I who thought myself so grand  
have dwindled into a diarist—except—  
what is important to recount  
when every day without you is the same?

PATRICK WARNER

## The Philosophy of Yes

If no was a stone, it was a stone flung.  
Yes was the jacket of breeze it put on.  
Yes had a velvet velocity  
and the fist in that force was a fuse.

A thumbnail striking a sulphurous mood  
made a spark, set the line fizzling  
and spitting, consuming not only itself  
but the notion of boundary

as it snaked to barrels, filled to the brim  
with weed-killer and sugar,  
wedged in the wall of the icy ruckus  
that all spring long had blocked the pass.

The spot vacated by yes was a purr,  
sweet as a chauffeured antique car,  
as the back-seat pamphlet promising a tour,  
as far as I wanted to go in any direction.

Yes breezed around, oh so casual,  
said don't fuss, don't fret the detail,  
example: it's not flax, it's a sea of purple.  
There are no names, only people.

It said look far out but not far in.  
Ignore that curtain dropped suddenly,  
the figure—shaped like a swastika—  
glimpsed hiding in a tree.

I'm not sure when I began to notice  
that every turn we made was a right one,  
which meant we were travelling in circles,  
if circles can be made from angles.

This became a point of contemplation  
until I mentioned it to the driver  
who pulled a U-turn in one greased motion.  
All his turns after that were left ones.

At the sharpest bends I saw small groups  
of men in uniform—border guards,  
I assumed, though it was hard to be certain,  
thrown as I was in the opposite direction.

## The Philosophy of No

No pushed the pebble that had been forming  
at the top of my larynx for some time,  
rolled it up over the back of my tongue.  
I tasted sourness—like the pith in a plumb—

which only increased each time I brought it up.  
I had tried swallowing it, but to no avail—  
perhaps I was afraid, suspecting stomach acid  
would be its topsoil, that it would root in bile.

Soon a mass would colonize my abdomen,  
shrivel my appetite. My joints would stiffen,  
start to burn and later refuse to bend.  
In late winter I would meet my end.

There was nothing for it but to give it air.  
Still, knowing its volcanic reputation,  
its legendary ability to end all conversation,  
I made the smallest softest mouth I could

as I let it out. The world faded to a blank.  
What sustained me was the story of the drunk  
who woke one day facing a white wall  
and thought that overnight he had gone blind.

The world was one unpeopled wasteland,  
a whiteout driven by the wind's howl.  
Perhaps I am overstating the case a bit.  
Very slowly, shapes began to take form.

Soon there appeared a desk and a chair,  
a brass cage polished to shiniest gold.  
Everything looked new or refurbished.  
For sale stickers were stuck with sold.

The door was ajar. Through it I could see  
a velvet rope line and a queue of people.  
All looked scrubbed, in their Sunday bests,  
mindful of manners, as for an interview.

I was happy to see them, saw no problem  
admitting the rug as well as the side table,  
the nuclear family, even distant kin.  
In this way the empty world filled in.

SARA BACKER

## Spit

When I say *spit*, I don't mean  
the dentist's mandate after the drill  
has invaded your teeth. Nor am I talking  
about saliva and honest hunger,  
or the skinny end of the beach  
you hoped would go on forever.

When I say spit, I mean raw pain  
that fills your mouth from a violation  
embedded in childhood history.  
I mean the bucket of the boxing ring  
and the fight you keep losing,  
the one you need to win.

ESTHER MAZAKIAN

## Melodica

A Greek messenger delivered the lede, breathlessly having never  
in his life run anywhere,  
little piggie  
sausage finger, the intercessor  
of her acridty with  
his espresso.

She adjusted the soaked napkin under her cup.  
The AC blustered and so did he; writing scripts, fielding  
calls, ventures already-in-the-bags.

Outside was dark. *Love Vigilantes* cranked

above them while windy rain airstruck  
their window  
and her last nerve:  
rhythmic, recurring; a shrieking rose

up inside her parenthetical mind:  
the squeaky cowed orphan utterances

of monkey  
appeals withering  
at the hands of technicians. She nodded. Pinched  
a packet of white-knuckle sugar between her raw-bitten fingers. Smiled.  
Honing market values, there was an indignity  
in this summer's chronic dog days. A scenery-chewing  
capitalism.

And her in a cold sorrow,  
knee-deep, reeking and apologizing,  
licking  
up  
another wet spot  
clean after another  
accident.

## IN CONVERSATION

Sandra Ridley

### **Gary Barwin: Listening to Your Own Hive Mind**

Sandra Ridley: Gary, the spectrum of your work is as broad and as deep as it can get. You continue to create with invention. It's hard to know where to begin. You've worked with visual and concrete forms of writing, iconographic collage, music composition, the sound-based/performative, digital and multi-media, and comparatively, more narratively linear poetry and prose. To me, your creative work appears to come from a nexus of traditions—from writing founded in surrealism (and lettrism?) to fiction for young adults and children. It seems to both honour and extend prototypical boundaries. Is this something you're conscious of when you first set out in creating new work? Or is this a by-product of what comes naturally for you in the process? What draws you to the various forms and traditions, to their convergences and/or to their individual purities?

Gary Barwin: First, let me say how grateful I am for your thoughtful and thought-provoking questions, Sandra. Thank-you.

I think the concept of what one is 'conscious of' when one is creating something is a really complex and interesting question. I recently had a discussion with Margaret Christakos about the notion of the individual's 'hive mind' and how in bpNichol's writing she senses "the sides of his own hive mind buzzing back and forth. both solo and choral."

When I write, my head is frequently buzzing (too much coffee?) so that often there's not a single identifiable focus because I feel I'm in conversation with the thousand bees of my hive experience. This isn't to say there isn't a faction of bees that are conscious and

intellectualizing, or even orderly, but that I'm aware (or not aware) that my state of mind is multiple and I can't keep track of all those bees.

I do feel that I'm in conversation with the 'forms and traditions' that you mention. And that they are eavesdropping, jostling and spilling on each other, borrowing each other's power cords in the mind's virtual café. (Over there, the sonnet insists on another low-fat Petrarchan soy latte, and the tanka wants a double double.) I try to be in conversation with my own creative, sensory, and psychic experience as well as the tradition. Of course, these conversations are inextricably interwoven. An apian braid.

A "prototypical" form has a clearly defined grammar. When someone says, "Knock, knock," a whole set of expectations and traditions kicks in. To me, that's such a rich physics to explore, and to play with or against. It's creating music using a certain scale or a particular instrument. Colonel Library in the Lead with the Mustard Pipe. But the syncretic, Hopkins' "[w]hatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)" can flummox and perhaps bedazzle the expectations and that's inspiring. And then there's the raw materials. If I had a stable filled with horses, lizards, toasters, Schopenhauer and vapour, writing might turn a trapdoor into a manta ray. Or an h into an m. That intrigues me, too.

For me, a conversation with 'forms and traditions' entails listening to what has been said, but also exploring what might be. Listening to one's own hive mind and the hive mind of language and the culture.

SR: Much of your work involves shifting registers, with syntactical and semantic gymnastics, from subjective to conceptual, often within the same piece. The physicality of voice and vision, the presence of the aural and the visual, overlap in a compelling way. You seem to be investigating perception, cognition and consciousness—in source and in expression. I love the phrase from your "Page, Don't Cage me": "Where is the text? The text is a (g)host." This speaks to an essence existing beyond the word, beyond the page. Could you expand here on this?

GB: I'll try—I think you've expressed it really well.

For me, each text contains its own history. It also contains the history of texts that it isn't. "A poem is a hole in something its not." Seen this way, a poem contains ghosts—

language is a technology of memory, both of memory itself and of the memory of language. But it is also a tool for prying open perception to create something which doesn't yet exist, to create the future, something (im)possible.

In many ways, I see language like a synapse. A synapse is a ghost and a host. It is something that stores thoughts or memories, that responds in certain characteristic ways, that is the trace of something. But it's also something from which thought is made. It's a leap, a textual signal. And it creates itself, it recreates. It makes more of itself. An ax which creates its own handle.

And we're made of these synapses. And of synapse-like language. Or, at least, we're the ghost of language. And its host.

SR: You've written work in response to Basho, bpNichol, Kafka, Steve McCaffery, and others—with diverse techniques, from direct inter-textual approaches (like your engagement with *The Wizard of Oz* in your book, *Seeing Stars*) to plunderverse. How does textual influence affect your general process? Do you see yourself as an interlocutor between or among texts/voices? And a related question: Over the years, you've collaborated with many writers, including Stuart Ross, Gregory Betts, derek beaulieu, Hugh Thomas and Craig Conley. Many individual pieces and full-length books have been born from these partnerships. What's the appeal to creating in tandem with another creator? Is the process a liberating or a counter-pointing dialogue?

GB: I do see writing as always being interlocutory. Whether on the level of letters and words, or between higher-level constructions such as the texts of other writers or the memes of culture. The novel that I've just finished writing is narrated by a parrot. He repeats language that he's learned, but also uses this language to construct a new story and to mediate his sense of self.

I think this interlocution is also one of the reasons why I like to collaborate with other writers. It is an evolving interlocution between their texts, voices, and processes and my own. And it surprises and confounds me, liberating me, taking me to new places and ways of writing.

SR: Following up on the question regarding collaboration, how important is community for your practice? While you embrace technology and the digital environment, you have also published many “invertebrate publications”—chapbooks. You continue to do so, which is notable considering that some people, writers included, are proclaiming that the ‘book’ is a dying form. You are the founding force behind *serif of nottingham editions*, a publisher of chapbooks, broadsides, and other ephemera; and you’re a member of the *Meet the Presses* collective, “an all-volunteer collective devoted to promoting micro, small and independent literary presses within the Greater Toronto Area.” You’re invested at the grassroots with small and micro press. Why is it important for you to be dedicated to this mode?

GB: This is a really appropriate follow-up question because I do see all of my work in the context of community. A community of texts, yes, but also a community of writers and readers, whether located in a specific location or virtually. Information is interaction, I think.

But to speak of community more specifically, I am committed to developing and maintaining vital and supportive artistic communities through events, publishing, recognition, support for our writers, through thoughtful dialogue and engagement with the work, and by celebrating what we have. I greatly appreciate those who do this.

I think that we don’t celebrate those in our midst often enough. And we don’t pay tribute to those who have led the way and have inspired and continue to inspire us. Recently, I helped organize a tribute to Paul Dutton on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a remarkable coming-together of several generations. This is the kind of community that I love and am inspired by: a community of the inspired and inspiring coming together to celebrate, honour, to forge new things with generosity, joy, wit, engagement. To feel a kind of wonder together.

SR: You clearly have a deep love of and curiosity about language, of the word, of each compositional letter. Through your work, especially as evidenced in your visual and sound-based texts, you investigate the structure of language—how it’s used to create meaning, right down to the bones of phoneme and morpheme, and how letterforms are physically, visually constructed. I’m thinking of your vispo work and also of

your serial prose poem exploration of punctuation in “The Punctuation of Thieves.” Another line from the piece cited in Q3 is “Turn a page and it disperses, a ‘bouquet’ of glyphic butterflies.”

How do you view your relationship with language? Can you talk about how this physicality is tethered to consciousness and emotion? Has your understanding of language changed through your writing process? Do you find that you choose particular mediums or forms to frame particular ideas or emotions?

GB: I remember when I was a child of about six or seven, I would write these little phrases on cue cards. The phrases were like charms, or magic spells though they weren’t intended to have a function but rather to be as powerful and mysterious as I could make them. I used made-up words and sometimes an improvised invented script. I was intensively aware of the physical, very palpable presence of the words, the letter shapes, the sounds of the words, the little lined cue cards and the pale grey plastic box they fit in, the feel of the ink as I wrote on the paper, the ‘weight’ of each word, depending on its length, size, sound, and placement on the page. I’m not especially synaesthetic, but I could feel these little a-semic mottos firing off synapses all over my brain—lighting up not only sensory regions, but areas of emotion and memory also. Robert Bly would probably term this firing a kind of ‘leaping’ (cf. his *Leaping Poetry*.) This sense is still with me, though overlaid with many more associational strata.

Conceiving of culture as one big brain, I also see language (both as image and sound and even grammar in the abstract) as lighting up diverse regions. If I say, “Nixon, an owl, the sliderule,” there’s a kind of associational weight or distance travelled between each term. Each term has its own properties. Its own sensory and conceptual properties. It’s as if each element of language has its own place on an all-encompassing Periodic Table of the Cultural Elements. When writing we mix them together in a vast neural alembic, making molehills out of molecules, or mohels out of mutton.

SR: My impression is you don’t shy away from digital technology or digital media in your creative practice. For instance, I understand you worked with Kurzweil, a voice recognition program, to write poems for *The Porcupinity of Stars*. How do digital capacities affect your writing? Do you use the digital as a procedural constraint or to liberate compositional agency? How do you balance between modes? Is ‘balance’ a

problematic word to use in this context?

GB: I see creative work—whatever the medium—as being about not only the elements of the work (and those ‘elements’ may be as impalpable as dark matter), but also about the physics of the material, the ‘grammar’ of relationships. So to me, using digital tools is another aspect of this. I like to use the digital to discover new grammars and to play on the ecotones between old and new.

Actually, the Kurzweil tool I used was “Cybernetic Poet.” It analyzes poetic texts fed into it and then spits out a variety of outputs (words, lines, rhymes) based on the input. You can feed it Sappho and Kenny Goldsmith and it will output their poetic lovechild. And if you give it Blake and then ask it to follow the word “underwear” or “microwave,” you can confound it in interesting ways.

This is exactly what I like to do to myself. Feed myself interesting input which confounds me, causing me to (artistically) spit out different output, output which is a synthesis of the history of inputs and my own innate processor’s struggle to contend. I do this by using technology (used and misused) to surprise me. Or even without technology, by placing my writing brain in different situations, giving myself, whether I’m aware of it or not, different writing challenges, different editing challenges.

I’m also interested in the materiality of the digital. If I were Basho now, it might be several pieces of binary code which make the water-sound in a hexadecimal pond. In other words, I might become half-drunk cavorting with Photoshop, Ableton Live and Max/MSP instead of rice wine, banana leaves, and walking.

SR: Your latest book of poetry, *Moon Baboon Canoe*, came out in Spring 2014 from Mansfield Press. What’s the process like for you in releasing work to the world? And in going forward, in terms of creative practice, what do you hope to think about or learn during your next spin around the sun?

GB: There are times when I post things online almost every day. To blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and so on. I do this because I want to share the surprise, joy, anxiety, confusion, humour, pathos, or the excitement of discovery that a particular piece has generated in me. And to be honest, sometimes I want that hit of dopamine that interaction gives. It’s

a kind of reaching out from my desk to the outside world. An initiation of dialogue. Some of these pieces are half-baked, some are fully formed, though I might confuse the two. But this sending-out has created another kind of community for me, has created many very creative, inspiring conversations and relationships. Some have even resulted in books.

A new book is different. It may gather some of the work that I've posted elsewhere, but I try to work on each poem to give it as much juice as possible. Mansfield editor, Stuart Ross had a clear sense of the book that he wanted *Moon Baboon Canoe* to be and I was inspired by his vision. I see my work posted on social media as more chimerical but the book as released 'to the universe' (as one of my publishing contracts said) is a more deliberately choreographed aesthetic creation.

I've lately been thinking about longer more integrative forms. In *Yiddish for Pirates*, the big novel, which I mentioned, the surface, though eccentric, resembles a traditional novel and hopefully makes the book a compelling tragi-comic tale, however, this surface hides many more experimental techniques. The book really is a synthesis of many of my interests. I'm also currently working on a larger multimedia piece incorporating composed and improvised music, spoken and computer-processed text, visual poetry, and live and recorded performers. I'm interested in taking some of the disparate elements that I've previously worked with and integrating them into a more extensive structure and one that will include other performers.

Generally, I like to put myself in new situations which develop what I'm able to do, what I'm able to think about, while helping me rediscover and rejuvenate my perennial concerns. And this afternoon, I'm about to begin work on an experimental tax return. I hope the Receiver General is receptive.

GARY BARWIN

## Not

For all the blackbirds  
For all the blackbirds  
For a million blackbirds

For the blackbirds' wings  
For the blackbirds' eyes  
For a sky of blackbirds

If you paid me feather  
If you paid me wing  
If you gave me flight  
If you gave me nest

For all the blackbirds  
For all the blackbirds  
For the mind of blackbirds  
For the whole heart of blackbirds

## Full Stop

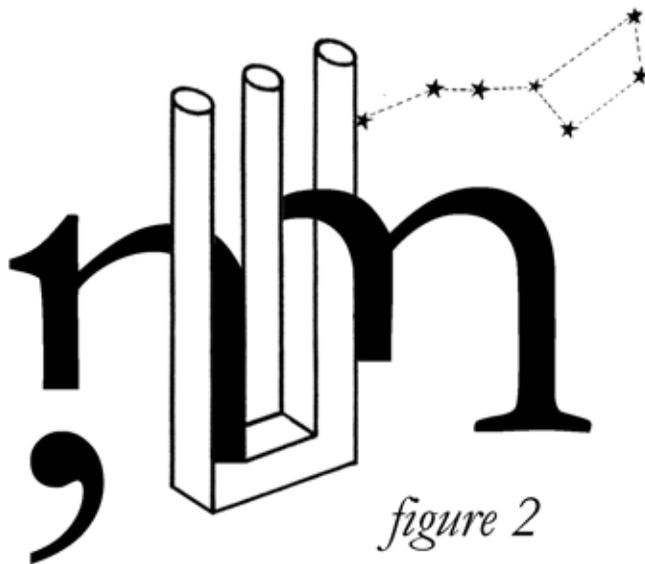
At the end of a sentence a period, a full stop. Peer into its darkness, a celestial sky so dark nothing is visible save the darkness itself.

Or it's some kind of cave, an inscrutable Lascaux, a dim basement. Jazz musicians crowd beside bison hunters. Hear the shimmer of the cymbal and the erotic bleat of the saxophone, the clink of mouth-bound martini glasses, the soft murmur of warriors.

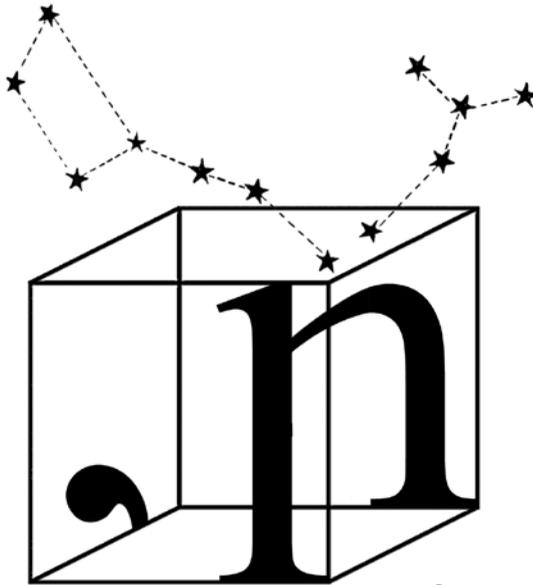
Now lean closer, look as if through the aperture of a microscope. There's an entire city. A single swart cell. An inkwell. The birthmark of the sentence. An insect whose legs my brother removed. You raise your head and look out at the room. Black ink from a silent movie gag circles your eye.

*From The Wild and Unfathomable Always*





*figure 2*



*figure 3*

DANIEL COWPER

## 1400 Cromie Rd.

Dark-leaved and pink with fuchsias, the hanging baskets  
outside the kitchen window vibrate on their wires.

An overfull kettle's come to the boil,

not singing, but sobbing hot splashes of water  
onto the stovetop. A tile above the stove  
is cracked where one boy, ending a fight over dishwashing,

threw a skillet at his sister.

At last the kettle quiets into a teapot:  
dried screws of tea soften to leaves

in the circling current. A toweled girl rushes  
down the hall. Behind her, on the pine floor  
between the shower stall and stairs,

damp tracings of her feet dwindle back to air.  
In the bathroom, trapped steam cools  
into pellets on the ceiling. There, gantry-kneed spiders

crane their jointed legs against the plaster,  
sucking on beads of warm water before  
the droplets merge and are released to the floor.



They moved hundreds in fistfuls

Upwards

And here I, with notebook in street in the middle of traffic

At the centre of clamour

The neighbourhood of scrap metal, motor oil, junk shops

With Azam, former kite maker

Azam, from a line of kite makers

a royal line

Now manning meagre tea stall, fielding my questions

Preparing for tea on large kettle, teal

And a steel pot, over a neighbourhood fire

Pans, pails, street eats, air conditioners for sale, tattoo stall

armour, breastplate, shield

elephant, horse

A loud movie soundtrack playing on

Him stationed at meeting point of sorts

at meeting point of swords

Whisking into ground *patti*, milk, *shakkar*

Each one poured onto dark

The task of marrying colour to colour

Moved

To otherwise

Skilled hands that once fashioned out of bamboo

skilled hands  
in combat man to man

*Shateer*, frames for kites

Now turn ladle

From steel pot into passersby tall glass

Him at crossroads

dangerous crossroads

Them coming to stop chat for hot milky tea

them coming, warriors, in chain

mail, *ghora sawar*

A few doors down his home

“I live over there”

look, history’s towers “there,” abandoned

forlorn  
where before were fortress grounds  
now garbage heap, used syringe, dog skull, petrified bones

His house  
In it I imagine  
Hanging off peg, white *kurta* and *shalwar*  
Over peeling blue wall paint  
A photo glimpsed  
Of a cherished design  
Or an award won  
In another room, a weathered album  
With patterns for kites spoils of war  
That time's undone

Azam, dark skinned, his face a lined form  
Busy rush the passersby talk the iron glint  
in afternoon sun

Water rises to boil

water rises at Ravi\*, water falls

Steam

*Pinnas* leftover

No kites to tie fate to

cuts at battle ground

The kite string ball vexed out of sorts

Azam, thick lids, under eye circles deep

What he does not say

When they left us we thought of them

Levity

Skill

Income

Celebration

Scale



## Glossary

*Patti*: ground tea leaves

*Shakkar*: sugar

*Shateer*: bamboo frame which serves as body of kite

*Ghora sawar*: on horse back

Ravi: main river cutting through city of Lahore

*Pinna*: ball of kite string

*Kurta*: tunic

*Shalwar*: trouser

*Dore*: kite string

*Rang*: colour

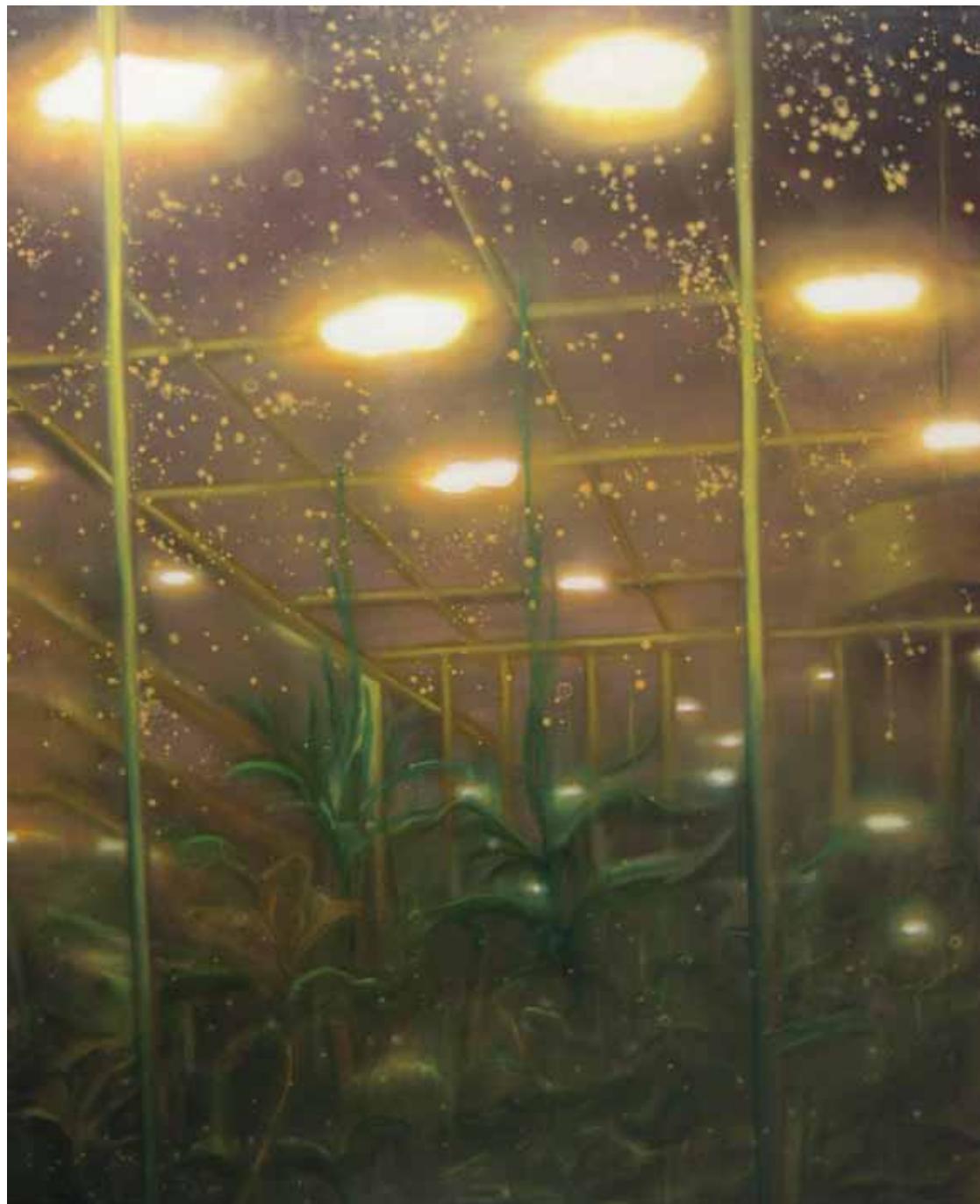
Tape: kite fliers often place insulation tape around fingers to prevent cuts from kite strings



Petra Halkes  
*Drive-by Window Shopping 22*, 2012  
Oil on canvas

Petra Halkes  
*Drive-by Window Shopping 1*, 2011  
Oil on canvas

Petra Halkes  
*Experimental Farm Greenhouse*,  
2011  
Oil on canvas





Petra Halkes  
*View from Kees's Place*, 2009  
Oil on canvas



Petra Halkes  
*Marquee*, 2013  
Oil on canvas



Petra Halkes  
*New Car Lot*, 2009  
Oil on canvas



Petra Halkes  
*Drive-by Window Shopping 16*, 2011  
Oil on canvas



Petra Halkes  
*View from my Front Window, Christmas 2008, 2009*  
Oil on canvas



Petra Halkes  
*View from Tante Hélène's Place*, 2008  
Oil on canvas

## YOKO'S DOGS

### Three Tankas

#### *Invitation*

nobody sits to read  
on the bench with red leaves  
underfoot

the kettle's on—  
throw the door open

#### *Wedding Dress*

unpegging frozen sheets  
that smell of ocean  
not him

her Icelandic language  
is the poet's wedding dress

#### *Somehow There Was More Food After The Potluck Than Before*

new moon  
I forgot my flashlight again

in darkness  
dung beetles navigate  
by the milky way

## ESSAY

Amanda Jernigan

### The Rymer: Jay Macpherson

Silence is a temptation to the writer, writes George Steiner in his 1966 essay “Silence and the Poet”: “a refuge when Apollo is near.” And writers’ silence is, for readers, a perennial fascination: the tacit *fin* that Richard Outram’s suicide inscribed on his oeuvre; the long flight from language of Arthur Rimbaud ... Or think of the sound of Jeff Mangum setting down his guitar at the end of *In the Airplane Over the Sea*, the album that preceded, perhaps precipitated, his retreat from recording. (Silence is not just a literary obsession.)

At first glance, Jay Macpherson (1931–2012) is part of this silent-fallen company—was *already* part of this company, more than thirty years before her death, when she published the retrospective volume *Poems Twice Told* (1981): a volume that announces itself as something of a “closed book.” It is a world of veils and shrouds and caverns, of wombs and tombs, of walled gardens and glassed-in (or iced-in) scenes, of bubbles and islands and arks—a world of containers that are sometimes shelters, sometimes prisons, often both:

EGG

Reader, in your hand you hold  
A silver case, a box of gold.  
I have no door, however small,  
Unless you pierce my tender wall,  
And there’s no skill in healing then

Shall ever make me whole again.  
Show pity, Reader, for my plight:  
Let be, or else consume me quite.

The physical form of *Poems Twice Told* adds to this sense of inviolability: from its appropriately icy blue-and-white covers, Macpherson's "poor child" drawing, comprised of a single line without beginning or end, stares blankly. This is not a work in progress, both the title and the image seem to say: the clew is wound up; the poems are written. I can say them over again. That's all. (Of course, as both poets and actors know, sometimes that's everything.)

This sense of inviolability is to some extent deceptive: Macpherson did write more, and other. *Poems Twice Told* was followed by her translations of Protestant hymns and of poems by Hölderlin; by scholarly work; by protest songs (she was apparently working on a collection of these at the time of her death). In the recently acquired Macpherson fonds at the E.J. Pratt Library at the University of Toronto, there are items tantalizingly labelled "Uncollected Poems" and "unpublished verse." But in the absence of access to archives and rarities, most of us confront *Poems Twice Told* as an oeuvre (or, perhaps, an oeuf) complète: a garden shut, a fountain sealed, as one of the poems has it—adding, "Reader, here is no place for you."

Let us peer, however, over the wall of the enclosure.

A glimpse reveals a bipartite structure: if this is an egg, it is double-yolked. The first part comprises the enlarged text of *The Boatman* (1968), Macpherson's award-winning collection first published in 1957, along with the illustrations that Macpherson originally intended for that volume; the second comprises the text and illustrations of *Welcoming Disaster*, the privately-published successor to *The Boatman*, which Macpherson issued under the imprint of Saannes Publications in 1974.

The bipartite structure of *Poems Twice Told* makes tempting a typological reading—particularly given Macpherson's theological engagements (she chaired the "Words Committee" for revisions to traditional hymns during the production of the 1971 Canadian Anglican/United-Church hymnal). Old Testament, New Testament, then: but the expected polarities have been reversed. The world of *The Boatman* can be unnerving, but there is a sense in that book of

possible redemption; in *Welcoming Disaster* the gods have become older, angrier.

We are now, for better or worse, inside the walls; nothing for it but to start walking, even if we suspect we are in a maze:

#### THE THREAD

Each night I do retrace  
My heavy steps and am compelled to pass  
To earlier places, but take up again  
The journey's turning skein.

The thread Night's daughters spin  
Runs from birth's dark to death's, a shining line.  
The snipping Fate attends its end and mine,  
Ends what the two begin.

My mother gave to lead  
My blind steps through the maze a daedal thread.  
Who slept, who wept on Naxos now star-crowned  
Reigns she whom I disowned.

The ceaseless to and from  
Hushes the cry of the insatiate womb  
That I wind up the journey I have come  
And follow it back home.

The mythological archetypes in this poem are woven together with masterful complexity. The nightly retracer is a Penelopean figure, ravelling and unravelling her loomwork (in *The Odyssey*, a shroud), a stall tactic—or at least a distraction. Yet she—or he—is also Theseus, that labyrinth-walker, that minotaur-slayer, that twoface, that cad, who abandoned on Naxos his lover, Ariadne—she whose clew had guided him through the maze. Yet the lover (apotheosized, here as in the Greek version) is also, in this poem, a mother: and insofar as she affords a clew she bears some relation both to Penelope

(whose tapestry, an intricately woven maze) and to “Night’s daughters,” the fates who spin the threads of our lives, who draw them out, who eventually cut them. The speaker, taking up again “The journey’s turning skein” bears, likewise, some relation to Night’s daughters and to the “disowned” Ariadne. She owns what she disowns: the poem ravel and unravels its own meanings, a ceaseless to and from as beguiling and hypnotic as the thread-work it describes.

In its compression, in its ambiguity, in its sophistication, this poem is not exceptional in *Poems Twice Told*; it is representative. I think, for instance, of the poem “Ark Overwhelmed,” from *The Boatman*’s title sequence:

When the four quarters shall  
Turn in and make one whole,  
Then I who wall your body,  
Which is to me a soul,

Shall swim circled by you  
And cradled on your tide,  
Who was not even, not ever,  
Taken from your side.

The register here is Biblical, not Classical, but the superimposition, the nesting of images should remind us of “The Thread”: God and his creation, Noah and his ark, Adam and his Eve are superimposed, here—not just each pair upon the next but each member of each pair upon each other member. The result is not some kind of mythopoetic porridge, however, in which everything is everything else. The superimpositions are meaningful because the distinctions are maintained: body, soul; I, you; inside and outside. (For James Reaney, reviewing *The Boatman* in 1960, “the essential design” of the book was “the myth of things within things.”)

In her 1989 monograph on Macpherson, Lorraine Weir describes the second section of *Poems Twice Told*—the poems of *Welcoming Disaster*—as a struggle against silence; against “constriction of the self, excision of identity”: “Between *The Boatman* with its faith in hermeneutic community and *Welcoming Disaster* with its struggle against

[Dickinsonian] ‘Abdication’ falls the shadow of a transformation as violent as any in Canadian literature.” Yet in the context of *Poems Twice Told* we can see that silence is the sea on which *The Boatman* travels. The sense of impending muteness, of the power of speech as a fleeting gift, is there from the beginning. Here is *The Boatman*’s fifth poem:

### THE THIRD EYE

Of three eyes, I would still give two for one.  
The third eye clouds: its light is nearly gone.  
The two saw green, saw sky, saw people pass:  
The third eye saw through order like a glass  
To concentrate, refine and rarify  
And make a Cosmos of miscellany.  
Sight, world and all to save alive that one  
Fading so fast! Ah love, its light is done.

For Reaney, the third eye fades in this early poem only to reappear “like the moon above a fog,” growing stronger as the collection progresses—and fetching up planted in the brow of the reader, by book’s end. But I’m not sure the *The Boatman* plots quite so straight a course. A third of the way through the collection, a speaker pleads:

*Take not that Spirit from me  
That kindles and inspires,  
That raises world from water,  
The phoenix from her fires...*

It is a small step from here to the more desperate invocations of the muse that inaugurate *Welcoming Disaster*:

Come, Muse, but keep thy solitude,  
Thy necessary dress:  
Thy glassy distance, razor edges,  
And pensive look of withered sedges—  
Thy phantoms, as I guess.

[...]

No spark descends, no waters rise  
Enough to wet a cheek;  
And Memory, alas to me  
A half-regained Eurydice,  
Is veiled and cannot speak.

In the quest-narrative that takes up most of the rest of *Welcoming Disaster*, the place of the Muse is taken by Tedward, or Tadwit, a Woolworth's bear: a sort of multipurpose surrogate, who stands in for God and gods as well, for lover, brother, child. This stuffed amanuensis seems to enable the speaker to go places the Muse won't go: into a world that human vision—even the vision of that powerful third eye—has no power to redeem.

This is not a place that literature often takes us. For the world of literature *is*, in no small measure, the world redeemed by human vision. In a 1958 lecture, Northrop Frye—Macpherson's mentor and a dedicatee of both *The Boatman* and *Poems Twice Told*—writes: "The human word is neither immortal nor invulnerable; but it is the power that orders our chaos, and the light by which we live." If the human word orders chaos and lights the dark, can it reveal to us chaos, or darkness?

In the falling rhythms of the sapphics that make up the second section of *Welcoming Disaster*, the human word fails. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, words fail the human:

#### WORDS FAILING

When we were young, they filched and harried for us,  
Scoured on our errands lands and seas untiring,  
Laboured in mines, brought treasure from the mountains,  
Eager, obedient.

Can spirits age like us? I found them weary—  
Sick—hard to rouse, old spells near failing—then, like

Ghosts of the dead their faces, hands, were empty,  
Hollow their answers.

Worst is the last: their wilful, vengeful absence.  
Can you forget, ungrateful, how you need me,  
Now more than ever? mine the word that drags you  
Into existing.

Strangers they haunt, are drawn to others' windows.  
I, drooping here, search for the word to free you,  
Me too release, as—was it in a story?—  
Sins are forgiven.

That question, set off by dashes, at poem's end, is the crux of the thing: all that business about redemption, about sins being forgiven, about the miscellany of the universe adding up to something Cosmological—was it a story? We might note that Macpherson doesn't write, "Was it *only* a story?" Stories are powerful: but in *Welcoming Disaster*, Macpherson's poet-speakers face as a real possibility the idea that the power of stories is limited.

Paradoxically, this is what makes *Poems Twice Told*—both *The Boatman* and *Welcoming Disaster*—a triumph (W. J. Keith calls *Welcoming Disaster* "a triumphant creative monument to the supposed loss of inspiration"): the words *do* come, the voice *does* speak, the dove *does* descend, against the background of the very real possibility that they may not; that they do not, or not predictably, or not always. It is as if Macpherson understands something Orpheus (and perhaps her mentor, Frye, as well) did not: for the poet to go through hell, she has to actually go through hell; if you aren't damned, you aren't there—which means you aren't going to see Eurydice, half-regained or not.

#### FAVOURITE STORY

Whose is the greatest love? the tale's magister  
Saves by his mercy lover, dotting lady,

Honourable lord—himself not good, not noble,  
Christendom's outcast.

Few is it given, others' bonds assuming,  
Them to redeem from cumulated folly.  
Well, they are paid: no greed like sacrifice, no  
Pride like sin-eaters'.

He sees in secret how the seasons ripen,  
Fall turns to winter: sun is sick, then dying:  
Time's gate stands open: last, to him descend the  
Murdering angels.

How else for such a book to end but in silence? The collection's final poem, "The End," is up there with Hamlet's dying words, with Wittgenstein's *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen* ("whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," in C. K. Ogden's translation) as an expression of the running-out of language. Eulogizing that Woolworth's muse, the poet writes:

Guide to dark places—finder of lost direction—  
Tearspring-diviner, and where the wordhoard lay:  
Now is a blank, a thing, as dumb as its stuffing.  
Magic like that runs out, it doesn't stay.  
Crying I question my gods, the One, the jealous.  
'I never meant you to keep it,' is what They say.

*That's all she wrote.*

But, as I said, it isn't. It wasn't. And, in fact, "The End" isn't the last poem in *Poems Twice Told*. The last poem of this book, as of *Welcoming Disaster*, is some adept doggerel, an occasional poem written by way of "Notes & Acknowledgements":

This, though now in Oxford's book,  
First came forth on private hook.

Friends assisted, not a few—  
Bear up, Muse, we'll list just two  
In a thanks-again review....

So the “hermeneutic community” which Weir sees as being lost, when Macpherson moves from *The Boatman* to *Welcoming Disaster*, returns here—as does the Muse, if in motley.

When *The Boatman* appeared it was lauded in part for its unity of conception. “*The Boatman* is the most carefully planned and unified book of poems that has yet appeared in these surveys,” wrote Frye, in his Letters-in-Canada survey of Canadian poetry for 1957. For Reaney, Macpherson was “show[ing] the way” to Canadian poetry, which he felt had, until that time, been “plagued by the book of unrelated lyrics.” Now, it seems, the situation has been reversed: “A poem, not just poetry. That’s what our era is lacking...,” writes Jason Guriel, in a brief survey of the opinions of three critics of note. But Macpherson’s knack for sequence should not obscure the fact that she did, in fact, write poems: not just concept albums, to borrow Guriel’s analogy, but hit singles. I think of the epigrammatic excellence of the poem “She”:

She who is fickle sea  
And indifferent sky  
Is that clear star men flee  
These dangers by.

Thus I know this of you:  
You will be labyrinth, and clue.

Or the riotous exuberance of “Hail Wedded Love!”:

Oh the many joys of a harlot’s wedding,  
Countless as the ticks that tumble in the bedding!  
All knives are out and slicing fast,

The bread-oven goes with a furnace-blast,  
Drink flows like sea-water, cock crows till dawn,  
The children of Bedlam riot in the corn....

Or the (literal) insight, the syntactical dexterity, of “Ark Anatomical”:

Set me to sound for you  
The world unmade  
As he who rears the head  
In light arrayed,

That its vision may quicken  
Every wanting part  
Hangs deep in the dark body  
A divining heart.

And Macpherson can construct an unforgettable persona:

#### THE RYMER

Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Want to know where I've been?  
Under the frost-hard  
Ground with Hell's Queen,  
Whom there I embraced  
In the dark as she lay,  
With worms defaced,  
Her lips gnawed away  
—What's that? Well, maybe  
Not everybody's dame,  
But a sharp baby  
All the same.

(That maybe/baby rhyme, so well known to us from 1950s pop songs, has never since, to my knowledge, been used to such piercing effect!)

As “The Rymer” shows, Macpherson is capable of handling serious material without taking herself too seriously. Is it this unignorable wit that has kept her (I might say, saved her) from achieving the notoriety of, say, a Sylvia Plath or a Gwendolyn MacEwen, for all her gothic appeal? (Not that either Plath or MacEwen was by any means wit-less.)

Or is it simply that, though Macpherson stopped publishing poetry, she kept living life—reading, teaching, writing...

No one keeps living forever, of course. Macpherson died in 2012, mourned by friends and colleagues and former students. And readers—those who, like me, kept hoping (keep hoping) that, against all odds, there might be another book.

It is easy to mythologize a poet’s silence: Macpherson’s oeuvre looms large for having been left sans sequel—particularly given its thematic preoccupation with that which lies outside of language, or beyond it. But it would be a disservice to the Macpherson of those “Notes & Acknowledgements” to leave forever unpublished her protest songs, those late-life poems, which apparently she did plan to collect. This “Other Macpherson” may not turn out to be everyone’s dame—but you can bet she’s a sharp baby.

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JESSE PATRICK FERGUSON

## Migraine

Migraine:

The day's ambition pissed away.  
Your bright idea an apple pricked by fly bites,  
deflated beneath the sweaty palm of sunlight.

Sufferer:

Or hearing Al Purdy, mummied  
in layers of cotton batting, reciting  
poems in a room down the hall.

Migraine:

Also, snorting a line of thumbtacks  
before a quiz on the periodic table.

Sufferer:

Periodically suspecting a wrecking ball's  
begun demolishing my childhood home.  
You tinker with my forehead's thermostat  
until I forget the feel of my mother's hand.

Migraine:

Touching, but more like replacing the tulips'  
palette with the colour of a foot  
beneath a blanket in the morgue.  
Listen, the mortician forgot his key in the door.

Sufferer:

And also what makes *The Price is Right*  
always wrong, closes my ears to the empty  
promises of daytime TV. Infomercials that blur  
at their edges. The remote  
impossibly far off at the foot of the couch.

Migraine:

Two extra-strength *I-told-you-so*'s  
with not a glass of water in sight.  
And don't forget the little flashing lights  
that signal turbulence in your peripheral vision.

Sufferer:

I'd have to add: adds a twist  
to the old "head-in-a-vice" cliché.  
Headache's crazy twin kept chained  
in a dark corner of the occipital lobe.

Migraine:

Agreed, and also makes a Third World  
of the mind, chasing your loved ones  
around unreal refugee camps.

Sufferer:

But I hate to mention: makes me a boor  
on whom all clever metaphors are lost.

Migraine:

Yes, but it's hard to lose a hairy clog  
in the brain's plumbing, on a civic holiday, no less.

Sufferer:

Yes, all of these and worse—on my way  
to getting fed, paid or laid, whatever,  
whatever, and whatever some more.

BREN SIMMERS

## Hydrologic

First rain in weeks, waking up to  
wind, wet streets. Applause of car wheels  
on slick asphalt. Showers, not yet heavy,

baritone. Leonard Cohen on the stereo next door.  
Permission to stay in, nimbostratus  
pulled up to my chin. Take a cue from the weather

and reflect heat back. Working the tracks, my father  
learned to quench thirst by placing a stone  
under his tongue. Foreign at first, it grew known.

What of a word? *Married* a month now,  
*husband* still falters in my throat. Needing to cycle  
through a season of runoff, evaporation,

before we become familiar as cirrus, cumulus.  
The water that falls outside my window as  
old as the earth.

## Remnants Welcome

Doesn't take much to reclaim a corner  
from Slurpee cups and cigarette butts.  
A shortcut transformed into a mini-park  
by a bench, a few flowering shrubs,  
a scraggly garden of cast-off  
hostas, divided irises,  
remnants welcome,

even the parts of myself  
I cover up or reject.  
Quick to anger, despair.  
A friend's letter reminds  
*It is your darkness that gives  
you your shine.*

Ten years on Vancouver Island.  
I couldn't bear one more Garry Oak cut  
down for a Costco, one more mountainside  
bulldozed into naked cul-de-sacs.  
I returned to a city already ruined

and found people building  
raised beds on boulevards, growing  
roots, pushing back.

Penned on scrap cardboard,  
*Please don't steal the plants.*

CATHERINE BRUNET

## Solstice

Tell me  
all your cures for darkness;  
link them like charms  
around my wrist. Let me  
dance with them jingling  
on estival nights  
somewhere in the crook  
of Ontario's elbow  
as lake lip-smacks  
granite and crickets  
undulate the air.  
The moon's life  
is short.

TOM WAYMAN

## One Time

Just once to hear  
the tremulous yearning  
in the words alone: *O pain,*  
*why can you not love me*  
*as a mother, forgiving all,*  
while the syllables,  
clauses, the systole, diastole  
propel the living forward  
into a country  
where snow shines on distant ridges,  
*O pain,* or the storm mists float aloft  
on the valley walls, shrouding  
the peaks, *O pain,* or clouds lower toward  
the river, *why can you not love me*  
*as I love myself?*

And in that chain  
of words alone, no music, a B-train or C-train  
hauls overland through the fierce weather  
*O pain* of spring, steering across the unloving, pitiless  
injustice, and the energy, the desire  
to defy it. How brave we are, *O pain,*  
to travel these routes, the highway forward  
*why can we not love ourselves,* braiding,  
rejoining, soaring through crossroads  
as if we knew *star and chimney smoke*  
what to love in one another, that country  
—words  
one time alone.

## Heavy Weather

Thunderclouds power into the valley  
    Around the ridges to the south  
Some here believe the darkness full of money  
    Others, the pure light

    At the fair, the badmen ballads  
        Roll again from the stage  
In front of the speakers, young women dance  
    with their toddlers, mother and child swaying leg to leg

Thunderclouds loom over the valley  
    –A contagion that advances from the south  
Some believe this darkness is bearing money  
    Others, the redeeming light

    Around the dancers, booths of canvas and wood  
        Sell garlic and absolution  
The young husbands stand at the edge of the crowd  
    Speaking to each other of engines

Thunderclouds release the crumbling bass  
    That precedes the downpour  
Some believe the shadow full of benediction  
    Others, unending night

    On the water, ripples swell into surf  
        Fishers gun toward distant harbors  
On the mountain, beside the passing line of pickups and sedans  
    Autumn's first snow dwindles on the shoulder

Thunderclouds push in from the south  
Some here are certain the darkness means wealth  
Others, eternal chastisement from what brandishes rain and fire  
Still others, the abiding light

MARK LAVORATO

## First Memory

I am sitting on a stair with my back against a wall,  
legs neatly lining the half-length of one of the steps.  
I think I am wearing cords. They may be brown.  
What I know is that I'm seated in a warm slot of sun.  
I have positioned myself here to inspect a pheasant  
that my father has shot on an afternoon hunt. The bird  
is strangely stiff, it's chicken-sized talons pointed, firm.  
Its body is so unbearably soft I recoil. Until, mesmerized  
by its colours, a magnet in my fingers pulls them closer  
again. My hand eventually settles onto the Chinese  
dye of its plumage as it ignites in the October sun  
which haemorrhages from some nearby window.  
This is a prism of feathers, iridescent firework  
of dusty down. My father appears chuckling,  
bending low to wrap his massive hands of sandpaper  
over my cheeks, rubbing them, telling me that I look  
so very serious. I do not recall feeling serious.  
He steps over my legs and leaves me with the bird  
for another long moment. Braver now, I lean in  
to look into its eye, the yellow so vivid it stings.  
I point to touch its iris, but instead, put a fingertip  
on the bottom of its eyelid, and close it. Then open it.

## Understanding Their Father's Death

I come to realize that they don't  
really, tucking them into bed  
the night of his funeral. At least not  
now, at the ages of six and eleven. Now  
it's a disruption, a catastrophic turn  
of events they will have to adapt to.  
They refer to his absence in the world  
as something temporary, as if  
the permanence of his death will, in time,  
pass. And the more I talk to them about it,  
the more I come to believe along with them  
that it will, that the space of a father tragically lost  
can be filled with the idea of his presence,  
which will so glaringly lack in those moments  
in life, grand and minute, when a father should most  
be there. An absence to feed, quietly, like some  
beautiful hidden creature, stolen away  
in the corner of some private cupboard,  
to be fed breadcrumbs that fall from the table,  
and the broken seashells of loving secrets.  
They will watch him grow, stronger, sprout invisible  
feathers, until, one day he will stand tall  
behind them, follow them to dinner parties,  
and perch on the backs of their chairs.  
And when they are forced to utter the words,  
"Actually, my father died when I was young,"  
he will set his enormous wings, eyes flashing,  
and hold vigil over the pause that follows.

JOHN WALL BARGER

## Ash Baptism

I was nine when the ash drifted  
to our flatlands like a mountain.  
Our farms stood on hind legs,  
staggered to the coast. We stayed,  
eating our bellies out. Shooting  
the cattle, the landholders. Living  
inside the ash, in the cave of it,  
inhabitants of it, citizens, prisoners.  
Father, thinking as it thought,  
chewed dead grass in the yard.  
Father bleated. Mother squatted  
naked by the road. Mother cawed.  
Ash a church in the sky. We hacked  
out prayers on the rocks & trees  
of it, delivered from the bondage  
of the sun & its hell-burning. Ash  
galloped with our small ones  
to the afterworld. We offered it  
everything. On the Sabbath,  
starving, staggering, I held out  
my last Twinkie to the swirling.  
There came a wind, shapes;  
a black spark, an inkling; past  
& future among like fallen statuary.  
Monkeys, waist-deep. The largest,  
“The Grandseigneur,” wore a sleazy  
grin as if behind a screen door.  
“Let every living soul prosper,”  
he grunted. I said, “The Twinkie in  
your claw, is that the soul?”  
He removed his blood-flecked crown,

eyes grey, mouth grey, in ash that  
includes & enfolds within itself.

## IN CONVERSATION

David Eso

### **A Cue and Eh? with bill bissett**

*In April, 2013, during the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Calgary International Festival of Spoken Word, bill bissett agreed to an interview. Our conversation took place in the Exchange Lounge of the downtown Marriott, where many of the festival's artists were housed. bill spoke about his new novel hungree throat, Canadian politics, his home-planet of Lunaria, the re-release of his seminal poetic tract RUSH: what fuckan theory; a study uv language and the remarkable festival in progress. Here's an excerpt from that conversation.*

Cue: Welcome back to Calgary, bill. It's great to see you! How was your trip here?

Eh: So excellent! but it takes so long to get here, you know. It takes four days to fly here from Toronto. Manitoba is really the size of Asia, now. It takes a whole day just to fly over Manitoba.

Cue: Luckily, they show such great films on the plane, it feels like only four or five hours.

Eh: That's true! Excellent, raging, another interview!

Cue: Could we start with some questions about your new 'novel in meditation' from Talon Books, *hungree throat*?

Eh: Sure thing. Excellent. Thanks for reading it.

Cue: The relationship of the two main characters, Howard and Brian, is very gently paced. Then, toward the end of the book, a single page makes a sudden revelation of their destinies. It's a shocking scene...

Eh: I was shocked by that scene, too. I did not see that coming. But it stayed in. It's in there. A lot of the book was dictated to me but not all. The novel I wrote before this one was almost entirely dictated to me: the storyline, everything. This one was more a novel in meditation, as you know.

Cue: But if it's a novel, it's a novel made up mostly of poems, no?

Eh: [Long pause then triumphantly] Yes!

Cue: What makes this a novel then, rather than a suite of poems?

Eh: I think it is a novel with poems and essays. It's a collagist, postmodernist novel in that the focus is not consistent or repetitive. The focus is changing. In a way, it's a new kind of representationalism, you could say... someone else could say that. Because it more truly represents how life is. We may be living a continuing storyline but throughout it and within it are all kinds of other situations or scenes we get into. It depends on the priorities and the obsession. For some people, something is very highly prioritized and that's partly because they're experiencing obsessions but partly because that's the way circumstances can be or are. We are not actually shaped entirely by circumstances—they do trump everything, kind of, yet in a way they don't. The book deals with that.

The main thing for me (as a writer, though it may be different for the reader) is that we need to let go of the baggage. These two people [in the book] get together and one is quite bold and unafraid of what has happened and the other person is very afraid of what has happened. He's seen some terrible things which he's not let go of yet. That's why there's that poem in there about surviving trauma. All the poems, some more than less, are connecting to the main theme of the book which is basically the conversation between these two people. They have a contrapuntal, not binary but, a contrapuntal relationship. One is very easy going and the past does not frighten him and the other one

is frightened by his past. I've seen this difference in couples, straight and gay and mixed. I've seen this difference as an almost primordial break-up causation.

Cue: Couples are reductions of society, aren't they? The question of how we live together.

Eh: Yeah, they are, totally. I believe that as well. But often couples don't want to believe that because they want to believe their thing is their very own thing, which it is, too.

Cue: The dialog is so precise and natural in *hungree throat*, I had assumed you were one of the characters in the relationship.

Eh: There's times when I identify with Brian, the hesitancy and the fear. And sometimes I identify with Howard, very easy going, almost manic. But I'm actually not either. I think I've had four relationships. They've all, of course, broken up or they'd be all here now. That would be fun wouldn't it?

Cue: I wonder about your editing process. Are you of the first thought, best thought school of writing?

Eh: First thought, best thought is an influence for me. It's like strokes in a painting—if it's a non-representational painting, especially. If the stroke is okay, then I can keep going with the painting and I can let all the strokes be there. But if an individual stroke is not okay, it causes a ricochet within the whole painting and becomes another kind of painting which may be just as fine, hopefully, if I've begun being part of it. Same with writing. So I do do editing. When I edit and when I don't edit, I am looking to feel the naturalness of the speaking voice. Yeah. If it's not there, if it needs to be cleaned up or needs to be smoothed up too much, then I let that go.

Cue: The trio of poems in *hungree throat*—the salmon poems—took 12 years to write. Was that a problem of editing? How did you come to decide that they were ready for print?

Eh: The third one, 'a symphony uv salmon,' was written last year. The two others were written a few years ago, more than a few years ago. One of them, I was watching broadcast news and I heard that "the salmon talks will continue on Monday." And I thought, "well, thank

God, at least the salmon are talking!" That was written thirteen years ago but I still read it. If someone hasn't heard it before, it may just fit in a reading, as a break because sometimes a serious poem can get too serious and in a sense, the people may drift... because it loses narrative agility, flexibility. In *hungree throat* I did the least editing of any book I've ever written and I'm happy for that. What I wanted to do was find the naturalness of speaking. And I'm aware there's some protocol around *he said* and *she said* and *how did they say*. That's a little tricky, some of that stuff, because you want to keep it natural and believable.

Cue: In the recently re-released *RUSH: what fuckan theory; a study uv language* (Book-Thug, 2012), you write: "I was caught by the dirt committee when very young. Everything I've done can be seen in terms of that first poem to God." Do you remember writing your first poem?

Eh: I remember writing what I thought (or I think now, I'm not sure which) was my first poem, in response to my mother going to spirit when I was fourteen. I think I actually wrote the poem when I was sixteen. It was called 'Death, Death and More Death.' "We're surrounded by, covered with, we live inside only death, death and more death." I moved it over the page. The poems we were taught in school, before I went to the hospital for two years and then came back, were in squares, you know, traditional formatting and that's fine, whatever, all ways always... but this one, 'Death, Death and More Death,' I felt the morbidity of the graveyard very strongly, it was moving over the page which I like doing very much. I still write in squares and rectangles. Sometimes it's for an economy of space. The language can call out for squares and rectangles or visual writing, moving it over the page. Always all ways.

Cue: There's been a shift in visual poetry: from concrete to something more fluid. I'm thinking of poets like derek beaulieu whose visual poetry more closely resembles the dancing letters of Quranic calligraphy than the concrete poetry of the past century.

Eh: And also draws from John Furnival who was a visual poet in England when I was starting. derek's work is very similar to that of John Furnival. I like derek's work very much. Gregory Betts<sup>1</sup> and Eric Schmaltz are doing work like that also.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sandra Ridley's conversation with Gary Barwin for more on Betts and beaulieu.

Cue: In *Rush* you complained that the poetry of the 1970s lagged behind developments in painting and music. Was there a time when language and poetry were leading the way? What about today?

Eh: It's still trying to catch up. It's still way too linear for my liking. Even though I write linear stuff myself. Poetry, in my mind, has always been behind the other arts.

Cue: Why do you think that is?

Eh: Because it's more associated with message. Linear message. That could be. So often in poetry, we're making a point, however disguised or layered. Of course music does that too, so the question is how it's done. I think music has been more adventurous in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries than poetry has. Though spoken word is mixing that up, pushing it forward. In all its forms spoken word approaches sound: performative, narrative, non-narrative. In fact, I no longer think like I did in *RUSH*, that poetry lags behind music. There were way fewer of us then. Where it has gone and is going.

Cue: One final question, bill. Last October, I phoned you to say that I'd just seen Ray Souster and urged you to go say goodbye, because he was obviously not long for this world. You made it just in time. What stands out from that meeting?

Eh: Eric Schmaltz and I met on Yonge Street and went to see Dr. Marsee at the garage on Church that was excellent and then we went to the Bloor line going west to where Raymond lived near High Park, that was October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, days before Raymond went to spirit. He was very affable, genuinely pleased to see us. He played Johnny Hartman for us, a beautiful voice and some excellent Dixie, gave us each his new book. He was in a lovely place: a big living room and a bedroom and a bathroom. He and his wife living in the same building of assisted living would visit each other and hang every day. Raymond remembered Milton Acorn so well. They had both served in world war two together. Raymond loved Milton as did I. His memories of Milton Acorn were very vivid and he enjoyed talking about him, how they each had chosen different life paths eventually, as Raymond and I also had done. Raymond chose a more guaranteed path with benefits such as a good pension from bank work so he could live there where he was. And both Milton and myself, much more precarious paths. "But who is to say which is

better really?” Raymond softly and beautifully said. It was wonderful to meet him after such a long time when I had met him once before at a literary party at Jerry and Arlene Lampert’s place also in Toronto, perhaps 40 years ago. But I don’t know so much when things happen, I seem like most poets to live in a continuing present. When we left Raymond, we each hugged him very warmly and him each of us. He seemed very fit. It was exciting to spend over an hour [of] wonderful, quality time with Raymond. Both Eric and I were startled that two days later Raymond Souster went to spirit, leaving so many friends and lives and memories. I was really hoping to see him again and talk and listen to jazz music with him again.

Cue: What’s the next book we can expect from you, bill?

Eh: Eric had been resurfacing *I want to tell you love*, the book I wrote with Milton Acorn in the mid-sixties. No one would publish [it] as our writing approaches were so different, people said we couldn’t be in the same book. That was the point. Milton and I would say to people *sheesh*, but excellence can happen. This many years later, BookThug with Eric Schmaltz [is] editing and putting it all together: our book, Milton and mine. We worked so hard on [it] and were so deeply into the choices: which poems, how they would enhance each other or not. *I want to tell you love* will be published. I think now it’s being slated for next year.

BILL BISSETT

## a symphonee uv salmon

sibilant thru th up stream swimming 4  
ward with dna fiersness in th gold stream  
now turning green

unlike th salmon we can live longr thn giving  
birth  
n cumming 2 th taybul place all our magik  
objekts uv manee dimensyunal  
consciousness on it

evn th taybul n all th objekts we can place  
on it glass figureens wills sacrid n  
arcane cannistrs uv kours documentz  
writtn agreementz template emblems  
narrativs  
uv our humours laisons n tragedeez  
th epoch neurologikal acuitee our

symphoneez ar mor divers we think we  
dont disapeer gradualee among colours uv  
green pink gold th pebbled shore em  
bedding th fins eyez n tails n heds n  
th innr flanks can we say falling falling  
in2 th erth dissolving in2 th wet ground

we disapeer in2 each othr n our bones eez  
in2 th erth th fire th vapour n sumtimez  
b4 also disapeering iuv herd we can heer  
th symphonee uv salmon n th salmon singing  
theyr liquid sibilants songs n dreems  
swimming guiding us thru in2

circuls within circuls sumtimes dizzeeing  
within th rivr running upstream we all ar  
evenshulee rainbows goldn pink

evreething salmon n gorillas all inside us

ther is no ending 2 bcumming

## th glass half full

is th glass full uv  
                  detritus hi hopes  
wundrful magik xperiences nite  
          mares wundr ful peopul  
th most cruel n vindiktiv  
                  peopul ar they  
          n angel peopul its such a  
kaleidoscope n revolving  
door or dea kalampra  
ham burgr n salads n cod  
cookd gentlee with green  
onyuns tomatos n buttr  
th othr half is full  
          uv th same or is that  
2 reduktiv          yes sew can  
2 redemptiv we make a run  
                  4 it  
                  diffrent piles uv  
traktors sand dunes wheet  
          fields uv longing n  
empteeness full uv  
          luf vu uvflu  
mor as it cums in th benefits  
uv life out weigh th down  
side its always at leest  
1/2 full uv what

## time inspiraysyun breth

what dew yu think

stelth like inside yr  
abandond furrier waiting 4  
th show 2 opn

talking with zebra king n he  
sd i was i am y r yu sighing  
life has alredeed startid

its onlee time its onlee life what  
can yu

time timothee timee timaeus  
erth time time uv th soil rocks treez  
fire wind duz it alwayze replenish  
dew we times winged chariot speeding  
like th chariot ride in ben hur

whats th diffrens btween d compose n  
compose how we with briteness take  
on inhabit fill out animate all our  
feetyurs n moistyurs apertures n  
mullucks sew combine as 2 rearrange  
th air erth wind n fieree verbs n th  
nounareez  
that enclose us all 4 th timex uv our

lives evn just a glansing touch sum  
timez 2 late we try 2 build a fire wall  
around our fragile stickrs all ovr our  
psyches  
self feelings 4 how long we  
ar built 2 last thr is plannd  
obsolesens in all our

lives n dew we live byond our breth  
is it continuous byond erth n whil  
we ar heer

i cud sit n drink watr all day at 20-30  
b low dot dot dot inspire th breth  
breathing heart how luckee we ar  
whn it runs with us loves with us  
risks with us our tremors feers n th  
luck uv th dna drawing our time  
inspirasyun b no wuns aneething  
if that sz 2 work 4 them working  
with them

n they wunt if they wunt a  
magik wreeth around yr breth  
somniales around th lee side n falling  
falling undrneeth th watrs  
th air inside wher ar we  
distraktid i 4get th magik words  
wher theyr saying pleez cum n get  
me dont let we stop let us keep  
going on n unravel all th puzzuls n  
all th serches as much as we can dew  
zeebra king sd agen rockin on his  
assumpsyuns  
empowring himself n his listnrs

th air startid going on lunaria n we  
th childrn first wer bording th  
shuttuls 2 erth n othr places leev  
ing th manee othrs bhind 2 build  
fires whil they cud n dewing deep  
breething but th air was going  
n they wer dreeming evr mor weeklee  
what wud inspire as th time was drawing  
neer n down 2 a close  
leeving  
with th air until  
sumthing wud happn

## HOW POEMS WORK

Brian Bartlett

### Robert Gibbs's Newgreen Inventory

Like an unrepeatable hike, an ear-catching melody, or a complex ghost story, "All This Night Long" has claimed a place in my memory for over three decades. In 1978 it appeared as the title poem of what might be Robert Gibbs's widest- and highest-reaching collection. Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the poem still holds much of its original power to haunt and move me and, in the best sense of the word, to bewilder (thinking of the "wild" in that verb).

With its country roads, blueberry patches and dense woods, this poem is rooted in terrain encountered in other poetry of northeastern North America. As in Frost's "Directive," Bishop's "Cape Breton," and "Orchard in the Woods" by Gibbs's fellow Maritimer Charles Bruce, the land in this poem is reclaiming much of its own, regaining some of its former wildness. At the outset, the poet/speaker is "taking inventory" of roads, "less than / roads," tracks, ruts, blazes. Though we often associate "taking inventory" with practicality, the ledgers and columns of business, here the poet is busy with something less quantifiable, our vanishing—yet still visible—traces left on the land. He's also searching for "ways of getting from the centre / of this woods to that point / along the shore," yet that turns out to be something of a false lead, since only the first stanza cites the shore as destination. Soon afterward, images and actions from human civilization—lighthouse, road-building, logging—are largely absent, except for cartographical references to "counties" and "borders." Rivers, brooks and birds appear without electricity, asphalt or painted signs; over half the poem is entangled in woods, swamps and intervals. Signs of technology move into the background, and the archetypal nature of the excursion,

into the foreground. The poem's human presences might be roaming in, say, the 19<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> rather than the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the timeless search goes on "parting / many thick-nesses" without finding the end of them.

The poem keeps opening up, taking several unexpected turns. One major turn occurs at the start of the third stanza, with the introduction of "a single man / on foot," who becomes the poem's main actor. It would narrow the poem to label this figure the poet's *alter ego* or *shadow* or *ideal self*; he slips away from definitions in the same way he detours around or leaps over logs. What can we say of him, then? He's persevering, wide-ranging, alert ("cocking ears at a birdcall"), generous (throwing a stone back in the water with "a giving all his own"). Twice we hear of "seeing" the vigorous walker, and the watcher and the watched aren't exactly one, but the former must be nearly as intrepid as the latter, in "making an inventory" of all the other figure does.

A second major turn occurs in the fifth stanza, when the specific actions of the cryptic hike give way to a revelation that the walking is "to / make connections more connect-ed." The walker isn't imposing false order, but finding order already there; his tracing connections makes them more themselves. Moreover, he sees how the universe is both centrifugal ("how it all radiates") and centripetal ("how / it all assembles"), composed of both those that reach out to other things and those that pull other things toward them. (The verb "radiate" might be a quiet allusion back to the lighthouse in the first stanza.)

In another unexpected turn, the walker says to a third figure, "Hey I have you here." Perhaps that "you" is part of the whole ("it all") that the walker traces and explores. (I don't see anything possessive or threatening here in the verb "have.") Then the poem's final three lines take the boldest turn yet. The observed solitary walker is called "that gentle plodder." Here, the word "plodder" sheds its negative connotations (as in "a plodding storyline"), as well as echoing the vowel sound of the earlier "slogging." What was implied earlier by the walker's handling of the pebble is now stated: despite his tireless strength, he is "gentle," not only hardy. The poem's speaker now returns to the foreground and tells the "you"—surely in part the reader—that the walker is "no more apart / from you than you from me." The three-part relationship here isn't linear (walker made accessible to reader via in-the-middle poet) but triangular (reader as close to walker as to poet). In the poem's final line there's gentleness and intimacy that can be both startling

and reassuring. With suggestions of the speaker-reader bond in hand, I retrace my tracks and suspect that the opening “All this night long and longer / I’ve been taking inventory...” might be spoken from within a room, within a mind, rather than necessarily in an outside dark. Gibbs allows us to imagine the poet either afoot or at home.

“All This Night Long” resists exhaustive interpretation, and as a dramatic, evocative whole transcends the diction of my commentary (“centripetal,” “revelation,” “three-part relationship”), even if that commentary approaches the words and lines with wonder and affection. Gibbs’s poem, suggesting more than it states, sends out rays of meaning and constructs a fragment of story from bits of landscape, excursion, and dream. It’s a poem that both radiates and assembles.

ROBERT GIBBS

## All This Night Long

All this night long and longer  
I've been taking inventory of  
country roads and sometimes less  
than roads tracks and logging ruts and  
blazes all but healed over  
all the ways of getting from the centre  
of this woods to that point  
along the shore that place where  
a light beams out and a horn  
thickens through inblowing fog

All of them over rough tracks past  
raw slashes and green newgreen in  
burntover humus and blueberry patches

Sometimes after a single man  
on foot along rivers and off them  
up steep brooks seeing him step  
round or jump over logs and stumps  
into staghorn moss or wild mushrooms

Seeing him break his way or wade  
long enough to know the motions  
he makes with his head and hands  
cocking ears at a birdcall or  
stooping over a pebblebed for one  
to turn in his hand or toss  
two or three times before giving  
it back with a giving all his own

In and out of counties across  
borders through swamps and flooded-out  
intervals slogging all night long to  
make connections more connected to say

See how it all radiates or how  
it all assembles to say  
Hey you there insisting you are  
there Hey I have you here

And that gentle plodder parting  
many thicknesses is no more apart  
from you than you from me

---

“All This Night Long” from the collection *The Essential Robert Gibbs* selected by Brian Bartlett  
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## FEATURE REVIEW

Jennifer Still

### **If Bees are Few: Three Poets from the Prairies**

Anne Szumigalski. *A Peeled Wand: Selected Poems of Anne Szumigalski*. Ed. Mark Abley. Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2011.

Katherena Vermette. *North End Love Songs*. Winnipeg: The Muses' Company, 2012.

Sylvia Legris. *Pneumatic Antiphonal*. Poetry Pamphlet #4. New York: New Directions, 2013.

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,  
One clover, and a bee.  
And revery.  
The revery alone will do,  
If bees are few.

—Emily Dickinson, “To make a prairie,” *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*

The term “prairie poet” has always troubled me. It supposes a certain predilection for subject (skyscapes, farmlands, hayfields) not to mention a down-home rurality that is tuned closer to a weather-vane than Blake’s pen. As a poet living on the prairies, I cringe at the idea of region prescribing voice, or worse, of landscape—particularly one as open as this—associating so narrowly.

Anne Szumigalski saw “a sky which has no limit but those that the poetic mind cares to put on it.” Indeed, a skyward, reverential looking informs these three collections; how-

ever, there is nothing singular in their aesthetic approach. If anything, expansiveness of landscape might contribute to their plurality—the *room* for difference and a range of poetic framings. As Szumigalski said: “If I had stayed in Britain, or indeed any part of Europe, I would have certainly written poetry all my life, but it would have been much more cramped and circumscribed, more conventional and less absurd” (“Epigraph,” *On Glassy Wings*).

Poets from the prairies are many grounds and many skies.

Szumigalski’s artistic landscape was not so much of a place but of the imagination. If anything, her vantage point was closer to a mountain peak than the prairie fields that surrounded Saskatoon, the city where she lived from 1956 until her death in 1999: “air is more rarified up here and there is snow under your boots, but then you are as near the heavens as you can get while still having your feet on the ground” (“Afterword,” *On Glassy Wings*).

*A Peeled Wand* collects 52 poems from 12 books spanning more than three decades of Anne Szumigalski’s writing life. I like to think a “selected poems” can and should be an act of unsettling—a recontextualizing, reconfiguring of work long held to its time and place. It is a chance to liberate material from its comfortable setting, to recast, resee, as the prefix suggests: *re-* “to go back,” “to start again.”

But what happens to poems when they are pulled from their initial framings? Maybe Szumigalski says it best:

...it’s true, isn’t it, that before something has become a whole we may not refer to it as divided? The trick of a word, the sag of the language, may mean it has always been whole, even before the two halves were joined. (“I = -1”)

Perhaps it is this fundamental wholeness that gives *A Peeled Wand* its rooted spark. Such thematic, imagistic and tonal cohesion are found here that it would be easy to believe these poems had always existed along the same spine.

Edited by her literary executor, Mark Abley, *A Peeled Wand* draws its title from the widely anthologized poem “Nettles,” which first appeared in 1974 in Szumigalski’s debut collection, *Woman Reading in Bath*. It is as if Szumigalski herself has selected the poems for *A Peeled Wand*, as more than half have appeared together in two previous “selected works” collected under her hand: *The Word, The Voice, The Text* (her 1990 memoir by Fifth House) and *On Glassy Wings: Poems New & Selected* (with Don Kerr).

However, this is more than just a reproduction of Szumigalski’s most treasured poems—*A Peeled Wand* is a thoughtful transplanting, a selective loosening and whimsical resetting of poems held apart from their original lineage. In *A Peeled Wand*, the hourglass tips on its side, context is *now*, old edges are crossed, which seems quite natural for a voice whose musical swiftness and transformative imagery are far too animate for anything as static as the page:

*for always she tells herself before  
you have finished naming a thing the meaning has  
changed no one can speak as fast as a thought  
darts across the mind no one can speak faster  
than the sound of words. (“The Disc”)*

And there couldn’t be a more appropriate treatment for poems that are shapeshifters, dreamers: angelic chickens, storytelling crickets, tree-hearts, bone-harps, semen fishes, and girls sprouting crane legs infuse lyric with fable. The line twigs, never to be pinned down in one direction, ever unfolding, conducted by the wand of the pen: “And the pancake is / a flower folded at sunset, and the flower is a nest hidden / in a tree and the nest hung there in the sky is a dark star” (“A Child and His Mother Camp Out on a Cool Night”).

A few weeks ago I was having tea with a poet friend who recalled a story Szumigalski told. Szumigalski’s father had allowed her to view a war scar on his chest, which had left a depression, a hollow that was enough for her to lay her ear inside, almost to touch her father’s heart.

I like to think all the poetic impulse in *A Peeled Wand* might be contained in that anecdote—a thorough, immersive, exploratory and close listening to the world—a listening with child hands, uncomfortably close, unshy to any hole or wound. Not only do Szumigalski’s poems go straight for the messy heart, but they enter it wide-eyed, open-palmed, unafraid. Curiosity always trumps fear and often travels right through:

carefully he passes his hands over his body  
buttoned into its tunic of stiff drab wool  
until he finds the hole in his chest  
he thrusts in his fist to staunch the blood  
a pulse beats close to his folded fingers  
it is insistent and strong  
it is pushing him away from himself. (“Shrapnel”)

This willingness to enter such inexplicable terrain (and with a fist no less!), is the daring direction all Szumigalski’s poetry takes. The wound is just the entry point, by no means the end. Endings are opportunities for transformation: here even death is active, pushing back.

There is a deep sense of hope at the root of this direct and almost violent looking. In “The Fall,” the narrator unbuttons the pajama jacket of her just-deceased father to see what he has been hiding: “Was there a hole there, beneath his heart, where a squirrel had made her nest?”

Even a sticky-fingered child in the garden scratching “her hot little bum” has her secrets, and Szumigalski peels them back: “It’s her desire she is hiding // Her desire for the death of her brother / conceived in your bed last night” (“Your Child Looks Up”).

The image always pushes the imagination. The moment arrives beyond its trauma. Not surprising then to find the poems in *A Peeled Wand* loaded with holes: button-holes, shrapnel holes, pockets, sheaths, stone holes “big enough for a little finger to poke through,” earholes, trephined skull, wormholes (and worm mouths!), holy nostrils, “straws of ice,” a hole in a book where a word used to be.

Much like Szumigalski, Winnipeg poet Katherena Vermette refuses to let grief or the harder image slip from sight. In her hauntingly quiet debut collection *North End Love Songs*, Vermette sets a bare and steady gaze upon loss and home in Winnipeg's oldest settled community.

Cover to cover, from the compassion of its title to its skyward author's photo, Vermette's poems offer a fierce hope: the dandelions "stay so yellow / even when / they are dead." These are poems that grieve, lament, and beseech, but mostly, relentlessly, they see. If Szumigalski places an ear to the wound, then Vermette sips a Big Gulp on the church steps and looks up.

Vermette's poems record levity, but not at the expense of a full picture. What she finds is as minimal and flickering as the "river waves (that) fold / into each other / like family."

There is a deep and slow revealing here, a subtle narrative and imagistic rewinding, something like the VHS player at the centerpiece of many of the poems. Winner of the 2013 Governor General's Award for English-language Poetry, *North End Love Songs* is best read in one circular sweep, allowing its curve, the soft places: "sky a white cloud" ("winter"). (This is not lightweight, this is the poem tracking, listing, buoying the long pause before *play*.) Trust its fine levels and the poet behind deftly pressing "on/off."

The first two sections offer soft, almost half-sketches of a North End girl with her eyes fixed high over the neighbourhood, transposing herself in the upper landscapes of birds and elms, in praising, almost spiritual, reverie:

branches overhead  
interlaced like fingers  
cup around her  
hold her in ("bannerman avenue")

The neighbourhood canopy filters a personal and collective grief. In the affectionately-titled "nortendluvsong," the poems survey from the highest reaches "like a roof" over the almost unspeakable loss symbolized by a river and the broken grey street that goes "bone straight / right under."

An achingly light but sure hand is at work here. Vermette's images are measured, written down while looking up:

she watches  
her steps  
and the leaves  
dance shadows  
across her  
upturned palms ("bannerman avenue")

The poems at the beginning of the book are generously spare, and almost grossly saturated in light—found in light and held in light—exposed and exposed.

The following section, "November," dims dramatically in tone and landscape. These are full-on grief poems that move inside the home to record, with tender detail, the loss of a brother who never made it to the other side of a "not quite frozen" river. Though the portrait of this young man is brief, Vermette's attention is so precise and exalting it hurts:

her brother is beautiful  
hair brushed gently  
across shoulders  
like newly born  
bird feathers  
so soft but  
the downy black  
could never be  
touched ("heavy metal ballads")

And then a few poems later, in the ghostly, almost-touching of this hair:

runs her fingers through  
the dust on the dresser  
the brush  
still lying there ("things she does the day of the wake")

Sealed rooms, black permanent marker on black plastic, and heavy metal t-shirts narrate the November darkness. Most remarkable though is how even trauma is transformed under Vermette's pen. Horror is recast into honor:

her brother is  
heavy metal ballads  
a thin ripple bass line  
a long  
slow current  
of guitar  
a smooth  
wave of lyrics ("heavy metal ballads")

This "smooth wave" is both river and song. It is the cassette tape unspooling and the recurring image of a VHS tape that finally plays out the full length of a grieving heart. The long loop of loss and memory is paused, rewound, held back and then let go:

she knows the half  
second delay  
how to hit the button  
just in time  
on  
off ("Record")

Vermette's poems are not trying so much as they are deeply seeking. They don't follow a fashionable conceit, they simply *are*. A sincere and wrenching arrival grounds each fragile, trembling word: "she walks / the length of the street / from the end." Following that fallowest of spaces, adolescent idleness, Vermette perseveres until the poem is raw with meaning, replaying the memory "until the tapes / wear thin."

Composed under the same and yet completely reimagined prairie sky is *Pneumatic Antiphonal*, Sylvia Legris's landscape (lunandscape) of symphonic birdsong.

Legris's is an atmosphere you have never before imagined: "The leaf-shaped epiglottis (petiolated, parallel-veined) is the front door (on singing hinges)" ("Lore: 3 [midrib nidifying]").

Legris's fourth collection might be the most contained in length and lexicon, but perhaps most resonant in density and imaginative scope. *Pneumatic Antiphonal* is Legris's signature "onomatopoeic anatomy" at its "interstitial pishing" finest ("Lore: 2 [decoy]"). Here breath is oscine, migratory, spinal chorused, lore-spelled, a "(t)in whistle dipped in liquid" ("Lore: 6 [pluvial]").

Legris' fantastical soundscape is a lung of "Oxygen song...Ozonic" ("Lore: 2 [decoy]") under a bronchiole-branched sky: "the utmost uppermost point is the pulmonary canopy" ("Esophageal Hiatus"). Canada Geese are "coiled trachea" ("*Grus Canadensis*"), the hummingbird, a floating rib. The inner is made out and the outer is made in.

If *Pneumatic Antiphonal's* poetic field is "evolutionary air" ("Floating Rib #11") then Legris is its "sparrowfull" ("Lore:6 [pluvial]") inventor. Reaching through the musical, tonal, etymological, and syllabic particularities of language with the dissecting, descriptive beauty of Gray's anatomy (see the pencil sketches which read like visual poems themselves—the wishbones are curiously beaky!), Legris's poems pierce illimitable linguistic and associative scope.

The opening and perhaps shortest poem in the collection, "Lore: 1 (premise)," is a fine example of the contained expansion in her work: "The theory of corpuscular flight is the cardinal premise of red / birds carrying song-particles carrying oxygen. Erythrocytic. / Sticky. Five quarts of migration."

Instant immersion in cardinals as cells, migrating bloodsong. Whenever I read "migration" I can't help but hear "imagination." The lung-forest is imagistically defined and yet imaginatively extended. Our synapses refire, "air changes direction" and we are on a "cervical vertebral pivot" ("Cervical Vertebra Variation 2").

In Legris's image-language transformations, the intangible is occupied: "Percuss the thoracic cage. / *Clavicula*: the little key that unlocks the door" ("Ribcage Invention"). Breath

is a theatre and the respiratory body its instrument: “Curve-bone tablature. Light-organ luthier. Costal cartilaginous tonewood” (“Lore: 10 [rib]”).

As always, Legris’s poetry is a cross-section of lyric possibility. She doesn’t just discover landscapes; she creates them. Most remarkable is the clarity of image that emerges from such complex association as in “*Grus canadensis*”:

Lungs

An open marsh,  
fenland, quagmire  
of low gurgle and iron-  
oxidized aspiration.

*Antiphonal* means a versicle sung by one choir in response to another, an anthem.

The most sustained moments in *Pneumatic Antiphonal* are anthemic acts of reverie that laud and intone in “nestling sostenuto,” “song-throttle” (“Lore: 13 [shadow-decoy]”), and “hovering exhalations” (“Hummingbird 2”), and in the “call and release” of “hum-tones” where “notes are the things with feathers” (“Esophageal Hiatus”).

*Pneumatic Antiphonal* is an anatomical temple, a “neural arch” (“Cervical Vertebra Variation 3”) lit in “a separation of sun and albumen” (“Where the neck [really] ends”) set to organ music windpipes as in “Cervical Vertebra Variation 3”: “a stippled hum (hyoid hymnody). Os sacrum. Sacral canal. Holy bone.”

There is so much to discover in this slim, exquisite “Poetry Pamphlet” put out by New York’s venerable New Directions Books, one is compelled to read it alongside a dictionary for full appreciation of its webbings, as well as aloud for its remarkable aural palette.

*A Peeled Wand*, *North End Love Songs*, and *Pneumatic Antiphonal* chime their own striking atmospheres and resonate with multiple reveries.

## FEATURE REVIEW

Phoebe Wang

### **The Width of their Breath**

Daphne Marlatt. *Liquidities: Vancouver Poems Then and Now*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013.

Jen Currin. *School*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014.

Aisha Sasha John. *Thou*. Toronto: BookThug, 2014.

Throughout her fruitful and fluid career, Daphne Marlatt has given special importance to a cadence that carries and controls the breath. Her cadence conveys the movement of breath through the body, in particular the female body, which she always positions within a moment in time and place. As a result, her means of sense-making is contingent upon the self's specific location within her historical and cultural moment. In 1972's *Vancouver Poems*, she is already circling around her central concerns: the rhythms of cities, colonial legacies and lost voices. For Marlatt, nothing remains whitewashed. Sooner or later, the veneer peels off—things pushed out of sight surface into the swift currents of her attention.

In *Liquidities: Vancouver Poems Then and Now*, she revisits and revises her older book and adds a new section. In her introduction, Marlatt states that the poems “remain verbal snapshots, running associations that sound locales and their passers-through within a shifting context of remembered history, terrain, and sensory experience.” For Marlatt, memory and intuition are forms of testament, and psychic and physical ways of being in a place are as valid as historical record. Indeed, the individual's experience often serves as the only basis of reality in a place like Vancouver that is constantly rebuilt and renovated. Yet the lives of its citizens, its racial tensions and White Spots, its Chinatown

and vanished Japantown, its ghosts and “dandelion history” are layers that course underneath and through the city: “Trappings, change, / what runs in the middle, gestures, wired for / vision. Spiral back through city even underground,” Marlatt writes of the *sh’te*, or the city’s inhabiting spirit. In the book’s opening poem, the speaker outlines her intention to follow its presence:

Asphalt  
cuts through time, your eye, my tongue, down where a  
culvert mouths on the beach the city’s underground:  
you come through walking, corpses, bits of metal,  
bird cry.

Marlatt lays out what might be called a cadence of place. Ceaseless wordplay, lines that use slips of the tongue, mistakes and takebacks, bits of overheard dialogue and misquotes immerse the reader in a sense of momentous reality. This feeling of immediacy is conveyed by the speaker’s quick questions and exclamatory tone at flashes of colour, fish scales and a bit of green coming through the pavement: “Wait! I can’t get my hand out of green / pockets green, dissected, frogs. The edges of their / vision littoral. We skirt red.” Her poems don’t follow the indulgent pace of the flâneur, instead, they lose their train of thought. Fragments of scenes run into spliced images and half-recalled conversations. The pace of Marlatt’s writing reflects a fluctuating city with a blurry, indistinct history. “Water / scutters old men on benches under conifers,” she intones, instructing: “Listen: / their edges always murmuring.”

Does Marlatt successfully invoke place through her loose syntax and cadence? Or is her tendency to trip over roots and morphemes and to pile on multiple connotations distracting? For instance:

Be side, by side, Beside the  
water’s edge we come up to, ignore bridge-wise, say,  
the siding of houses dark, or dank, with what sea  
does. There is that smell the air will never get rid of.  
Riddled.

Or in “To Navigate” which continues: “grey-green fathoms, un/fathomed / intent, a word to be applied only eye-desire,” lines that cause the reader to double-check and second guess. It can be overwhelming, even wearisome, to unscramble parts of speech and parenthetical thoughts: “this city: shrouded (shreds) of original stands, darkened by / absence of (at the foot of Columbia Tea Swamp joined the / water’s edge).” Why can’t she pick one thought and stick with it? But Marlatt is mimicking the mind’s careening movements, implying that there is something false, even violent, about how sentences demand a complete thought.

Neither Jen Currin nor Aisha Sasha John are her direct inheritors—Currin’s *School* recalls Juliana Spahr, Lisa Robertson and Anne Carson, while John invokes M. Nourbese Philips, Alice Notley and Harryette Mullen in her second collection, *Thou*. Yet it is still possible to place these younger poets on a trajectory of experimental and feminist poetics. The measure and the width of their particular cadence is the only formal constraint for all three poets. And what about the relationship between cadence and meaning? How much is meaning absorbed through the listening mind’s ability to tune into each poet’s stresses and silences?

In *School*, Currin’s lines are nearly complete sentences expressing nearly complete thoughts. Nearly, because there is always some referent missing, some piece of information withheld from the reader. On initially reading Currin’s poems, I had no resting place, no sense of the book’s thesis. Currin deliberately thwarts her readers’ longing for order and chronology, asking us: “How do you get there?” The book investigates the violence of logic, of making rational conclusions, and of political-correctness that operates as doublespeak. How does one thing follow another? How does a child reared in a consumerist and self-indulgent culture gain a sense of healthy relationships? Its single-unit lines reject storylines and tidy conclusions: “It’s hard to know how to story things, / what anything means or meant” she declares. Riddled with “maybes,” “ifs” and “I don’t know,” the poems dispel the notion that one can deduce anything given a premise. Statements such as “Fathers die, friend, I don’t know / what else to tell you. // And the talking cure isn’t really,” and “Nothing is unquestionable. // Sharp pencils and careful study / when we sense something is breaking,” point out the limits of cures, shrines, a religious education or study when trying to understand the heart’s murkiness. Even teachers are happy to sleep in, to be unconscious during a school closure, and are

not infallible or disinterested: “We have beliefs, like anyone. // We made the choices that led to these results.”

In *Thou*, John also breaches unspoken taboos about how the female body can or cannot be viewed and represented. The book disconcerts with its mentions of unmentionables, bodily functions, vomiting, shitting and spasms. Doubtlessly, reviewers will make much of this visceral aspect of John’s book, but I believe they would be missing the point. *Thou* reveals the violence of address, the violence of one’s body continually represented, marketed and demarcated by an other. She lays bare the violence that is projected onto skin, hair, a torso, a nipple. The speaker announces:

People want to be scared.  
And then you scare them.  
I want to embarrass  
you. To crouch  
my stupid little swollen body.

*Thou* reneges on the ideals of beauty and exposes how they are used to control or subdue the female body. But these are words, not images—the poems remind me that I’ve seen women’s bodies depicted in much more obscene ways in film and media. John insists on obscenity on her own terms, mixing it with self-love and tenderness:

I rest  
my hand on my own belly kindly  
when I’m  
being tender with myself.  
The romance capable  
only of girls  
as girls.

At nearly two hundred pages, *Thou* is a demanding read. John is able to sustain a high pitch—like that of an inner scream—while still incorporating a comic air. I’d like to have seen even more variation in tone—the same wish I had of *School*. Despite the apparent lack of formal constraint, both poets are controlled and deliberate. Because both employ

features of the long-poem, such as repetition and allusions, individual poems feel less purposeful. Even the lack of constraints can become monotonous. This conundrum has been handed down to a new generation of poets who, like Marlatt, deploy a non-linear poetic structure. What all three books reveal is that the rhetoric of everyday speech contains as many biases, euphemisms and false premises as it always has. When a poet strives to make her voice utterly distinct from others, it cannot waver, even if she must hold the same note for as long it takes us to hear it.

## BRIEF REVIEWS

JM Francheteau

### **John Barton. *For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin: Selected Poems*. Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2012.**

With nine previous trade collections and a number of significant awards in his rear-view, John Barton is well within selected-poems territory. But, as perhaps the first career retrospective by a Canadian openly gay male poet, *For the Boy with the Eyes of the Virgin* also charts the broad strokes of a 30-year sea change. In a recent discussion of emerging queer writer Ben Ladouceur, Barton notes that in his own time the experience of being a queer male has come to no longer entail “an *a-priori* despair over same-sex identity” (*Arc* 73). One reading of Barton’s career suggested by this selection of poems is as a project of undermining and deconstructing such despair. There’s a sense in the earliest poems here of a voice coming to self-knowledge in a vacuum—the initial instinct, to fill that great unspoken with volume, scope, wilfulness-as-prophecy: “I’ve let you in, / filled empty marble halls, / arching silences that have lasted generations. / My doctors will be shocked. / Hitler will be shocked. / They never knew I would give birth / to a new age.” The early long poem “Hidden Structure” cycles metaphors (the sea, the sun, the infinities between atoms) in search of one large enough to assert its own existence. While the poem lacks the worldliness and emotional nuance of Barton’s mature voice, in its questing, its meandering, its piling of aphorisms, “Hidden Structure” performs a necessary work of setting terms: “We have destroyed in living // alone the meaning of love.” “Those who love shall love / no matter how the bodies join.” This movement over 18 unguarded pages through anguish into love and (self-)acceptance forms a basis for both a personal poetics and for survival. There is an echo of that project in the coming-of-age poems from 1994’s *Designs from the Interior*. These graceful lyrics have a prelapsarian

quality, nascent sexuality honeyed by nostalgia. Here sin is not in the hand that “embraces mystery, the hungry / language of involuntary // nerve endings” but in the cult of shame that makes simple words of love dangerous. In this queering of familiar adolescent tropes like playing doctor, he produces the most conventionally beautiful poetry of his career. It’s the Keatsian beauty-truth connection deployed as a mathematical proof: the existence of beautiful gay love poems proving the objective beauty of gay love. The later poems cease to presume a “universalist” audience. There is a subjectivity that does not hedge its expression in hopes of heteronormative sanction. At the same time the writing itself becomes simultaneously denser and more conceptually expansive. Simile is replaced almost entirely by metaphor, concerned with wholeness rather than comparison. Ideas emerge in long chains that almost defy short excerpts, “...collapsing / inward as memory spirals down a vortex / of expanding // particulars, which with every tighter downward turn more / minutely blur.” Compared to early work like “Hidden Structure,” the Barton of gems like “Saranac Lake Variation” and “Days of 2004, Days of Cavafy” is less defined by his aloneness, as though in the connections forged by 30 years of writing to predecessors like Frank O’Hara and C. P. Cavafy, and to generations ongoing, it has become easier to simply be a poet, and a man.

Shane Neilson

**bill bissett. *RUSH: what fuckan theory; a study uv language.*  
derek beaulieu and Gregory Betts, editors. Toronto: BookThug,  
2012.**

bill bissett’s poetry is based on principles that every poet should profess—two of these being a refusal of convention for the sake of convention and a refusal to define poetry specifically other than in terms of freedom. I declare from the outset that this review is a failure: it can’t convey bissett’s poetry in its actual form. Quoting a line of bissett does violence to his poetry, a fact that says a lot about bissett’s poetic, which is less about sense and more concerned with form. His presentation is far more interesting than his prosody—admittedly a basic thing to say about the notorious man who’s been writing for over half a century. bissett is *not* himself a complex poetry theorist. All bissett says in the first section of the book, over and over again, is that language must revolt against grammar and orientation. What’s curious is how this revolution proceeds in terms of

his own practice—a poetics of *collage*. Most poems in the first section of the book have simultaneous concrete and “tradishunl” elements. These poems usually possess themes of linguistic and sexual emancipation, as well as being anti-war. Grammatically, bissett madly deploys verb-noun and noun-noun links in loose “The-X-Is-The-Y” formulations, such as “the weave is the eye / is speaking speaking th / evening talks th eye / is speaking speaking / th sounds of stones.” A Me-Tarzan-You-Jane fragment effect is created, amplified by an idiosyncratic and phonetic rendering of words. More than any other bissett technique, phonetics slow the reader down, preventing quick assimilation of message. Slowing down means spending more time with the form on the page, which means spending more time with bissett’s collage. This reduces the importance of bissett’s message as a statement of poetics while preserving the worth of the work as poetry. bissett’s message to the definitional set is: poetry can be this, too. The second section of the book is an essay-in-poetry, not included in the original 1972 version of the book. bissett’s simple ideas are repetitive (love not war, freedom not control) when set against the poetry of the first section. The most obvious bissettian subversion comes in the Stephen Daedalus motif. bissett repurposes an academic essay he wrote on Joyce in his undergraduate days to become an idea-gram and visual poem. bissett’s take on Joyce is not new but it provides a key to understanding bissett’s love of artistic freedom. The second subversive element—sure to give conservatives-in-verse therapeutic conniptions—is an acknowledgement of the tradition. Though bissett is on record disliking historical modes of poetry, he does deliberately write in lyric on occasion so as to display a competence formalists should appreciate, encoded within his signature orthography: “aftr the rain wild onions so good what yu do / that th earth grass trees sky is always / within yr sight.” The last three sections of the book contain, respectively, the first editorial from bissett’s own *blewointment* press, an interview with bissett as conducted by the editors of this *RUSH* reissue, and finally a critical essay worth the price of the book alone for its contextualization of bissett as poet within the Canadian avant garde tradition and larger Canadian culture. Hopefully this essay will encourage scholars to engage with bissett’s example, if not his *stated* thought.

Patricia Keeney

**Don Domanski. *Bite Down Little Whisper*. Brick Books:  
London, ON, 2013.**

Effortlessly linking opposites, the poems in Don Domanski's *Bite Down Little Whisper* share rare secrets of a larger existence that is usually blocked out by the diurnal noise and distraction through which most of us fret and hurry. Quietude lets the marvels in: "Quietude is called returning to life Lau Tze says" in "Ars Magica."

Throughout this book, Domanski converses easily with haiku masters and other figures from ancient culture, all mavens of the intimately universal moment. He uses space instead of punctuation, so that the poems breathe internally—and we along with them at the same, slowly revealing rate. To absorb the book quickly is to hyperventilate. Every phrase stops the reader, provokes thought, demands attention. Space and silence expand consciousness into all the other worlds these poems touch. And there are many of them.

The quest is one for the essence of "being itself... a vacancy frescoed / on emptiness nothing to puzzle out / to unwind to unbend" ("The Alchemical Lion is Green and Devours the Sun"). This search is all-encompassing and ever vigilant, requiring constant mindfulness, wanting to know the nature of existence in every form, the essence of being alive:

a heron's footprints run line after line  
like typographical errors in the glistening mud  
above me moths chaperone the musculature  
of stars and the Delphic shudder of a cloud  
prophesying a bright green world ("Ursa Immaculate")

Domanski re-invents language. He finds new words, exact words, forgotten words; and he deploys old words in new contexts. There are so many ways to talk or write ourselves into existence. New experiences also produce new ways of expressing:

I want to disremember as I walk through this field  
through this first folio of the unwritten  
each of my footprints having been its own alibi for being here  
each eavesdropping on the one behind (“First Folio of the Unwritten”)

Domanski’s poems invoke and embrace the gift of close seeing with language that is perfectly placed and smoothly interwoven to take us ever deeper and further: “a doe standing still in the acquittal of light / each leg holding a presolar energy // and a mouthful of air” (“Bite Down Little Whisper”). With creative generosity, Domanski gives us new but timeless ways of seeing and *being* what we’ve ignored or missed, connections and observations as unexpected as they are familiar, their knotted obscurity as interesting as their flashes of clarity. In so doing, he recalls two earlier searchers and seekers: Leonard Cohen in his *Book of Secrets* courting the divine ‘other’ and Ted Hughes in his psychic dramas of the natural world. Each of these poets enters into alternative modes (available to us all) as a way of extending and understanding the full potential of the human condition and of accepting that we can’t always know where we fit along the continuum. For Domanski,

these paper birches are half remembered by yesterday’s rain  
half understood by the sunlight I feel at home among them  
peering through their windows caked with dust looking down  
into the soil’s registry where all our names are written  
the secret ones we’ve waited all of our lives to hear  
 (“The Light of Unoccupied Memory”)

Andrew Johnson

**Tom Marshall. *The Essential Tom Marshall*. Selected by David Helwig and Michael Ondaatje. Erin, ON: Porcupine’s Quill, 2012.**

Too often, our understanding of our literary history gets mixed up in debates about the canon, about who was great and who was merely good. In the process, we risk overlooking the fact that the greats didn’t spring out of nowhere; they needed literary

friends, drinking buddies, sympathetic publishers, rivals, lovers.... They needed writers like Tom Marshall (1938–1993), the poet, novelist (*Adele at the End of the Day*), and critic (*Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition*). Marshall spent his life writing his life, mythologizing his Kingston, his Wolfe Island, his family's deep Ontario roots. To understand the full scope of our heritage, we need volumes like *The Essential Tom Marshall*. Marshall was an important part of the literary ecology of his time and place, in Kingston, Ontario: a place where editor David Helwig spent significant parts of his career and where co-editor Michael Ondaatje was a graduate student in the 1960s. Kingston was also where, in the mid-1960s, Marshall helped *Quarry Magazine* branch out to include Quarry Press, which was not simply an influential small press, but a leading example, at the cusp of the explosion of regional publishing activity during the late 1960s and early 1970s. And to wannabe undergraduate poets like myself, at Queen's in the late 1980s, Marshall, looking ruffled and aloof, fit the ideal of what poets were like: wholly reserved and totally serious. And there is ample proof in this volume as to why we took Marshall seriously. Take for example "Astrology" from 1969, in which he writes the hard attitude of the poet: "I care more about this / arrangement of words than about you." We responded to this man who needed to write, to find some kind of arrangement to help make sense of the whole. And it was Kingston, distilled to its most elemental, that became the locus of arrangement—particularly his touchstone, Macdonald Park. Appropriately, the volume opens with, "The park is like a wood," transforming the urban space into a wild, sensual, even carnal place at the heart of the city. It is a tender place where "the / early moon bends, beckoning / our lips and bodies back." And it is a place of "old men, perverts of several kinds, / grotesque women with floppy hats and sunglasses...." It is this quality of honesty, this willingness to spot the lovely and the ugly under the same canopy of trees that is Marshall's greatest achievement as a poet. It is a quality that lingers after reading his memorial poem, "Words for HSKM (1910–1991)," where he writes, "Mother, in your darkness and light / I grew. Your love of music and reading. Your hatred of space and freedom." It is an honesty and a commitment to his path that allows him to conclude the same poem, devastatingly, "Human mysteries persist, deepen. / There is no resolution. Only pain / familiar and defining, strengthening." This is a commitment we writers need to pay attention to, and for which we owe an enduring debt of gratitude that can be best paid by reading this work.

Emily McGiffin

**Anne Michaels. *Correspondences*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2013.**

With its plain and elegant construction that evades the orientating features of title, spine and back copy, *Correspondences*, Anne Michaels' beautifully unconventional book-length poem, invites the reader into a pleated Möbius strip. "Forgive me, for beginning / at the end," she writes in the midst of a poignant and evocative elegy whose very form echoes the continuous cycle of birth, life, and mourning. The book-with-a-twist comes enveloped in a handsome grey sleeve. Sliding it off, one enters a realm of poetic text spliced with Bernice Eisenstein's portraiture. The design allows the book to be read from end to end and back again in a continuous loop. One side of the single accordion page is an alternating sequence of words and images, portraits of a cast of characters set alongside excerpts of their writings. Eisenstein's images are simple, painted in memory's muted shades, the palette tinged with melancholy. The other side bears Michaels' own long poem. This poem, a memorial to her late father, Isiah Michaels, is set within a much larger territory of loss. At either end, the book opens to flyleaves featuring its dramatic personae, brief biographies of Eisenstein's subjects that converge around the central figures of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs at one end and Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam on the other. The names are familiar: Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka. These are Isaiah Michaels' contemporaries, the European intelligentsia uprooted and scattered by the havoc of the Second World War. The collected sketches of their ordeals gesture toward a loss of unimaginable proportions—not only of so many lives, but of a future that might have been. Cubist painter Albert Gleizes wrote of the Great War: "The past is finished... the present conflict throws into anarchy all the intellectual paths of the prewar period." Michaels attends to the turmoil, disruption and violence of the years that followed, when not even the landscape itself was firm. "Names were changed / *ronger, grincer* / so valleys and mountains / would not be stained"—an act that speaks to the power of words to carry and convey memories. Yet steadfastness, love's strong and stubborn abiding, is as strong a theme in this book as are upheaval and loss. Again and again, the poem circles back to remembrance, revealing "the mourner / who accompanies the body, so the soul is never, / not for a single moment, alone." There is forgetting

here, too, as Isaiah's own memory dims, becoming "the buried book," his mind settling into "the repetition of the plough horse, / majestic head bent to earth, / turning the same direction / at the end of each row." This image, like so many others in the book, reverberates through time, portraying her father's dotage as well as past injustices, humanity struggling forward under their weight. If "a conversation," as Michaels suggests, "can become the third side of the page," *Correspondences* is a book of many pages, many conversations. Within them, loved and remembered spirits step forward to "smell their favourite dish," "hear his own language / her own song, mother and father / tongue," the third sides becoming a warm tribute to their lives.

Rhonda Batchelor

### **Leon Rooke. *The April Poems*. Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2013.**

In *The April Poems*, Leon Rooke has found an elegiac touchstone to honour a remarkable muse.<sup>1</sup> A marriage, particularly a long and happy one, can assume its own identity. It settles in with the couple and becomes, over time, the third setting at the breakfast table, the invested voyeur in the bedroom, the voice of reason, the *raison d'être*. Marriage is in on the private jokes, personal quirks, the spirited quarrels, the daily grind. Once solidified, it tends to stick around, a stubborn guest, even when a spouse dies. But another less benign entity—grief—can steal in, threatening to swallow the space left at the table, in the bed, in the heart. When the bereaved partner is a poet who has lost a muse, the foundation of a loving marriage can bolster the poet against grief's intrusion, and—once a muse, always a muse—can help to fill that vacant space so there is no need for the rare and beautiful arrangement to end. In fifty poems and prose poems, from a variety of perspectives and voices, a portrait of a wondrous woman named April emerges. The book opens with words of advice from her father, who seems to be able to see well into April's future: "...That all is not roger / in this world should not steer you / into further indiscretion or onto the fields / of abstraction. Stay your focus..." ("1. April's Father"). April's husband, Sam, is, at any given moment, fascinated, enraptured,

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<sup>1</sup> Rooke's spouse Constance Rooke, the writer, academic, and advocate for writers, passed away in October 2008.

mystified, and thwarted by his puzzling, dazzling love. Her beauty draws many admirers while her superior intellect confounds even more. “She was an intellectual colossus, big, big, and bigger. Call her up, you / got busy signals, you got guys from Nantucket, Singapore, / the Darwinian Isles” (“3. April Defined”). Feared and desired by everyone from airport security agents to ex-lovers, from Henry James to the tow-truck guy, April is a force. Rooke’s imaginative style, with touches of magic realism—“I was out raking leaves when this flying woman dropped down / through swirly clouds”—and the patently surreal—“Every time I get in the elevator to visit my boyfriend / these geese walk in and punch every button except mine”—lends itself to the near impossibility of any “straight” approach to such a complex character. One of the most touching aspects of this collection is that the poems in April’s voice seem altogether quieter, almost wistful, and are distinct from the viewpoints of those (including Sam) who would mythologize her, or whose grandiose descriptions belie the depth of her soul. Her vulnerability, ultimately more endearing than any exploit, is revealed. “Here comes a fleet of angels, such lovely feet, / Will they—(what’s the word?)—k-k-k-kiss me?” (“46. April Contemplates God”). Even seen through multiple viewpoints, it’s clear that April is more than the sum of these parts, as is this collage-like collection. Like that long and happy marriage, April is here to stay.

## ONLINE REVIEWS

### Books reviewed online at [arcpoetry.ca](http://arcpoetry.ca) between January and April 2014.

- Abel, Jordan. *The Place of Scraps*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013. A Response to Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps* by Margaret Christakos, February 27, 2014.
- Bachinsky, Elizabeth. *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*. Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2013. Reviewed by Jennifer Delisle, April 9, 2014.
- Dawson, Kanina. *Masham Means Evening*. Regina: Coteau Books, 2013. Reviewed by Christopher Doda, March 20, 2014.
- Donaldson, Jeffery. *Slack Action*. Erin, ON: The Porcupine's Quill, 2013. Reviewed by Jim Johnstone, April 17, 2014.
- Elza, Daniela. *milk tooth bane bone*. Lantzville, BC: Leaf Press, 2013. Reviewed by Al Rempel, March 6, 2014.
- Fretwell, Katerina. *Class Acts*. Toronto: Inanna, 2013. Reviewed by Heather Spears, January 22, 2014.
- Jernigan, Amanda. *All the Daylight Hours*. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2013. Reviewed by Jenny Haysom, March 26, 2014.
- Karasik, Daniel. *Hungry*. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2013. Reviewed by Emily Davidson, March 13, 2014.
- Kasper, Vancy. *Rebel Women*. Toronto: Inanna, 2013. Reviewed by Katerina Fretwell, January 30, 2014.
- Lebowitz, Rachel. *Cottonopolis*. Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2013. Reviewed by Emily McGiffin, January 2, 2014.
- McGrath, Carmelita. *Escape Velocity*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2013. Reviewed by Zachariah Wells, February 6, 2014.
- MillAr, Jay. *Timely Irreverence*. Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2013. Reviewed by rob mcLennan, January 9, 2014.
- O'Meara, David. *A Pretty Sight*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2013. Reviewed by Zachariah Wells, January 16, 2014.
- Scobie, Stephen. *At the limit of breath: Poems on the films of Jean-Luc Godard*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2013. Reviewed by Kimmy Beach, February 13, 2014.
- Severson-Baker, Juleta. *Incarnate*. Calgary: Frontenac House, 2013. Reviewed by Harold Rhenisch, April 2, 2014.

Shin, Ann. *The Family China*. London, ON: Brick Books, 2013. Reviewed by Phoebe Wang, April 24, 2014.

Tostevin, Lola Lemire. *Singed Wings*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013. Reviewed by rob mclennan, February 20, 2014.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Sara Backer, author of the novel *American Fuji*, has recently placed poems in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *PANK*, *Gargoyle*, and *Crab Creek Review*. She lives in New England.

● **John Wall Barger's** poems have been included in both of The Montreal Prize *Global Poetry Anthologies*. His second collection, *Hummingbird*, was a finalist for the 2013 Raymond Souster Award.

● **Brian Bartlett** of Halifax has published seven collections and three chapbooks of poems. His first book of prose, *Ringling Here & There: A Nature Calendar*, was published this spring by Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

● **Gary Barwin** is a writer, musician, multimedia artist, and educator and the author of 17 books and numerous other publications. His latest is *Moon Baboon Canoe*. He lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

● **Rhonda Batchelor's** books include *Bearings*, *Interpreting Silence*, *Weather Report*, *Roll from me like water*, and the novel *She Loves You*. She's the assistant editor of *The Malahat Review*.

● **bill bissett** born on lunaria sum 400 yeers ago approximatelee in lunarian time was sent 2 erth on th first chlldrns shuttul from th at that time troubuld planet landed in halifax moovd 2 vancouver at 17 moovd 2 london ont wher i was part uv luddites altrnativ rock band thn toronto wher ium poet in residens at workman arts n recording with pete dako wanting always 2 xploor words n sounds n image in th writing n th painting how thos ar intrtwind th pickshur image n th lettr showing paintings at th secret handshake art galleree toronto

● **Roo Borson's** most recent book is *Rain; road; an open boat*, published in 2012 by McClelland & Stewart. She also writes, with Kim Maltman, under the pen name Baziju.

● **Kristina Bresnen** is working on her first collection of poems, provisionally titled, *Pascal's Fire*. She is from Montreal and now lives in Seattle.

● **Catherine Brunet** teaches high school French and History in the Upper Ottawa Valley. Her poetry and short stories have been published in several literary journals.

● **Chad Campbell** was a finalist for the 2013 *Malahat* Long Poem Prize and his poetry has appeared in *Maisonneuve*. His first book is forthcoming from Signal Editions.

● **Daniel Cowper's** poetry has appeared in various publications, including *Prairie Fire*, *CV2*, the *Literary Review of Canada*, and *Vallum*. He's currently engrossed in writing a fairy tale.

● **Robert Currie** served two terms as Saskatchewan's Poet Laureate (2007 to 2010). In 2009 he received the Saskatchewan Lieutenant Governor's Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts.

● **Antony Di Nardo** is the author of *Soul on Standby* and *Alien, Correspondent*. A new collection, *Roaming Charges*, is forthcoming from Brick Books in 2015. He lives in Sutton, Quebec and Beirut, Lebanon where he teaches at International College.

● **Katherin Edwards** has recently completed her MFA from UBC. When not writing or gardening she works as a floral designer.

● **David Eso's** literary

work unites Canada's literary heritage with the impending renaissance. He currently studies Robert Kroetsch's correspondence at the University of Calgary, as a student of Aritha van Herk. ● **Jesse Patrick Ferguson** is a Canadian poet and musician. His next collection of poetry is forthcoming with Buckrider Books, the new imprint of Wolsak and Wynn, in fall 2014. ● **JM Francheteau** is a rural transplant based in Ottawa. Recent poems have appeared in *CV2*, *ottawater* and the chapbook *A pack of lies* (Dog Bites Cameron, 2013). He blogs at [jmfrancheteau.wordpress.com](http://jmfrancheteau.wordpress.com). ● **Petra Halkes** is a painter, writer and curator in Ottawa where she exhibits regularly, most recently at Cube Gallery. She frequently writes for magazines such as *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art* and *C-Magazine*, has curated exhibitions in public institutions and has, since 2006, organized discussion groups and exhibitions for Ottawa artists in her home. <http://ressearchi-nottawa.wordpress.com> ● **Nancy Holmes** has published five collections of poetry, most recently *The Flicker Tree: Okanagan Poems* from Ronsdale Press. She has also edited *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems*. She teaches creative writing at The University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus and lives in Kelowna, BC. ● **Stevie Howell** is an editor, writer, and psychology student living in Toronto. Her first book of poetry, called ^^^^^ ^^^^^ ^^^^^ is forthcoming from Goose Lane in fall 2014. ● **Amanda Jernigan** is the author of *Groundwork* (Biblioasis, 2011), *All the Daylight Hours* (Cormorant, 2013), and, most recently, a monograph on the poetry of Peter Sanger (Frog Hollow, 2014). ● **Andrew Johnson** is a Hamilton-based writer and editor. ● Currently studying for his Masters of English, **Matt Jones** traveled extensively with the military. Matt was a feature reader at VERSeFest; he currently works as an editor of *In/Words Magazine*. ● **Patricia Keeney** is the author of nine books of poetry and a picaresque novel. Her works have been translated into many languages including Hindi and Chinese. An award-winning theatre and literary critic, she publishes in Canadian and international journals. She is a professor of English and Creative Writing at York University in Toronto. ● **Z. Rafi Khan**, born Lahore, Pakistan, has previously been published in *Vallum Contemporary Poetics*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Antigoneish Review* and *Poetry is Dead*. From 2008–2013 she worked at Canada's largest daily, the *Toronto Star*. ● **Mark Lavorato's** third novel, *Serafim & Claire*, is published by House of Anansi. His debut collection, *Wayworn Wooden Floors* (Porcupine's Quill, 2012), was a finalist for the Raymond Souster Award. ● **Michael Lithgow's** first collection of poetry, *Waking in the Tree House*, was published in 2012, by Cormorant Books. He is currently a Post-doctorate Research Fellow at McGill University and lives in Gatineau, QC. ● **M. Travis Lane**,

B.A. Vassar, M.A., PhD, Cornell, has published 14 collections of poetry, the most recent: *The Book of Widows* (Frog Hollow Press, 2010), *The All Nighther's Radio* (Guernica Editions, 2010), and *Ash Steps* (Cormorant Books, 2012). She has won numerous honours, among them the Pat Lowther Memorial Award, the Banff Centre Bliss Carman Award, the Atlantic Poetry Prize, and the Alden Nowlan Prize for Literary Excellence. Canadian by choice, she has lived in Fredericton, New Brunswick since 1960. ● **Esther Mazakian** is a poet living in Toronto. Her book, *All The Lifters*, was shortlisted for a ReLit Award in 2007 and last year she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. ● **Emily McGiffin's** second collection of poetry, *Pteropod*, is forthcoming from Pedlar Press this fall. She currently lives in Toronto. ● **Carmelita McGrath** is a writer, editor and communications freelancer. She has published ten works of poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction and children's literature. Her latest poetry collection, *Escape Velocity* (icehouse poetry/Goose Lane Editions, 2013) was a finalist for the BMO Winterset Award. ● **Steve McOrmond** has published three books of poetry, most recently *The Good News about Armageddon* (Brick Books, 2010). He lives in Toronto. For more information, visit [www.stevemcormond.com](http://www.stevemcormond.com). ● **Shane Neilson** is a poet from New Brunswick. He's releasing a new chapbook from Alfred Gustav Press in 2014 about Milton Acorn. bill bisset and Acorn once collaborated on "I want to tell you love," a lost text that has recently been found. Perhaps it will see the light of day soon. ● **Sarah Neville** is a book historian and professor of English literature at West Virginia University. She is an Assistant Editor of the *New Oxford Shakespeare* and a General Textual Editor of the *Digital Renaissance Editions*. Her nonfiction writing and reviews have appeared in *CNQ*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Maisonneuve*, and *In Media Res*. She tweets @EffectDefective. ● **Sandra Ridley** is the author of three books of poetry: *Fallout* (Hagios Press), *Post-Apothecary* (Pedlar Press), and most recently, *The Counting House* (BookThug) which was chosen as one of the top five poetry books of 2013 in *Quill & Quire's* 2013 Readers' Poll. ● **Bren Simmers** is the author of *Night Gears* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2010). She is currently working on a book about the Hastings-Sunrise neighbourhood in East Vancouver. ● **Jennifer Still** is the winner of the 2012 Banff Centre Bliss Carman Poetry Award and the 2012 John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer. Her second collection of poems, *Girlwood* (Brick Books, 2011), was nominated for the 2012 Aqua Books Lansdowne Prize for Poetry. Jennifer will serve as the 2015 University of Winnipeg Carol Shields Writer-in-Residence and has been faculty for the Banff Centre of the Arts Wired Writing Studio. She lives in Winnipeg where she is a poetry editor for the literary journal *CV2*. ● **Anne Marie Todkill's** poetry has

appeared in *CV2*, *The Malahat Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *Prairie Fire* (forthcoming), and *The Winnipeg Review*. Her poem "Wash Day" was *Arc's* Poem of the Year in 2011.

- Vivian Vavassis is a Montréal ex-pat living in Ottawa. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Arc*, *ottawater*, *PFYC*, *Montage*, *A Crystal through which Love Passes*, and *Studies in Canadian Literature*. Once upon a time, she co-founded a little 'zine called *incunabula*.
- Phoebe Wang is a graduate of University of Toronto's M.A. in Creative Writing program, and her chapbook, *Occasional Emergencies*, appeared last fall with Odourless Press. More of her work can be found at [www.alittleprint.com](http://www.alittleprint.com).
- Patrick Warner has published four collections of poetry and one novel. He lives in St. John's, Newfoundland with four cats and three women.
- Tom Wayman's most recent poetry collections are *Dirty Snow* (2012), *Winter's Skin* (2013), and a selected poems *The Order in Which We Do Things* from Wilfrid Laurier University Press (2014).
- Darryl Whetter is the author of three books of fiction and *Origins: Poems*. He is currently at work on a book of smut poems and a third novel. [www.darrylwhetter.com](http://www.darrylwhetter.com)
- Yoko's Dogs (Jan Conn, Mary di Michele, Susan Gillis and Jane Munro) is a collaborative group of four Canadian poets. Their first book, *Whisk*, was published by Pedlar Press (2013). Please visit their website [www.yokosdogs.com](http://www.yokosdogs.com).
- Changming Yuan, a seven-time Pushcart nominee, grew up in rural China but currently tutors in Vancouver, where he co-edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan. Yuan holds a PhD in English and has had poetry appear in *Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *London Magazine*, *Threepenny Review* and 800 other places worldwide.
- Jennifer Zilm lives in East Vancouver where she works in libraries and social housing. She is the author of the chapbook *The Whole and Broken Yellows*. Her unpublished manuscript, *Waiting Room*, was recently shortlisted for the Robert Kroetsch Award.

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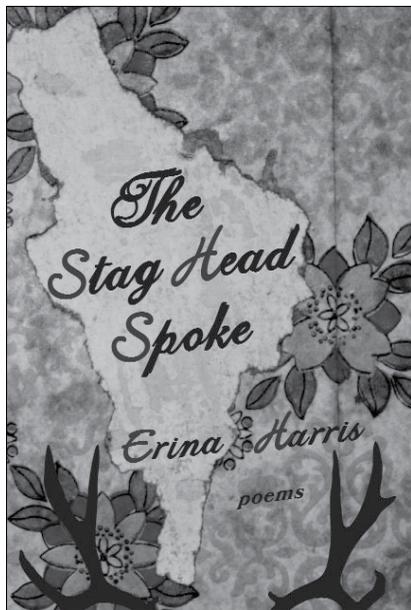
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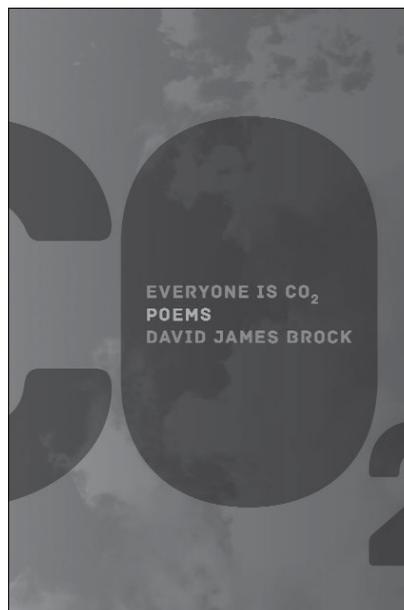


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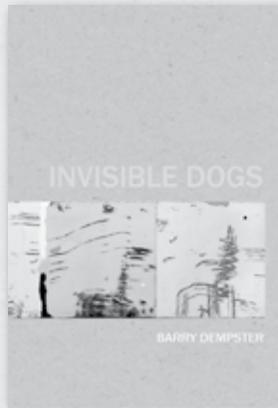
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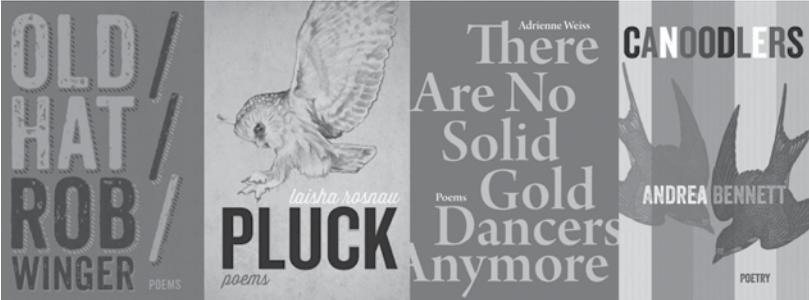
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