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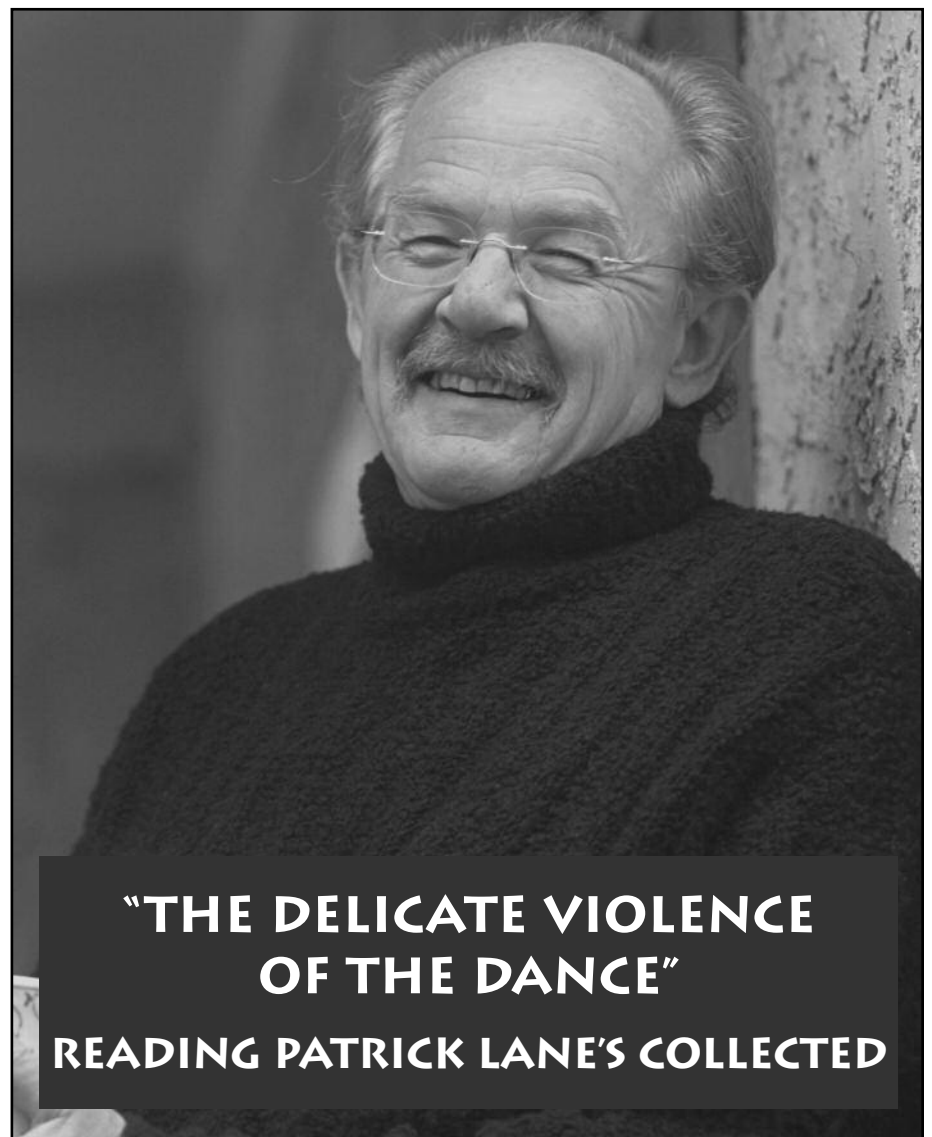
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## A SPRING READING OF WRITERS & BOOKS



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OUT THE BIRTH OF A PSYCHEDELIC CULTURE  
BY RAM DASS & RALPH METZNER**

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EMILY DICKINSON AND HER FAMILY'S FEUDS  
REVIEWED BY JAMES EDWARD REID**

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**HALF-BLOOD BLUES  
BY ESI EDUGYAN  
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**EDEN ROBINSON & TRADITION  
IN *THE SASQUATCH AT HOME***

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# PRRB

## Pacific Rim Review of Books

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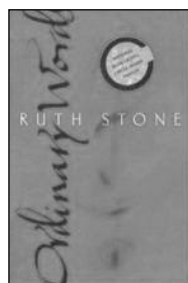
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This issue of the  
*Pacific Rim Review of Books*  
is dedicated to the memory of  
Ruth Stone (1915-2011).  
Poet, author, and teacher.  
She will be missed.



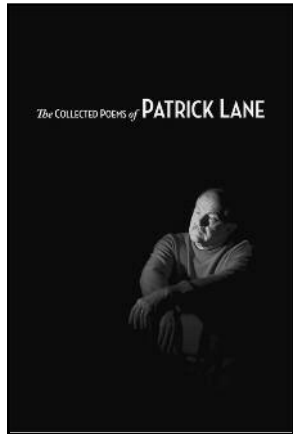
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To: New and  
Selected Poems  
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Press

# THE DELICATE VIOLENCE OF THE DANCE

Hilary Turner



*The Collected Poems of Patrick Lane*

Russell Morton Brown and Donna Bennett, eds. Harbour Publishing, 2011.

In his 2004 memoir, *There is a Season*, Patrick Lane explored the proposition that “the power the body has to go willingly toward pain is something no one understands” (148). The present volume, which contains five decades’ worth of poems by Lane, and which runs to well over five hundred pages, stands in relation to the former work much as physiology does to anatomy. *The Collected Poems*, in other words, roundly presents the testimony, the exhibits, the *corpora delicti* of the troubling human attraction to the very things that hurt us. Though Lane’s long career has been complex and multifaceted, and though we cannot now fail to see the trajectory of his poetic development and maturation, this remains the subject towards which he has gravitated most often, and has rendered in the most various of voices, keys, and dimensions. It has been a lifelong preoccupation. Lane recalls from boyhood his mother’s retrospective bafflement at the pain her father inflicted: “can you *imagine?* she’d say”—and he remarks: “I’ve spent my life inside her question” (*There is a Season* 61).

The pain that results from a loss of innocence has been the preoccupation of Romantic poets from Blake to Dylan Thomas. Many of Lane’s poems too depict a loss of innocence, but where the Romantic mind contrives an eventual “strength in what remains behind,” he rejects the facility of any consolation born of thought. Rather, Lane insists that memory preserves both the original loss and its afterimage in the mind’s desperate effort to regain its former state: for this reason, he says, “thinking has never been a stay against the dark” (*There is a Season* 66). Even such an early poem as “Surcease,” in which the speaker drunkenly mourns for “the sudden / years, pits I’ve placed my dead in,” refuses point blank the balm of introspection:

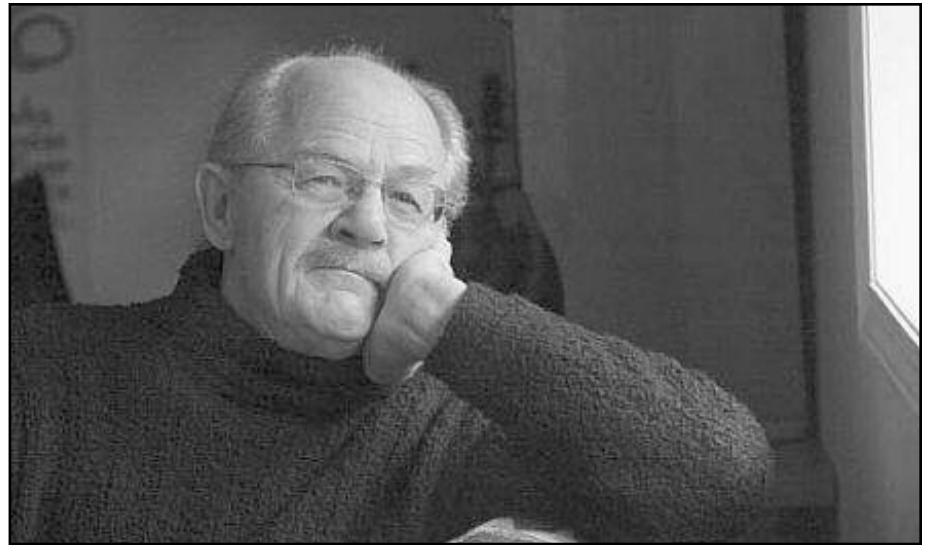
*I want  
to ride with your body and celebrate  
the darkness and my pain.  
Forget the past.  
Play with me gently, woman,  
I’m made of glass* (64).

Similarly, the speaker of “At the Edge of the Jungle,” who has watched a horse beaten to its knees and a rooster whose beak has been torn out by children, concedes: “the garden I dreamed does not exist,” and thus acknowledges that there is nothing to be gained by attempting to recover lost innocence at some higher level of contemplation:

*What reality there is resides  
in the child who holds the string  
and does not see  
the bird as it beats its blunt head  
again and again into the earth.* (115)

Readers who are attuned to the conventions of Romanticism may find this denial of transcendence abrupt, even self-flagellating. Yet remaining stubbornly upon the plane of physical perception is probably Lane’s most characteristic feature: as George Woodcock pointed out more than twenty years ago, he “never offers us an abstract thought... the act of abstraction is not part of the role the poet accepts” (21).

This is not to say that we may lock eyes with pain indefinitely. Certain more visceral kinds of pain seem to compel an aversion of the gaze, however brief, however futile. In poems where animals or humans are subjected to calculated cruelty, and more especially in poems where the speaker feels an intimacy or complicity with oppressor, Lane habitually engages in a structural change of direction. He is well aware of this manoeuvre—more than merely self-protective, it is something of an artistic signature. In his epigraph to the *Collected Poems*, verses entitled “Poets, Talking,” Lane refers to the “bat and the consequent moth / I create to keep my world whole a little longer.” In this raw symbiosis, there is a necessary elusiveness, of course:



Patrick Lane

*I watch the delicate violence of the dance,  
the bat, and the moth too, veering.* (21)

The veering away from assured destruction, or from a pain that cannot be confronted (not now, not yet) becomes, in the mature poems, a kind of super-caesura, the equivalent of a rhetorical blink, wince, grimace, recoil, or reset. It is very effective.

To take an initial simple example from a complex poem, “Pale Light” recounts at one point the torments that magpies maliciously inflict upon an immature gopher, surprised outside his burrow. Able neither to escape nor dive homeward, the small creature is stunned, and the more knowing speaker veers away from the destruction:

*Such play was theirs. I couldn’t stay to watch the death and I didn’t drive the  
birds away. Surely I am like that tidings of magpies. I won’t let go what I hold.  
I play with it, my life a coin in a magician’s hands. It seems at times I play with  
death.”* (485)

The same poem then hurtles on towards a recollection of a human death, that of the speaker’s mother. Because her image now seems irretrievable, he laments: “Why can’t I see her? I swear I’ll kill my sight” (487). Again, there is a veering away, a conspicuous failure to confront reality—and then a suicide attempt: “I sank a dozen times and each time my body rose again to the surface, refusing to let go of its hold on things” (488). In the end the speaker accepts that such evasions are pointless. To attack the imperfections of memory is to lose forever all that remains of the priceless thing itself:

*You died and I have nothing here but words. I make of them a memory to you  
who sang to me and sing to me still, your voice as bright as the sharp points of  
the moon before it’s gone, that blade of light that holds the heavens, crescent-  
shaped, like two arms holding on to what it knows.”* (490)

The worst pain of all—and on this subject Lane speaks from experience, in the voice of the former addict—is the recognition that “we have seen the enemy, and it is us.” Many poems, among them Lane’s most powerful, attest to this sly and humiliating identification with the thing that is feared and despised. To veer away in the presence of such knowledge is most forgivable, and requires the greatest poetic agility. In Lane’s work, this kind of on-again-off-again confrontation is often associated with dead animals and dismembered bodies, both human and animal. In “The Day of the Dead Horse,” a man botches the job of cutting a dead horse so that the corpse does not explode under the pressure of what is within. He is, at the same time, saving what can be saved of the flesh—to feed the hungry. The physical body, both dangerous and valuable, is the counterpart to what the speaker feels about himself, and the poem pursues this analogy, but circuitously, seeing it and then glancing away:

*Remember, I was dry drunk. It’s the kind of drunk you have*

that waits till you drink again, the kind that eats you,  
the skin flowering with seeds that crawl like barley  
under your skin...

So I cut and cut again, stupid,  
looking for blood and not finding it, cutting through  
the throat and down into the chest... (363).

And here it is, the veering away, a self-deprecating shake of the head that both admits and denies full entry to the fearful thing:

It was just a horse on the damned road  
killed by a truck. It was a road that went nowhere,  
not Damascus, not Ithaca, not anywhere.  
South as far as Kamloops, north to Jasper or Prince George.

Nevertheless, having pinpointed the experience geographically, having measured it against grander revelations, the speaker turns back again to see it for what it is, to give it its due:

I lay there wishing I might have saved more,  
that the knife could have healed the horse enough  
to make of his body for all our lives a meal  
that might have lasted longer than the one  
we were to eat. (364)

Perhaps the most memorable of such poems of self-recognition is "What My Father Told Me," a climactic piece in the volume, and biographically important as well, given the long absence of Lane's father during the war years, and the difficulty of knowing the man when he returned. At long last, father and son have a conversation—or perhaps a sparring match—in which the flashpoint is a sexual encounter the father recounts from his participation in the liberation of Holland:

And him looking slyly up at me, a look that was complicit,  
that told me we were somehow  
in the story together, that I was his son, a man now  
though I was barely twenty-two, married, three children,  
and I knew they had raped her, the German, that woman,

and my father seeing me staring at him,  
angry, saying, No, and I knew  
when his eyes slipped away, that he had lied." (503)

Moments like these are, for Lane, part of the poet's necessary vision—to see what others might willfully ignore, to shun self-deception. He draws attention to this aspect of his art self-consciously and repeatedly: "The gift / I have been given is to see what's left behind" ("Apples in the Rain"); "That's the hard part, knowing the darkness is there /and singing anyway" ("False Dawn"); "Sometimes a poem is all we can know, part of me struggling to escape/ the violence of simple things" ("Old Storms"); "I feel sometimes my heart in its cage / not screaming, just going on steady, / one beat and one beat going on" ("The Truth"). In this stance as poet-as-witness, Lane resembles Neruda, a poet he much admired.

Although this collection will be gratefully welcomed by readers and scholars who desire to see "all the poems that Lane wants to preserve" (23) together in one place, I am as unconvinced as the editors of this collection that it is time to deliver a full accounting of his career. Lane has come back from the grave (or near it) more than once; and one suspects he has plenty more to say. I note, for instance, that his productivity continues apace, with fully one third of this text taken up by poems written since 2000.) Thus, editors Brown and Bennett have provided ample biographical and contextual information, in both an interpretative introduction and in a set of endnotes; and, while giving Lane his due as having played "a distinctive role" in Canadian poetry, one that has been "independent of schools and movements" (23), they do not aspire to be defini-



Patrick Lane in his garden

(continued on page 15)

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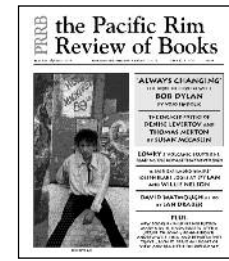
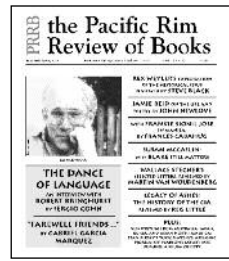
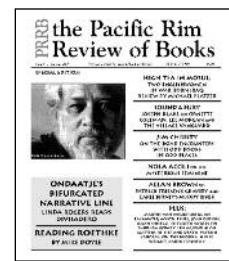
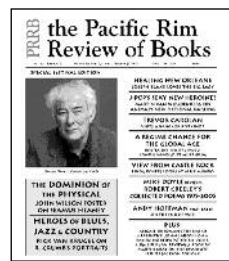
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# "A MAGNIFICENT FLOWERING"

## THE POETRY OF GJERTRUD SCHNACKENBERG

Doug Beardsley

It was at the Elliott Bay Bookstore in Seattle in the mid-1980s where I first set eyes on the poetry of Gjertrud Schnackenberg. Several friends had journeyed there to attend a weekend retreat conducted by Robert Bly. The city was a virtual paradise for book lovers in those days; one felt like some early 15<sup>th</sup> century bibliomaniac traipsing from bookstore to bookstore to see what he could find. But no bookstore offered an enormous downstairs café and the wealth of books that Elliott Bay conjured up. Several tables of 'Recent Arrivals' were carefully positioned throughout the store and on the large literary table I chanced upon *The Lamplit Answer*, Schnackenberg's second book of poems published in 1985 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

I was attracted by the other-worldly, starry night of the soul quality of the cover painting of "The Wedding of the Deer" and by the poet's unusual name – the only other Schnackenberg I had ever encountered was the noted 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian, Rudolf Schnackenberg, when I was doing my theological studies.

Back in the hotel room I read through *The Lamplit Answer*, dazzled by the poet's prodigious technique, her iambic pentameter line, her use of rhyme, and her ability to convey deeply-felt emotion within a formalistic approach that felt natural – never forced or strained in any way.

As I made my way toward the fourth section I came upon a poem in six-part sonata form and "Darwin in 1881," a five-page narrative detailed evocation of the English natural historian and geologist, "The seeds gathering on his trouser legs/ Are archipelagos, like nests he sees/ Shadowed in branching, ramifying trees,/ Each with unique expression in its eggs." I was taken with her daring repetition of even the most obvious word – four times in three lines: "Different islands conjure/ Different beings; different beings call/ From different isles..." And then there are the last eight lines that illustrate her magnificent, formal, imaginative invention:

*He lies down on the quilt.  
He lies down like a fabulous-headed  
Fossil in a vanished riverbed,  
In ocean drifts, in canyon floors, in silt,  
In lime, in deepening blue ice.  
In cliffs obscured as clouds gather and float;  
He lies down in his boots and overcoat,  
And shuts his eyes.*

Her technique is so masterful here the reader barely notices the repetition of "in" eight times in five lines.

The final grouping consists of three of the greatest poems Schnackenberg has penned. Here she achieves a rare and genuine thing: a poetry of belief in which both poetry and belief are perfectly fused in a unity of expression, not consciously biblical, that contains a kind of liturgical authority coupled with the resonance of faith.

"The Heavenly Feast" is an elegy dedicated to Simone Weil, who starved herself to death in a sanitarium in England in 1943. Weil refused to eat more than what was available to her comrades in the French Resistance behind the lines and in the camps: ("Father, I cannot stand/ To think of them and eat./ Send it to them, it is theirs"). It is a holocaust poem that cuts straight to the human heart.

"Advent Calendar" is based upon a German Lutheran tradition from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The poem is a childhood celebration of "Open paper scenes where doors/ Open into scenes," (usually 24), in anticipation of Christmas, a counting down of the days. One door is opened daily to reveal an image connected to the Nativity. Schnackenberg's poem is a distillation of her childhood experience, capturing the air of expectancy and openness that she has fought to maintain as an artist, despite the overwhelming pressures of free verse in our modern age. Its elegiac tone and meter brought to mind Auden's masterpiece, "Musee des Beaux Arts."

However excellent these poems are, the poet achieves the apogee of her art with "Supernatural Love," an elegy in Dantean triplets written in iambic pentameter. Here

the perspective is through the eyes of a four year old child doing cross-stitch in her father's study while he pores over his dictionary examining the roots of such words as "Carnation...Beloved...and Clove" in the context of Christian theological doctrine. The poem blossoms into the love felt by a four year old for her father, and is transformed from a lyric-narrative piece into a magnificent metaphysical meditation on the relation between human and divine love. Nadine Gordimer said of *The Lamplit Answer* that it contained "poems that move me in a way that I don't really think I have experienced since I first read Rilke at 16 or 17." In our Seattle hotel I visited the rooms of my friends at midnight to awaken them to the sheer joy of "Supernatural Love."



Gjertrud Schnackenberg

Later that memorable weekend, I discovered a copy of her first book, *Portraits and Elegies*, which also contained "Darwin in 1881". Published in 1982 by David Godine in Boston, the slim volume is dedicated to her mother and in memory of her father, who was Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran in Tacoma. She received an education in life from her father: a love of history, Christian charity, Van Gogh, Bach.

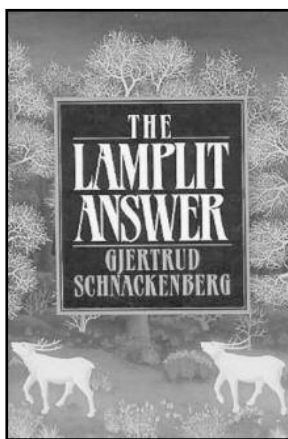
From him she inherits a sense of Debussy, Scarlatti, Brahms. From him she learns that "man is not a god." She is writing elegies and highly sophisticated portraits drawn from her ancestral Nordic origins. She also displays a delightful sense of humour:

*And Esmerrinna Knott  
Listened, then calmly bent to close  
Her hem up with a gathering thread  
So sinners left on earth could not  
Look up her dress as she arose.*

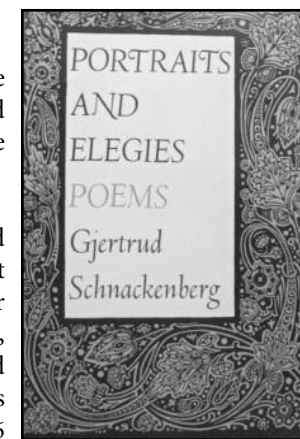
Religious images come naturally to her; they emanate from the life she has learned to live. Gjertrud Schnackenberg's first poems date from 1976. She is 23. She is writing way beyond her years.

The revival of traditional forms that came to be called "New Formalism" occurred about the time that Schnackenberg published her *Portraits and Elegies*. Her antecedents in American poetry would be Ransom, Tate, Hecht, Nemerov, Justice and, in particular, Richard Wilbur, whose memorable "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" has long been a favourite of mine. A 1996 anthology, *Rebel Angels*, edited by the Americans Mark Jarman and David Mason and including Dana Gioia, Paul Lake, Brad Leithhauser, Molly Peacock, Mary Jo Salter, and Marilyn Hacker, has been influential. But Schnackenberg remains a solo star ascending in the starry night.

*Supernatural Love*, published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux in 2000, is an exemplary book, a collected poems of her first three volumes, with two exceptions. One is the removal of the obvious repetition of "Darwin in 1881", which is in both *Portraits and Elegies* and *The Lamplit Answer*. The other is the omission of "Love Letter", a clever but bitter response to being jilted by a former lover. Clearly she heeded her own advice in the poem to the effect that "these quatrains should be burned." The poem is written in her style, but its tone is out of character with hers and with her work, and so



*The Lamplit Answer*



*Portraits and Elegies*

deserved to experience an editorial death. It is like one of those angry, rant letters that we feel needs to be written in the heat of the night but never mailed. Or, in this case, published. Rereading these poems for this review, I once more “flamed amazement,” filled with joy at the majesty of her art. No words are sufficient to encompass the brilliance of her trained brain, her philosophical intelligence, her unique attention to detail, and her psychological depth.

*A Gilded Lapse of Time* appeared in 1992. The title is taken from her long poem that opens the book. The volume is bookended by two extended poems: the opening, an account of a visit to Dante’s tomb in Ravenna (as a child, Schnackenberg copied out Dante in the original), and a latter piece, “A Monument in Utopia,” in honour of Osip Mandelstam, in which Schnackenberg imagines a Russia after the terror where,

...there will be time  
For uninterrupted study  
At the once desolate kingdom  
Of your desk, where you escape  
Everything and everybody,  
Where the only thing you surrender to  
Is a paper world....

Like every true believer, a confessional note of doubt is experienced from time to time: “My heart still struggles with, and still cannot/ Surrender up to you, Messiah.” Though, at an earlier stage she claims that she “cannot discern/ The guilt of our callings” she soon becomes “able to ascertain/ The guilt of poetry.” Schnackenberg refuses to shy away from the central contradiction that bedeviled Thomas Merton and many other religious poets who attempted to integrate these two incompatible callings or vocations, one given over to humility and obedience, the other devoted to the worship of the personal self and worldly fame. However, from time to time in this book, Schnackenberg’s experiential detail becomes too dense, her associations obscure.

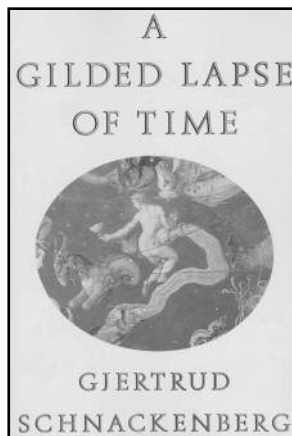
The fulcrum of this volume consists of seven lyrics called “Crux of Radiance” that extend her poetic exploration of the development of the image of God and His world-making juxtaposed against historical narrative, the work of the human and the divine, of secular and supernatural love, and a synthesis of the past as a fundamental part of the future that results in imaginative leaps that truly astonish the reader.

And yet, the seven narrative lyrics in “Crux of Radiance” do little to reinforce Schnackenberg as one of the finest poets writing today.

The notes to “Annunciation” serve to inform us of her sources: Josephus, Thucydides, Ecclesiastes, the Babylonian Talmud and Suetorius in that order, a further illustration of what a good grounding in theological and classical formation can achieve out of this “gravel of ritual objects.” “Soldier Asleep at the Tomb” is based upon a self-portrait of Piero della Francesca that fuses the past and present in a future dream of an utopian sensibility where history presses “...toward you/ From the other side.” The next poem describes this process in a different way:

...in other eras  
A shovelful of dust  
  
Now blowing into your eyes,  
As if a storm wind from Paradise  
  
Blew the rumors of this death  
So hard you must cover your eyes  
  
Before the museum case.

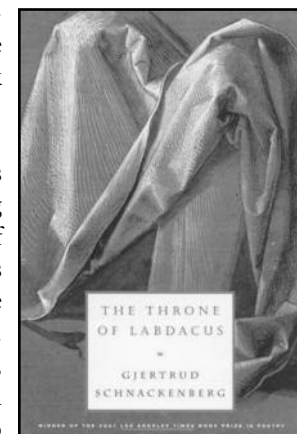
“The Resurrection” and “The Dream of Constantine” also are dedicated to Francesca. The latter is a study of “the void at the heart of power” in Rome at the time when “the Messiah’s men have entered/ Every room in the city.”



*A Gilded Lapse of Time*

The poem “Angels Grieving over the Dead Christ”, which receives its impetus from *Byzantium*, a book by Paul Hetherington, describes a state where death becomes “only a flash of worlds...” while “Christ Dead” is based upon Mantegna’s famous painting. Here, once more, one hears the echo of Auden’s great poem, with the use of the word “something” when, on the road to Calvary, “one man turns “to look back/ Over his shoulder several times,/ Struck by something he couldn’t say.”

And “Tiberius Learns of the Resurrection” tells of the legend recorded by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* and first recounted by Tertullian, one of the earliest Church Fathers, that the Roman Emperor “sought the Senate’s approval... to admit Jesus as one of the Roman gods. It is a fascinating and little-known myth, but Schnackenberg’s obsession with detail and her overwhelming number of historical images draws the air out of the poem and serves to suffocate the reader. This feeling occurs from time to time throughout *A Gilded Lapse of Time* and makes the book less successful than its predecessors.



*The Throne of Labdacus*

Published in 2000, *The Throne of Labdacus* (who was Oedipus’s grandfather) further compounds the falling away from her first two collections. Taking the myth of Oedipus beyond Sophocles’s play, Schnackenberg assigns Apollo — the god of poetry, music and healing — the responsibility of setting the playwright’s text to music. Schnackenberg’s meditative variations on this child, born in defiance of the oracle, maimed and left to die on a hillside is the result. Sometimes her ambition seems to know no bounds. But even a god (or goddess) can be consumed by riddles, obscure allusions, vaguely-defined images and heavenly questions. The reader comes to feel like Apollo did: that the task of understanding lies beyond us, the distance between the classical past and the modern present is too vast to be bridged. Packed full of allusions, her language dense, compressed, even at times involuted, the poem becomes a learned text for scholars rather than readers. The complexity of her work can be overwhelming, all lamplit without an answer. Like Apollo, I feel the reader becomes increasingly isolated from the language of the poem and becomes mentally exhausted. Or have I simply become yet another blind man, unable to see the text in front of me?

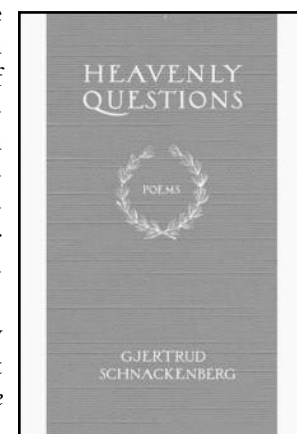
My initial reaction on hearing that Schnackenberg had won the 2011 International Giller Poetry Prize for *Heavenly Questions* was two-fold: My selfish ‘Damn it, now I’ll have to share her with the world,’ was immediately followed by ‘what took you so long?’

The book is a cantata of love, a lamentation, a requiem lullaby to her late husband, the philosopher Robert Nozick, her “magic stag...beloved body’s beauty lying still.” Schnackenberg has given us permission to listen in on her raw anger and deep compassion as she sings him to his final sleep.

A chain of six extended poems linked by rhyme-rich blank verse with densely-packed images and apparently effortless shifts from mellow line to mellow line, melodic stanza to melodic stanza, are conceived in an unfolding rhythm, an exultant music for her “magic stag.” Drawing on the writings of Qu Yuan’s unanswerable questions, the legends surrounding Hagia Sophia, and the “Mahabharata,” Schnackenberg combines Classical and Buddhist mythologies with a private despair of disbelief that results in compassion – indeed a nobility – of expressive power rarely seen in modern poetry. All her talented being is brought to the fore in these poems: her intellectual powers, her aesthetic sensibility, her technical innovation, her magisterial control, her compassion, her intense love for this man, all combine in a perfect marriage of form and fury that is a joy to behold.

However, I regret I feel the need to ask a heavenly question and, I hope, a fair one. Schnackenberg’s finest poems in *The Lamplit Answer* and *A Gilded Lapse of Time* come out of the Christian tradition she was brought up in by her beloved father. In a recent interview she spoke of “the way lines and stanzas come directly out of the religious music I have heard all my life, in the polyphonic harmonies of the great Lutheran composers, especially Bach – the ‘Fifth Evangelist’ – and Handel,” and goes on to say: “I love the *St Matthew Passion* more than I love any other work of art.”

Be that as it may, at a time of major crisis in her life, the six interrelated poems of *Heavenly Questions* contain little reference to the Christian life. While it is true that



*Heavenly Questions*



*Supernatural Love*

(continued on page 27)

# ROCK, ETC.

## Joseph Blake

*Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music*

Nona Aronowitz, Ed. Univ. Minnesota Press, 272 p. \$22.95;

*Rock and Roll Always Forgets*

Chuck Eddy, Duke Univ. Press, 352 p. \$24.95;

*Flying Saucers Rock 'N' Roll*

Jake Austen, Ed. Duke Univ. Press, 320 p. \$24.95

Historically, rock criticism has been a boys club. Lester Bangs, Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh and other founding fathers of the form were joined briefly by one, strong woman. Beginning in 1968, Ellen Willis wrote seven years worth of *Rock, Etc.* columns for the *New Yorker*. As a 26-year-old novice journalist, she had a readership of 475,000 when *Rolling Stone Magazine* had a circulation of only 75,000.

The *New Yorker* hired Willis on the strength of a long essay she wrote for the short-lived *Cheetah* magazine. It was five months in the making and thoroughly dissected Bob Dylan's career with a fan's passion and a political scientist's cultural analysis. Decades before other critics caught on to Dylan's multiple selves, Willis wrote, "Dylan has created a magic theatre in which the public gets lost willy-nilly. Yet he is more-or-less than the sum of his illusions."

That tour de force leads off this collection of Willis' rock writing that includes most of her *New Yorker* columns and other groundbreaking work she did for publications like the *Village Voice*. She wrote insightful reports from Woodstock and Newport, delved into the career of Janis Joplin with a powerfully feminist reading, and made typical concert reviews, liner notes and top ten lists read like the finest non-fiction prose.

She wrote passionately about personal favourites like Dylan, the Stones, Velvet Underground, Who and Creedence Clearwater for over a decade, but as Georgia Christgau writes in this book's introduction, "she cared less about rock than she did about movements."

Robert Christgau describes Willis as a "radical humanist, a liberationist" who believed "for any leftist agenda to succeed it has to be based on pleasure, on realizing desire."

This book's editor and Willis' daughter, Nona Willis Aronowitz describes her mother's groundbreaking, long-form new journalism showing "how effective a mass medium like rock and roll is for revealing human desires and both a national and cultural identity."

Willis died of lung cancer in 2006, but left rock writing long before that to concentrate on feminism and other political passions. The most recent piece is "The New Talking World War III Blues", a 2001 critique for *Salon.com*. She calls Dylan's *Love and Theft* "an album in which the individual and the general, the topical and the timeless merge with maniacal intensity" before concluding that it "merely feels like an invitation to critics to parade their musical erudition."

Ellen Willis was a wonder. Here's your chance to catch up with her powerful writing.

Chuck Eddy is another kettle of fish. His passions include an odd assortment of musicians like Def Leppard, Toby Keith and Debbie Gibson and he has praised them



Ellen Willis

in the *Village Voice*, *Cream*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Entertainment Weekly* for almost three decades. His writing in those magazines are collected here in chapters like "Race Mixing" where Eddy's rants range from minstrel musician Emmett Miller to contemporary minstrels like Eminem, and Vanilla Ice. Eddy's Pop Muzic chapter features insightful readings about Michael Jackson and the Pet Shop Boys, but all of his work is grounded in a unique philosophy that believes that "all thoughts about music are valid, but most thoughts about music are backwards."

As Chuck Klosterman writes about Eddy's writing in this book's introduction, "It felt like some brilliant weirdo was talking directly at me, yet with no regard whatsoever for how much I enjoyed the conversation."

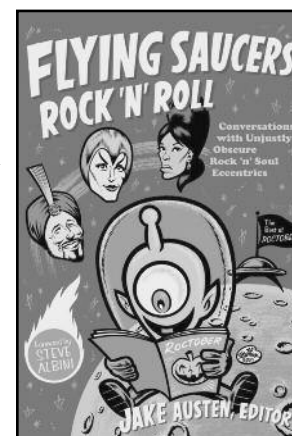
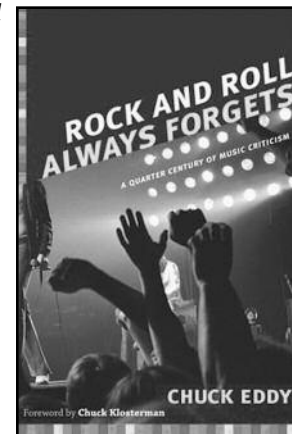
Eddy wrote in a 1984 *Village Voice* piece, "How the fuck can you revolutionize an industry which has accepted Pere Ubu and Essential Logic and the Angry Samoans and Teenage Jesus and The Birthday Party? You can't. Nothing scares anybody anymore, nothing surprises anybody anymore, there's no such thing as a real mindfuck because peoples' minds have already been fucked with over and over and over again. I never realized it until now, but the Sex Pistols were the worst thing that ever happened to rock 'n' roll—they demanded anarchy, and they got it. Anarchy means you can do whatever you want, and that's what everybody since the Sex Pistols has done. This has given us a surplus of interesting music, but it's also given us a situation in which you can't tell the artists from the poseurs."

That's typical Chuck Eddy.

Subtitled *Conversations with Unjustly Obscure Rock 'N' Soul Eccentrics*, *Flying Saucers Rock 'N' Roll* is a treasure trove of strange tales and musical genius from the margins of popular music. A series of in-depth interviews from the music magazine *Roctober*, this collection ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime, and it helps fill in some of the gaping holes in the history of the last century's pop music. In the words of *Roctober* editor Jake Austen "I truly dig sharing the stories, music and energy of some of the hippest square pegs in music history."

Interviews with jazz man Oscar Brown Jr., country outlaw David Allen Coe, rockabilly pioneer Billy Lee Riley and rock visionaries The Treniers are worth the price of this book. The stories beneath these tales of music business shenanigans and racial politics help explain these great artists' relative obscurity. Austen's interviews with two of his favourite bands, The Good Rats and The Fast, shed light on rock's underbelly. Interviews with Sam the Sham and Sugar Pie DeSantos are almost as insightful, while tales of Zolar X and Guy Choookorian are just plain silly fun... weird and wonderful fun, just like the best rock and roll.

Joseph Blake is Music Editor for PRRB.



Chuck Eddy

# DECODED

Joseph Blake



*Decoded*  
Jay-Z.  
Spiegel & Grau,  
2010, 308 pages, \$40 Cdn

Jay-Z is a rap mogul with his own record label and Rocawear fashion line. He is a part owner in an NBA team. His recently published autobiography, *Decoded* features a Warhol print on the cover, a photo collage coffee table book design and collaboration from journalist and filmmaker Dream Hampton. It also includes a street level view of the hustle and flow of urban life.

From the opening chapters describing Jay-Z's early days in Marcy House Public Housing in Brooklyn's rough Bed-Sty neighborhood, the rapper weaves a riveting, revealing narrative of his life as a drug hustler, entertainer, artist and entrepreneur.

"My life after childhood has two main stories: The story of the hustler and the story of the rapper," Jay-Z writes, "and the two overlap as much as they diverge."

There have been better books about dealing drugs, but few have better captured the tidal inevitability of the crack cocaine epidemic or the allure of the drug business for young black men. Jay-Z wraps his crack hustle narratives within his more interesting thoughts about rap as an art form and the way "the streets bled into and shaped hip-hop."

His comparison of rapping to the alpha dog competition and bombast of boxing and wrestling is insightful, and the book's photos of street-life, athletes, musicians, politicians heighten the power of the rapper's written words.

Jay-Z also frames his narratives with the lyrics to a couple of dozen of his rap songs. Each chapter delves into an aspect of his life and ties these things to his lyrics, which he footnotes with detailed, professorial analysis. Word by word, line by line analysis notes Jay-Z's use of metaphor, symbolism, wordplay, and alliteration as percussive instrument. His descriptions of allusions to music, culture, art, film, and urban politics in a rap song like "Public Service Announcement" draws a line between Jay-Z's work and the black power speeches of Malcolm X.

"The deeper we get into the sidewalk cracks and into the mind of the young hustler trying to find his fortune there," Jay-Z writes, "the closer we get to the ultimate human story, the story of struggle, which defines us all."

In another section describing his craft, Jay-Z reveals another part of his rap



Jay-Z

magic. "It's a trick I learned from the greatest MCs: a 'dumbed down' record actually forces you to be smarter, to balance art, craft, authenticity and accessibility."

Elsewhere he writes, "Great MCing is not just filling in the meter of the song with rhythm and melody. The other ways that poets make words work is giving them layers of meaning so you can use them in a way that straightforward storytelling fails to do." The rapper adds in a profane voice that is more recognizable from his records, "It leaves shit rattling in your head that won't make sense 'til the fifth or sixth time through. It challenges you."

In analyzing his rap artistry Jay-Z writes, "The flow isn't like time. It's like life. It's like a heartbeat or the way you breathe. It can jump, speed up, slow down, stop, or pound right through like a machine. If the beat is time, flow is what we do with that time, how we live through it. The beat is everywhere, but every life has to find its own flow."

Jay-Z's new autobiography is a vanity project from a billionaire street hustler who hasn't forgotten his roots. He's still full of rap's braggadocio, and his lyrics are tainted with misogyny and vulgarity. He makes a case for his words grounding in day-to-day reality and a more important case for their multi-dimensional artistry. That's the real message of *Decoded*. If you hate rap music, it might open your mind.

Joseph Blake is Music Editor for PRRB.

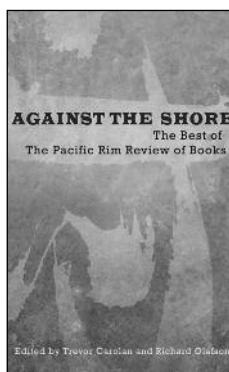
## Against the Shore

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& **Richard Olafson**



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From its inception in 2005, *The Pacific Rim Review of Books* has cast a close, constructive eye on contemporary literature. With the publication of these anthologies, the PRRB now confirms its place in contemporary Canadian arts & letters. Addressing a broad horizon of topics and issues in engaged East-West culture, serious poetry, international relations, history, and ecological inquiry, contributors include such distinguished writers as Gary Snyder, Josef Skvorecky, Red Pine, Rex Weyler, Andrew Schelling, and Michael Platzer, as well as many of the veteran and talented young West Coast writers whose work *The Pacific Rim Review of Books* has consistently championed.

Trevor Carolan has published 13 books of poetry, fiction, translation, memoir, and anthologies. Active in Pacific Coast watershed issues, aboriginal land claims, and Asia-Pacific human rights campaigns, he now teaches English at University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, B.C.

Richard Olafson is an editor, poet, book designer and publisher. He has published a number of books and chapbooks, and lives in Victoria with his family. He is publisher of *The Pacific Rim Review of Books*.

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# HALF-BLOOD BLUES

Linda Rogers

Judging a book by its cover, in this case a vinyl disc (how analogue the “now” kids say), this one needs to spin. It is a challenge, since the hype is incredible - Man Booker and Governor General’s Award nominations and a Giller Prize - enough noise to drown out the music at the center of Edugyan’s story. And then there is the issue of civic pride. Edugyan lives with her husband writer Stephen Price in Victoria, home of Pacific Rim Review of Book and four finalists in the massive Montreal International Poetry Prize, the biggest purse in world poetry. Holding my breath, a luxury no trumpet player can afford, and full of expectation, I drop the needle and the music plays.

The novel begins in Paris, 1940, a city about to sell its soul to protect its material integrity. By collaborating with Nazi Germany, the Vichy Regime will keep France’s monuments and lose its heart. At risk are its Jewish citizens and expatriate *mischlings*, half-bloods like Hieronymous, a gifted young trumpeter eventually caught up in Hitler’s racist net.

The great writers of times present and past have already personified Berlin and Paris, the settings for this sprawling novel. Edugyan wrote with them looking over her shoulder, and possibly Thomas Hardy the English master of landscape as character. She gives this option a pass, choosing to have her characters, the members of a Berlin based blues band, most of whom escape to free Paris and the promise of a recording with the great blues trumpeter Louis Armstrong, develop the narrative.

This creates a problem. At the center of her story is Hiero, but he is lost, taken into custody because he is a black Rhineland German without papers. Of course, Hiero never had the required pedigree. The children of black soldiers and Rhineland girls were never real Germans.

Hiero’s only authenticity is his voice, the golden soprano sound of a b flat trumpet.

But, here is the twist. Hiero can’t tell the story himself because he is lost and his outcome is the mysterious core of the novel. Enter his Salieri, Sid the bassist, a competent but uninspired musician, whose sexual and professional jealousy drive the arc of this sadly familiar narrative.

We already know about competition in art and we have read dozens if not hundreds of books about this terrible period in history. What makes *Half-Blood Blues* scream for attention?

It is voice. It is soul, the essence of black culture. As an aside, “soul” is a word writing instructors forbid. A cliché that abstracts the concrete objective correlatives essential to evocative writing, “soul” is anathema, except in describing the essence of black culture, which has a meaning deeper than language, the unison voice of brothers and sisters in the struggle to endure.

There is strength in familial solidarity and weakness in its betrayal. Soul is the matrix of the African family, many communities, many nations and the slave diaspora. When that bond is broken, then as now, the outcome is inevitable. It is civil war, war in a band, a family or a country, that shatters the spirit. Sid, in letting his personal shortcomings dictate the outcome of Hiero’s tragic story, breaks the Soul Code.

The Nazis did not silence this group of young musicians. That tragedy came from



*Half-Blood Blues*  
Esi Edugyan  
Thomas Allen, 2011  
paper, \$24.95



Esi Edugyan

within. This is a message that is at once historical and immediate, something that resonates with Edugyan’s readers all over the world.

Revelation of Sid’s egregious error, his hiding of the false papers that would have allowed Hiero to escape to Switzerland so that the recording of their music in Paris could go forward, comes late in the novel. Edugyan takes a breathtaking risk in protecting his secret for so long. It works in terms of structure, but could have blown the song.

Blues, diatonic lamentation relieved by sexual humour (man must have something to look forward to even, especially in the darkest moments), is the most straightforward genre. It is pure and simple, from the heart.

This parable wanders from that direct path. In that sense it marks the break from the past, a time when slaves broke the soil with their own hands when there were no tools (there is a town in Cuba called *Unas*, meaning fingernails, signifying the back-breaking work of slave labour), and the segue to the more sophisticated cultural implications of Jazz, an urban art form.

Integrity is the essence of the blues and Sid unfortunately left his at the crossroads where he made his deal with the devil, trading his moment in the sun for eternal darkness. “And all of a sudden I could feel this lightness coursing through me, this real soft excitement. Like an echo of something I felt once in another lifetime. ‘Okay Pops, I said, imitating old Armstrong’s gravelly voice. ‘Let’s make history.’”

The first section of the novel reads like a radio play from the Thirties, a shuffle of discordant voices adapting to discordant times. Sid is allowed to hide in the tense atmosphere of confusion, keeping his secret buried in the sound of human traffic, as violence and racism destroy their previously hospitable musical environment. The blues must come later, when reflection becomes lamentation. Everything from politics in general to the politics of the band is contrapuntal. We are still waiting for the voice.

Edugyan knows her dialects and her history. Her dialogue recreates the world of African culture in America and Europe, where many talented African-American artists emigrated to avoid Jim Crow. The sound is right, but it is not the blues. She must reach deeper for that, and over the course of the novel, she does.

We get the whole story near the end, when survivors of the band reunite. I am reminded of the unnecessary last chapter of Ian MacEwen’s *Atonement* where the writer/narrator gives her betrayed characters happiness, “but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me.” Sid does not ask for forgiveness either; and there is no redemption because he destroyed the music he loved by allowing his ambition to trump his humanity.

“Alone I wasn’t nothing. Just a stiff line, just a regular keeper of the beat.”

There is something anti-climactic about the contemporary endings to the parallel novels, both outstanding in their strengths and weaknesses, both resilient and reflective of the Japanese belief in the flaws in a work of art that make perfection an exquisite non-option.

The greatest richness and texture comes when the characters met the destruction they have wreaked head on. Then we are in the living Book of Revelation. Sid did not create the calumny of Hitler’s Germany, but his crime is the microcosm of a greater crime. The redemption is not his, but ours. The music lives. Civilisation staggers on.

*Linda Rogers is the wife of a blues mandolinist with a similar story of lost music to the band’s. Muddy Waters, who had moved on to Chicago Blues from his musical roots, died as they were negotiating a delta blues recording, which might have resuscitated that dying genre. Her father was a media lawyer who privately billeted his clients, The Mills Brothers, when Vancouver hotels refused to put them up. Rien ca change.*

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# BIG TIM, RAM DASS & THE PSYCHEDELIC CULTURE

*Bill Pearlman*

In Ram Dass' and Ralph Metzner's *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture* we get a terrific view of the early days of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert's experiments with LSD and the ramifications for the culture of the 1960s as well as different aspects of the principal players in that unfolding scene.

The 1960s may have begun with the election of a charismatic Irish Catholic by the name of Kennedy, but the real culture wars of the 60s were centered in many ways around another flamboyant Irishman by the name of Timothy Leary. Leary was by nature a complex figure—part showman, part psychologist, part guru, part messiah for a whole generation of anti-Vietnam counter-culture youth that wanted a rallying cry from an older brother who 'knew where it was at'.

When I was a student at UCLA, the first doses of LSD came from our own Chemistry Department labs. This was 1964. We had heard about it through the doper's grapevine. It was not yet illegal. We were living in Venice, not far from where Jim Morrison and *The Doors* lived. We'd do our trips in those days on the beach, and one of our friends had a place near State Beach in Santa Monica. The conditions of light and sound, the gorgeous surf, activists like Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, Watts' *Way of Zen*, and the newly arrived *Psychedelic Review* all stirred our young college minds into trips suffused with ideas, vast sensations, hallucinations and wild excitement. The whole ritual history of mankind became part of our psyches. We were deeply stirred into states that were expansive, extravagant, wondrous and full of creative possibilities. It all could go off into a bad trip, but rarely for me. There was a day in Topanga Canyon (when Reagan was governor) that a helicopter buzzed us as we tripped and it felt like we were in Vietnam. In all honesty, I think we imaginally *were*.

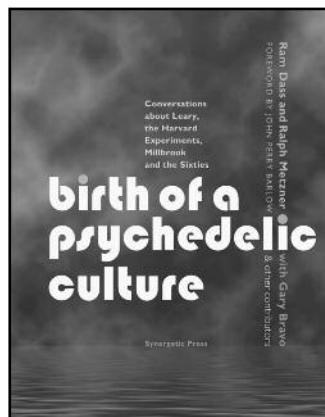
But in *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture*, Ram Dass and Metzner take us back to the origins of the movement. Tim Leary was the center of the action and the first attempt at a group research project with LSD was in the Mexican beach town of Zihuatanejo, in the state of Guerrero. Leary and Alpert were earlier part of what came to be called the Center for Personality Research which was ended by the Harvard Psychology faculty:

Ram Dass: *Brendan Maher and others were pissed off because Tim and I had so many graduate students. And the scientists around us complained because we were taking drugs ourselves as part of our experimenting. But actually the data we were collecting were our own internal stuff...* (35)

Ralph Metzner: *The Mexican LSD sessions were strikingly different from the Harvard psilocybin psychodramas. Zihuatanejo was still a sleepy fishing village with gorgeous beaches... Here the setting was exuberant lushness of jungle flora and fauna, the ceaseless rhythmic pounding of the surf, extravagant beautiful sunsets... The women often transformed mythically into sea nymphs or mermaids, the men into Aztec warrior chieftains or jungle shamans... At the suggestion of Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, we began using the Bardo Thodol (The Tibetan Book of the Dead) as a guide to the psychedelic sessions. Tibetan Buddhists talked about three phases of experience on the intermediate planes between death and rebirth. We translated this to refer to the death and rebirth of the ego or ordinary personality.* (51)

Eventually, trouble from Mexican authorities stopped the Zihuatanejo experiments. There was a brief attempt to start up again in Dominica and Antigua in 1963, but that fell apart as well.

Ram Dass: *Yeah. Tim was being irresponsible. Actually each of us was irresponsible at one time or another. I used to think Tim was the irresponsible one*



*Birth of a Psychedelic Culture*  
Ram Dass and Ralph Metzner  
Synergetic Press  
2010, 240 pp



*Ralph Metzner and Timothy Leary - Harvard Days (1960-61)*

*and I was the poor person to be in the middle of all the things. But I have re-evaluated it. I was just as irresponsible as he.* (101)

And then came Millbrook, gifted by Peggy Hitchcock and her family to the group for psychedelic research and communal living. By this time, Alpert and Leary were fired from Harvard. As time moved on, the original impulse of the Harvard profs Leary and Alpert gave way to difficulties with law enforcement, and LSD was made illegal in 1966. Then came a series of busts & Leary's outlaw/celebrity status. Tim Leary's outright defiance and ego took him to new places of grandeur and jeopardy...

I remember one long Beverly Hills night doing acid with Leary; he had earlier that evening done a sort of psychedelic show (The Psychedelic Theater) at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. A young actor at the time, I was filming a scene just outside the hall with one of Aldous Huxley's nieces, Elspeth Huxley as I remember.

Leary was a pivotal figure in the cultural wars of the 60s because he was a trickster as well as a serious actor, almost a King Lear and Fool in one character. His showmanship and his instincts were ritualistic and spectacular, but often with the edge of a cultural star. Alpert (later Ram Dass) saw Leary as the creative force in the psychedelic movement:

Ram Dass: *Tim was just Tim. He didn't have the intellect that Ralph had and he didn't have the heart that I have, but he did have a sense of history and he was very much a scientist. And he was very expansive...* (167)

The cultural wars were fought under the backdrop of Vietnam. Pynchon says on the first page of *Gravity's Rainbow* that 'it's all theater.' The psychedelic ride was extraordinary theater—combustive, rich in historical analogue and deeply fun. (We forget that one of the chief elements in the cultural wars was pleasure vs. the prohibition of pleasure—moralisms and the punishments of law enforcement.)

When Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters got hold of the acid phenomenon, they pushed Leary's theatricality even further: 'the acid tests' were total environmental theatrics: a veritable riotous fun-show, a Punch & Judy wilderness of strobe lights and confrontational sound.

A friend of Kesey from his Stanford days, Dorothy Fadiman described the arrival of Kesey and the Pranksters at Millbrook in the bus *Further*:

Fadiman: *The moment when the bus appeared on the horizon, was completely surreal. The people on the bus—Ken Kesey and the Pranksters—lived in a reality that had never really been mine, but I hadn't yet let go of the fantasy that I might someday be brave enough to join them. The Prankster path, as well I could tell, was to get high (not asking how much of what you were taking) and see what happened! That mindset was about to collide with this other delicately arranged, carefully crafted, but still elusive vision: the promise of a*

*safe place to be guided, guiding each other through the terrains of consciousness with psychedelics. (135)*

I spent a long stoned day with Kesey on his farm in Springfield, Oregon; I was living with wife and newborn daughter Wave Adrienne in Eugene at that time. Kesey took me around the grounds, showed me the famous bus *Further*, all covered with leaves and mist from the Oregon rain. Kesey's living room was a theatrical trip: on the floor was a wrestling mat (he had been a wrestler at Univ. of Oregon) with theatre seats all around, and a little shrine with Ken's letterman's jacket hung up around a bunch of trophies. We had big Mason jars full of gin and orange juice as we wandered the fields: Kesey gestured at one point toward a couple of hummingbirds who were in full mating dive. He was a good storyteller, never stopped talking. Later in the day we had a meal and my family, Phil and Elaine George, Faye Kesey, and later Ken Babbs all joined in.

My own coalition of dropouts and back-to-the-land hippies created another dimension to the psychedelic circus. We built domes designed by a Buckminster Fuller-inspired builder, Steve Baer, and we took cues for how to live from a famous article in the old *San Francisco Oracle* which featured an interview with Leary, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. Poetry and acid surged through our commune, first called Drop City South, (after a sister commune in Trinidad Colorado) and later re-named Manera Nueva (New Way). We also started a magazine which I called *Fervent Valley*, and we got submissions from Ginsberg, Burroughs, Bukowski, Fee Dawson, Robert Duncan, and many others. I also wrote a novel, *Inzorbital* (Duende 1974), which chronicled some of the cosmic dimensions of the psychedelic romp. This was a wild time in the whole commune movement and others were springing up all over New Mexico—the most famous probably was Steve and Barbara Durkee's Lama Foundation, which became a home base for Alpert's transformation into Ram Dass. About twenty or so years ago, I did an all day retreat with Ram Dass and found it happily refreshing. Sitting in lotus for several hours, he just talked about whatever came to mind—'and this too'—LSD, India, sexual perversion, piety, his



*Timothy Leary and Ram Dass (then Richard "Dick" Alpert) (circa 1960)*

guru, the courage of Tim Leary, who had been at one point he admitted one of his gurus. At the end of the session, participants stood in line and Ram Dass gave each one a joyful hug, but I simply observed. He had done his job and he soft-balled a kind of old/new wisdom of what Walt Whitman called *The Open Road* and it felt authentic and good-natured. His mentioning the courage required for Leary to keep going even when the forces of oppression were harassing him was good to hear, and a boon to those of us who feel strongly that something strange and powerful came into the world as a result of the experiments of the early founders of the psychedelic movement.

*Bill Pearlman has published several volumes of poetry, including Brazilian Incarnation: New & Selected Poems (1967-2004). He divides his time between California and Mexico.*

# AT THE INTERFACE OF CULTURE AND MEDICINE

*Marina Parapini*

Too often, news of the health care system in Canada comes as grumblings over its ever increasing costs or worries of how it will cope under the aggregate weight of the aging baby boomers. It can sound like the only voices in the debate belong to politicians, health economists and pharmaceutical companies, all of whom use almost incomprehensible data to prove their respective points, and all of whom have hidden agendas to expound their legitimacy.

*At the Interface of Culture and Medicine* ignores this and brings the question about the future of health care back to the people it is trying most to help. This book challenges the practice of relying solely on Western medicine paradigms when Canada is so proudly multicultural. It brings to the forefront considerations of Canada's Indigenous population with its long and distinguished medical traditions, and questions why they haven't been better integrated into the system. Other countries have taken the 'biomedical' model and mixed it with their own but Canada has not yet adapted, nor has it found a working hybrid model. Health and sickness are still understood differently depending on the cultural norms, values, beliefs and frameworks of the individual. But culture affects the very definition of illness: for example, where does old age blend into dementia, and when does physical or mental infirmity demand hospitalization or palliative care out of the home setting? *At the Interface of Culture and Medicine* looks at these questions and hopes to act as a catalyst for further discussion.

The book is separated into four sections: Culture and End-of-Life Care, Culture and Alberta's International Medical Graduates, Cultural Competence and Language in Medical Practice, and Cultural and Ethnic Diversity in Health Care. Each section represents a unique point where health touches culture and where the distinctions between each are intricate. Language is the crux in the interface between culture and



*At the Interface of Culture and Medicine*  
E. Waugh, O. Szafran & R. Crutcher  
Univ. of Alberta.,  
2011, 296 p. \$49.95

medicine and its importance is underlined throughout the various studies. The book's format also serves as a testament to the editors' collective belief that promoting health is not solely the purview of physicians, but of a whole network of professionals including nurses, anthropologists, sociologists, public health officers and human resources program developers. The content is comprised of 13 papers by 25 professionals from an impressive array of specialties and cultures.



*Mother and child in hospital, Iqaluit, NWT*

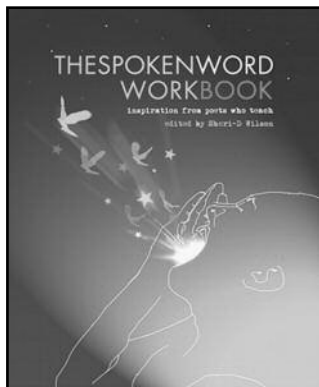
The title fits the book well. The interface between culture and medicine is a critical junction in determining the future focus of health-care policy. The Western medical tradition has historically emphasized scientific advancement and allocated funding accordingly. However, some experts believe that there is a ceiling to human life expectancy and as it reaches its limit, the benefits of research may no longer exceed the costs. If this is the case, funding priorities should shift toward education and prevention. The authors of this book do not ask for any drastic changes, rather for recognition of the room within Canada's health care for improvement, especially in the treatment of minorities. This improvement, they contend, is within reach. The major theme, repeated often quite baldly throughout the book, is a need for more cultural competence among our health care professionals. The study "Seeking an Understanding of Aboriginal Culture" by Donna M. Wilson, Sam Sheps, Roger Thomas and Margaret Brown ends with what can be taken as the main call-to-action: because of the impossibility of knowing everything about every culture, "an attitude-centred approach is needed, one which emphasizes the importance of valuing other cultures." Thoughtful words. Canada has always been outspokenly proud of its other multicultural facets: it's time for our medical community to join in.

*Marina Parapini studied Business at Turin Italy. She writes from Nicomen Island, in B.C.'s Fraser Valley.*

# A TRIBUTE TO SPOKEN WORD

Mary Ann Moore

As Sheri-D Wilson says in her introduction to *The Spoken Word Workbook*: “Poetry has moved back to its roots, or its oral origin, and thus this new form has returned the voice of the people to the people.” Wilson is the Founder and Artistic Director of the Calgary Spoken Word Festival and Founder and Director of the Spoken Word Program at The Banff Centre.



*The Spoken Word Workbook: Inspiration From Poets Who Teach*  
edited by Sheri-D Wilson  
Calgary Spoken Word Society and The Banff Centre Press, \$20

*The Spoken Word Workbook* is a marvelous celebration of life, writing, performance and an invitation to write and perform your own work. There’s a magnificent array of poet-teachers inviting you in and cheering you on from the pages of this book. Among them are Bill Bissett, Robert Priest, Billeh Nickerson, Anne Waldman, Cheryl L’Hirondelle and Wendy Morton whose adventures in promoting poetry are described in an essay.

To learn more about these artists through their history and their writing has been like the couch conversations I enjoy while hanging out at poetry festivals. The writing exercises and performance tips are inspiring and innovative. All of this is presented in a book that is a visual feast of spoken word thanks to the design skills of Peter Moller of Egg Press Co in Calgary, Alberta.

Spoken word emulates “the best of the street” and as Wilson says, “includes the body as memory vessel, and resonator. Gesture is an important aspect for punctuation and jubilation.” As tough as spoken word topics may be (racism, homophobia, poverty for example), there’s jubilation and seasoned advice from this wondrous assembly of performing poets.

Spoken word can be a vehicle for your personal manifesto as it’s about “taking

action” and “being part of positive change.” Think about Shane Koyczan’s homage to Canada performed at the Opening Ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, B.C. He shares his writing history and practices in an interview with Wilson.

In terms of performance, Regie Cabico, a spoken word pioneer, says: “From the first line to the end of the poem you should have been transformed and so should the audience.” His suggestion for a writing exercise is to write a list poem: “50 Things That Drive You Crazy.”

George Elliott Clarke suggests you understand “your own personal dictionary.” As he emphasizes, you must memorize your poem to own it and deliver it in your own style.

I’m a big fan of Hilary Peach, a spoken word performer and Artistic Director of the yearly Poetry Gabriola Festival on Gabriola Island, B.C. where I’ve had the pleasure of seeing and hearing the performances of many of the spoken word artists featured here. Peach reminds us that we have many teachers and “a particular bench by a particular river can embody or function as a teacher’s voice.” It could be the bench is the teacher or the river.

In Sheri-D Wilson’s section of the book, the Mama of Dada teaches what she has learned: listen, discover your own oral tradition, dig and excavate your own story. Start with your first epiphany.

Mary Ann Moore is a Nanaimo poet and writer who offers a mentoring program: *Writing Home: A Whole Life Practice*.



Sheri-D Wilson

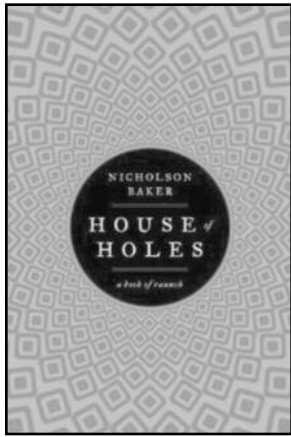
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# GOINGS-ON AT A MAGICAL SEX CLUB

Eric Spalding



*House of Holes: A Book of Raunch*  
Nicholson Baker  
Simon and Schuster  
2011, 262 pages.

**H**ouse of Holes: A Book of Raunch is Baker's third sex novel, after *Vox* and *The Fermata*. In my view, it's also the least successful of the three. It's erotic, but it's also boring at times.

The first of Baker's sex novels, *Vox*, which Monica Lewinsky infamously gave to Bill Clinton, consisted of a series of phone sex conversations between a man and a woman. There was not a single word in the book extraneous to the dialogue between the two protagonists. (Baker would later use the same device for his Bush assassination fantasy, *Checkpoint*.) The interest of *Vox* was that the man and the woman competed with each other to tell the most arousing stories that they could come up with.

In *The Fermata*, the second of Baker's sex novels, a man develops the ability to stop time, a skill that he then uses mainly to ogle women. When it came out, *People* magazine singled this book out as the worst of the year, which suggests at least that the book did not leave its readers indifferent. I can see that *The Fermata* on the surface appears to cater to pornographic fantasies of male domination over females. After all, the protagonist, moving around women who are frozen in time, is free to do whatever he wants with them.

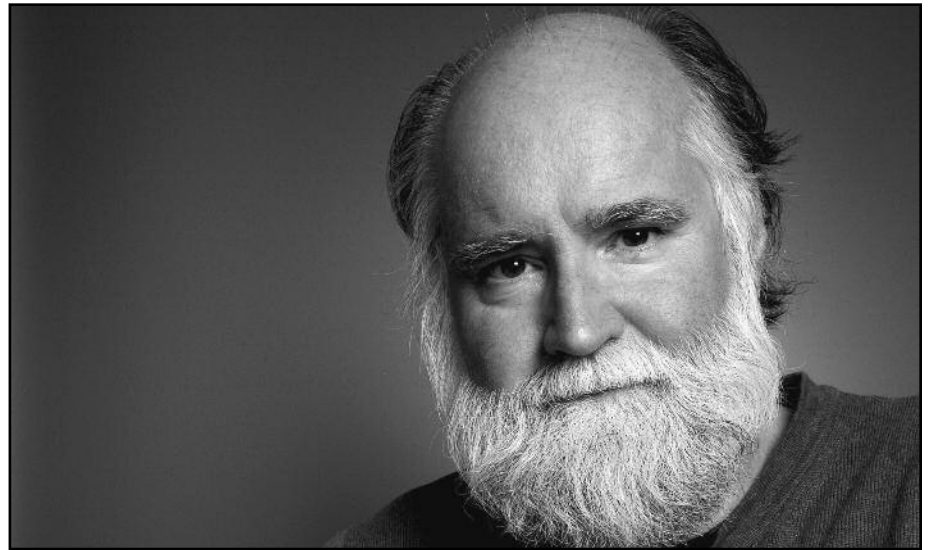
However, *he* is the one who ultimately comes across badly, a solitary loser unable to deal with real live women in person.

I found Baker's third sex novel, *House of Holes*, to be titillating, although I wonder what a female reader would make of the author's various scenarios. The House of Holes is an expensive sex club, accessible only to select men and women who want to realize their weirdest, most erotic dreams, within the framework of consensual heterosexual relations between humans. (The novel does also feature a couple of lesbian encounters.)

This place is no ordinary club: it has magical properties. Body parts can be separated, exchanged and reattached, people change sizes, clothes suddenly disappear... Moreover, patrons access the club by being sucked in through holes in their environment. For instance, one visitor passes through her pepper grinder:

?Rhumpa held the machine to her nose and smelled the distant sharpness of the pepper, which made her smile. And then the pepper grinder got bigger and she jumped down into it and fell through tumbling peppercorns, and she smelled a hundred dinner parties of the past. Then she was herself again, but standing on the porch outside the House of Holes" (pp. 71-72).

In spite of its magical properties, the House of Holes has a dark side, which has



Nicholson Baker

to do with how free the patrons are once they're there. The cost of services is very high and certain patrons, absorbed by their activities, lose track of their expenses. These individuals end up having to work off their debt by helping others to realize their fantasies.

Baker as usual is creative and humorous with the stories he dreams up. A favourite chapter of mine involves a woman taking a stranger to her lodgings for an intimate encounter. As her date progresses, she keeps calling up her husband for permission to engage in specific acts with her new lover. The husband, to say the least, is very reluctant to consent to his wife's increasingly outrageous requests. Baker's prose is creative as well. For instance, it overflows with colourful words and expressions for sexuality, some quaint, some slangy, some newly made up. I would give examples, but then this review would be rated "X" like Baker's book definitely should be.

All the same, the novel for my tastes is too episodic. It lacks an overriding conflict or dilemma, and there are too many interchangeable characters, so the book becomes boring. I've loved so many of Baker's books, including notably *A Box of Matches* and *The Anthologist*, even though they don't have much of a plot either. But unlike *House of Holes*, those two novels have a single narrator who provides a greater degree of cohesion and continuity.

Eric Spalding writes from British Columbia's Fraser Valley where he teaches Communications and Media Studies.

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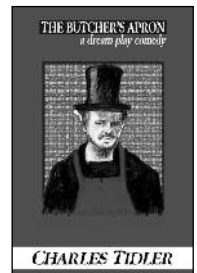
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# "ALL THAT LIES BEYOND THE FRONTIER OF LANGUAGE"

James Edward Reid

*Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied.*

Emily Dickinson

Upon reading a new biography of George Eliot.

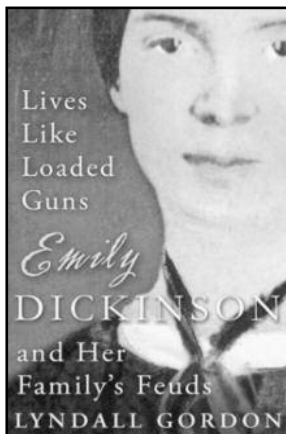
Lyndall Gordon's *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* is one of the best biographies I have read. It is not possible in a short essay to present fully the complex narratives and research in its deeply researched 500 pages. A number of thoughtful reviews have already praised Gordon's consolidation of a very clear picture of the bitter emotion and generations long feud surrounding Dickinson, her poetry, and its legacy. There seems to be general agreement among reviewers that Gordon's picture of the social relations, sexual mores, hypocrisy, status of women, and repression in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century village of Amherst, is bold and convincing. In addition, she has combined deep scholarship, ethnography, sensitivity to subtleties, and good humour, all in a clear lively style that carries the reader along with the depth and momentum of a great novel.

Dickinson withdrew from society for reasons that are uncertain. It certainly gave her the space that is required for writing. Perhaps withdrawal allowed her to develop and retain the wise clarity that her poetry exhibits. The feud that surrounds her arose from the thoughtlessness of her brother, Austin Dickinson, and his mistress Mabel Loomis Todd. While he was married, Austin helped to advance the career of Todd's husband David Peck Todd, who was then free to philander. The power of Austin Dickinson's personality, and the softer nature of David Todd in this relationship of collusion appear clearly in the facing photographs of Austin and David Todd opposite page 364. Austin appears to be bearing down like a freight train upon an innocent creature. Would Austin have accepted Mabel's sexual embraces on the days she was least fertile, had he known the long history of conflict that this passion would generate? Probably. The third party in this secrecy and sexual collusion, Mabel Todd, appears on the page above her pliant husband and the fierce face of Austin Dickinson. This triangle from hell, a therapist's waking nightmare, was the fuse that ignited the long feud.

As for the feud itself, it began in the village of Amherst in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, extended across generations, and was still under way in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup>. At stake was the possession and copyright of Dickinson's letters and almost 2,000 poems. On the one side descendants and supporters of Mabel Todd held a significant trove of Dickinson's writing, and on the other, descendants and supporters of Dickinson held another collection. Who would eventually hold the full collection in trustworthy hands?

Gordon's book opens up the reader's understanding of Dickinson's life and poetry. Previously enigmatic lines become clear: "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun — . . . "Abyss has no biographer —" In Lyndall Gordon, however, Emily Dickinson has certainly found a biographer who is willing to look deeply into her poetry and life, and remain fearless in the face of any abyss Dickinson's life and work present. Dickinson's sense that she was singlehandedly on the losing side of a great feud clarifies her persona as David, losing the battle against Goliath:

*I took my Power in my hand —  
And went against the World —  
'Twas not so much as David — had —*



*Lives Like Loaded Guns:  
Emily Dickinson  
and Her Family's Feuds*  
Lyndall Gordon  
Viking  
491 pages, 2010 \$41.00



Lyndall Gordon

*But I — was twice as bold —*

*I aimed my Pebble — but Myself  
Was all the one that fell —  
Was it Goliath — was too large  
Or was myself — too small?*

In the first stanza, listen, and look into the abyss that yawns in the long dash between "David" and "had". Surely Dickinson was aware of the power of her work. Is false modesty surfacing as she metamorphoses her Power into a mere Pebble? Gordon has also considered some fascinating similarities between Dickinson's deepest concerns and those of another reclusive and poorly understood 19<sup>th</sup> century Emily.

*Why have I persevered to shun  
The common paths that others run:  
And on a strange road journeyed on?*

(From "O thy bright eyes must answer now" Emily Brontë)

Previous books by Lyndall Gordon have examined the life and work of writers such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Charlotte Brontë. Her revelations in *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art*, exhibit deep research, fine analysis, and occasional levity. *A Private Life* was difficult to put down, especially in its moments leavened by good humour: "In his heaven of the immortals, there were 'no women', he had declared in his youth, as he walked off arm-in-arm with Shakespeare." Her clear gaze upon James may have caused more than a few ripples across the finely modulated seas of Jamesian criticism. In her new book, once again, Gordon opens up a writer's life to reveal what other biographers have missed, or have been unable to consider. *Lives Like Loaded Guns* presents strong arguments for new and deeper readings of Dickinson's poetry and its stature.

Gordon exhibits deep scholarship, particularly in primary sources, such as quotations from letters of the principals involved, and in connecting the import for Dickinson of the records of prescriptions filled for her in Amherst, or filled in Boston away from prying eyes. The reproduction of an 1856 map of Amherst reveals the claustrophobic closeness of the houses in the village, and suggests the force of endeavour required to keep secrets. Gordon has also attempted to reproduce as closely as possible Dickinson's distinctive capitalization and use of dashes. Gordon's long dashes with more space around them allow Dickinson's intense and compressed language to open up and breathe with more meaning for the reader. Gordon describes the puzzlement of early readers and later scholars over Dickinson's dashes: "None had an ear for the silence of dashes that defy the march of standard meanings in order to open up a space for vision and veto — for all that lies beyond the frontier of language" (p. 251). On the book endpapers, Gordon reproduces Dickinson's racing handwriting, with dashes that touch down in space briefly, only to take flight again and suggest more meaning.

For a plainspoken and affectionate attempt to look inside the importance of her work, there is the conclusion by that Yankee Galway Kinnell in "The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson". His poem recounts a series of his silent responses to the balefully oblivious deconstruction of one of Dickinson's poems by an obtuse professor of English to undergraduate women in a lecture hall. Finally, Kinnell reaches inside "into that sanctum within me where Emily / sometimes speaks a verse" to listen to:

*"Thanks — Sweet — countryman —  
for wanting — to Sing out — of Me —  
after all that Humbug." But she was silent.*

I inserted Dickinson breathing spaces around Kinnell's dashes, to open up his deliberate choice to fail to echo her voice.

Many others have appreciated and deeply admired her work. In an essay on Paul Celan, J.M. Coetzee commented on Dickinson's influence on one of the greatest poets

(continued on page 31)

# A NOBEL LAUREATE ON SUICIDE:

*Kenzaburo Ōe and Jūzō Itami*

*Eli Kirzner*

In his most recent work to be translated into English—*Changeling*—Nobel Prize-winning Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Ōe writes about the suicide of his lifelong friend, the internationally acclaimed screenwriter and director Jūzō Itami. Itami—whose most famous film in the West is the hilarious and insightful “noodle western” *Tampopo*—purportedly leapt to his death from the roof of a Tokyo office building in 1997 (although some reports accuse the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia, of murdering him).

The narrative centers on a washed up, depressed writer named Kogito who is trying to comprehend the suicide of his childhood friend, Goro. As is common in Ōe’s work, the protagonist, in this case Kogito, is a pseudo-autobiographical representation of the author. The character Goro (a name Ōe seems to have borrowed from the hero of *Tampopo*), represents Itami.

The story kicks off when Kogito receives a trunk full of cassette tapes from Goro. The tapes contain recorded monologues in which Goro expresses his innermost thoughts and feelings. After Goro leaps off a high-rise, listening to the tapes on a walkman becomes Kogito’s nightly ritual through which he tries to make sense of his friend’s suicide. Kogito begins to have conversations with Goro’s taped voice, engaging in dialog with his walkman. Like a low-tech version of mind-altering technology in a Phillip K. Dick story, the walkman begins to blur the lines between reality and illusion as this man-machine dialog grows ever more obsessive, and Kogito begins to believe he is talking to Goro in the afterlife.

The narrative spirals steadily from memory, to tape-recorded dialogue, to fragments of movie script, to numerous literary allusions and a fairly coherent storyline slowly emerges. However this style of telling eventually becomes repetitive as we return to similar moments in Kogito’s life again and again. By the end of the novel, for example, we have grown tired of Goro’s repeated criticism of Kogito’s novels, which are phrased in much the same way throughout.

The first half of the novel moves ponderously through a highly cerebral world in which details of setting and bodily actions remain vague and poorly realized. The name Kogito intentionally alludes to Rene Descartes’ famous philosophical catchphrase “cogito ergo sum” or “I think therefore I am” and the almost disembodied manner of telling is reminiscent of the cognizing introspection of the narrator in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In the second half of the novel Ōe conjures a better-realized world of action and location. Kogito’s struggle to behead a giant turtle in his kitchen is quite memorable and the climactic scene referred to enigmatically throughout as “THAT” is also vivid, clearly paying homage to the late director Jūzō Itami by attempting to simulate his cinematic style in novel form.

Ōe is notorious in Japan for producing ambiguous and obscure novels written in complex, others might say cryptic, syntax. The translator Boehm has done an excellent job of making this novel easier to follow in English by adding quotation marks and useful phrases like “X said” to indicate who is speaking, elements Ōe himself does not do the Japanese reader a favor of including. She also adds descriptive passages, which reduce the reader’s feeling of alienation, especially in the disorienting and thinly explained introduction.

However, this generous clarification leads the translation into trouble. The translator (or perhaps the editor) was reluctant to include footnotes, and yet the text demands explanation of Japanese customs and phrases that are unfamiliar to most readers of English. The end-result is explanatory passages squeezed incongruously in brackets within paragraphs. The translator ought to have chosen either the footnote route or, better yet, done the nitty-gritty work of integrating these details into the story.

In addition, creative translations of many descriptive details diverge inexplicably from the original. For example, the phrase “濃い雲の影” (koi-kumo-no-kage) (Jap P65), has been translated as “shadow of a giant bird” (Eng P69) but a word for word translation would be “shadow of a dense cloud”. Literary translation is an interpretive



*The Changeling*  
Kenzaburo Ōe  
Translated by Deborah  
Boliver Boehm  
Grove Press (2009)

art form not a set of rigidly defined rules and procedures. Translators can and should change images if essential to giving a text new life within the cultural context of the target language. But few English readers will find “dense cloud” difficult to grasp, offensive or even awkward, and the image of a “giant bird” adds nothing in the context (birds do not play any symbolic role in the novel). There are many examples like this of disloyalty to the original text without any discernible semantic gains. One suspects that the Nobel-prize winner carefully chose his imagery for a reason.

Problems of translation aside, this novel expects a heavy burden of prior reading. It constantly refers to events in Ōe’s novels, which cannot be fully grasped without reading them. Since these novels are pseudo-autobiographical, study of the author’s life and historical milieu is also recommended (not to mention the wide array of allusions to be tracked down and studied). Rather than being the first novel in a trilogy, one feels that *Changeling* might be better labeled as the 20<sup>th</sup> installment in a series made up of Ōe’s lifework. This makes the book well-suited for Japanese literature specialists, or perhaps only the die-hard Ōe fans among them, who enjoy brow-knitting intellectual scrutiny and pedantic nitpicking over the profound immediacy of art. Laypeople should look elsewhere in contemporary Japan to writers like Haruki Murakami, and Banana Yoshimoto whose accessible literature enchants the full sensory and emotive range of our humanity.



*Kenzaburo Ōe*

*Eli Kirzner, originally from Toronto, now lives and writes in Japan. He has been published in Now Magazine.*

## BEAUTIFUL ONE (continued from page 4)

tive about his legacy. The same might be said of Lane’s brief autobiographical contribution to the volume, “A New Awakening,” which ends not with a summary, but with an open-ended list of his concerns. Likewise, Nicholas Bradley’s afterword to the volume, “Furious Snow Swirling” is an appreciative essay, not a summative appraisal. These and other editorial decisions have been undertaken in exactly the right spirit, offering aids to the reader but no premature academic embalming.

Any full accounting of Lane’s contribution to the literature of this country would (among other things) have to examine the formal properties of his verse, enumerate his many subjects and the many places he has depicted (in Canada, in Latin America, in China), and explore the links between his personal tributes and elegies and the life he led and the company he kept. *The Collected Poems* furnishes most of the necessary materials for such an undertaking, and is thus a valuable resource. But more than a mere catalogue or index of Lane’s accumulated poetic works, the volume is arranged to provide a sense of the whole. It gives us a body of work in both the organic and objective senses of that word. It captures a lifetime of poems that, as Lane has said, themselves attempted to capture “the animals, the plants, the birds, the insects and spiders, frogs, rattlesnakes, the moss and lichens, the rocks, the stones, the suffering of the world and its peoples and the life...spent wandering among them, the ‘journey old as the trails that lead us again to the world’” (517).

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Patrick Lane, *There is a Season: A Memoir in a Garden* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), 2004  
George Woodcock, *Patrick Lane and his Works* (Toronto: ECW Press), 1984.

*Hilary Turner teaches English at the University of the Fraser Valley.*

# THE NEW NEW ORLEANS

Joseph Blake

I fell in love with New Orleans when I visited the city's annual Jazz and Heritage Festival 25 years ago. I interviewed Allen Toussaint in his studio, Delfeayo and Ellis Marsalis in their family home, Charles Neville in his aunt's home, and Preservation Hall founder Allen Jaffe in his French Quarter club. During an interview Jean Knight served me her homemade gumbo and after another interview Irma Thomas drove me home in her Cadillac convertible. It was a magical two weeks, and I've returned many times since, most recently the year after Hurricane Katrina. That visit was bittersweet. A lot of the New Orleans I loved was gone, but a new New Orleans was being born.

Two new books by New Orleans-based journalists make a strong case for musicians' role in post-Katrina rebirth. Both books use a series of profiles to show how New Orleans rhythm and blues, jazz, rock and rap is a reflection of the city's history and distinct neighborhoods and how the music provides a soundtrack for a uniquely haunted and haunting, pleasure-seeking ethos that is coming back to life. Keith Spera is the music writer for the city's daily paper, *The Times Picayune*. In *Groove Interrupted* profiles of Aaron Neville, Fats Domino, Pete Fountain, Allen Toussaint and lesser-known fixtures of the New Orleans music scene are intimate and insightful. Ranging from ghetto favourites like rappers Mystikal and Juvenile to under-the-radar alt-pop heroes like Alex Chilton, Spera's narrative tells a harrowing tale of tragedy and transcendence. The city's historic crime and corruption bubble beneath the surface as Spera describes how musicians help bring New Orleans back to life after the man-made disaster he calls "the federal flood."

As I read a litany of lost homes and lives, I kept hearing Ellis Marsalis' words so long ago.

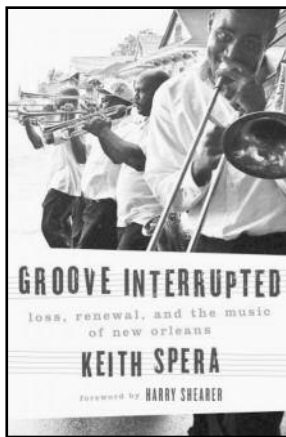
"Being a musician in New Orleans is more than a profession. It's a civic duty," the piano-playing patriarch of the famous jazz family told me back in 1986. That view is repeated in most of the profiles Spera offers in *Groove Interrupted*. Music is a life force in these stories.

It's reflected in Rebirth Brass Band tuba star, Phil Frazier's return to the band and performance after a series of strokes and in the story of 80 year-old Pete Fountain's triumphant return to one of the city's premier venues in 2009. The man known as Mr. New Orleans (in Spera's words "joie de vivre personified"), Fountain played the Blue Room in the 1940s, and he opened the restored venue after his own series of strokes and other unrelated operations to his fans' and the city's delight.

My favourite story is the book opener, *Gatemouth Brown's Last Ride*. It's a searing narrative of the cantankerous bluesman's last days battling death while completing a performance schedule that would kill much younger men. Gatemouth went from his trademark Cadillac to a wheelchair, picking and singing until the end and then after his death and burial Spera relates, Hurricane Ike "forced open Brown's subterranean vault and flushed out his bronze-tinted casket, which came to rest against a nearby fence. Not even death could halt Gatemouth Brown's rambles."

Such spirit is at the heart of Spera's book, and it explains how music is the life blood of the city and how musicians pumped the life blood back into New Orleans.

John Swenson's *New Atlantis* is ripe with good stories too. The author of biographies of John Lennon, Stevie Wonder and Simon and Garfunkel, Swenson is also a noted journalist whose work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Crawdaddy*, *Circus*, and New Orleans music journals, *OffBeat* and *Gambit*. His book, subtitled *Musicians Battle*



*Groove Interrupted*  
Keith Spera  
St. Martin's Press  
260 p. \$31.;



Keith Spera

for the Survival of New Orleans covers similar ground to *Groove Interrupted* with a lesser-known cast of characters and a more detailed, history-informed narrative. Like the best New Orleans music, Swenson's book feels like it's coming right out of the city's streets, right up out of the ground.

The book opens with the story of the Voice of the Wetlands All-Stars, a Louisiana super-group founded by Cajun bluesman Tab Benoit and including Dr. John, Cyril Neville, Mardi Gras Indian Monk Boudreaux, and Meters bassist George Porter Jr. Veteran musicians Johnny Vidacovich, Johnny Sansone, Anders Osborne and Wayne Thibodeaux rounded out the All-Stars lineup when they formed in 2005 "to educate the public about the dangers posed by erosion of the region's wetlands with a recording that at once extolled the area's natural beauty and warned of its vulnerability to the encroaching Gulf of Mexico."

A few months after the first recording session, Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast. The All-Stars warnings still go unheeded, and after the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf, Benoit and the band were still playing and still fighting for the wetlands. The final chapter in *New Atlantis* describes their ongoing struggle.

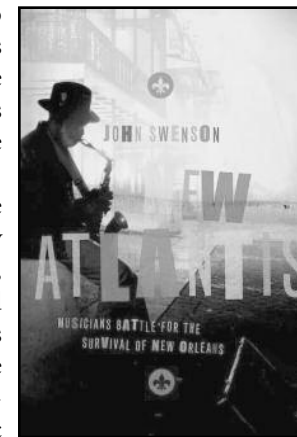
Another highlight is Swenson's detailed history of the relationship between Native Americans and African Americans writing, "the natural affinity between people brought in chains from Africa and the Native Americans (whom a bewildered Columbus mistakenly called Indians) made for all kinds of alliances."

Present day Black Indians, New Orleans gangs who dress and parade in Native American costumes on Mardi Gras, are in Swenson's words, "a link to the cultural activities of their African past and an acknowledgement of the Creole bloodline of African and Native Americans." At the end of this chapter he continues, "The fate of that culture is intertwined with all popular music in the city, which is why the people who played New Orleans music before the storm returned to their city and fought so hard to reclaim the culture that nurtured them."

Other chapters reveal similar struggles to return and reclaim New Orleans culture by a host of unlikely local musical heroes like Cowboy Mouth, Davis Rogan, Andy J. Forest, James Andrews and his better-known younger brother Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, Shannon McNally, Coco Robicheaux, Paul Sanchez, John Boutte, Leroy Jones, Bonerama's Craig Klein and many, many more. All came back soon after the flood, sometimes playing by candlelight before the power returned, some helping to rebuild homes by day.

One of my favourite images from Swenson's book is the picture he paints of Johnny White's Bar on Bourbon Street staying open 24-7 throughout the storm and its aftermath. Johnny White's is always open. It doesn't have a lock on its front door. New Orleans is always open too, a uniquely Caribbean outpost on the edge of American empire, a death-haunted party town with a seminal music scene. That music scene plays on. Families are still emotionally scarred and scattered all over the map. Tens of thousands have not returned and may never return. The rebuilding effort has been painfully slow, but there is a soundtrack to the city's rebirth that is grounded in history and culture. It is still playing, and the city's great heart is still beating. These two books explain why.

Joseph Blake is Music Editor for PRRB.



*New Atlantis*  
John Swenson  
Oxford University Press  
320 p. \$27.95



John Swenson



# DEMETER GOES SKYDIVING

Yvonne Blomer

Susan McCaslin writes in the forward to her latest collection of poems *Demeter Goes Skydiving*, “What if Demeter, the timeless fertility goddess of ancient Greek myth, slipped through the crack into the twenty first century...?” I’d like to turn that question on its head and ask, what if a poet from the twenty first century was able to bring Demeter here, was able to slip into the mythic world of the Greek goddesses and return changed by the depth of experience, longing and power of those goddesses?

*Demeter Goes Skydiving* begins with an invocation, a word which has the meaning of “conjuring of spirit (or in this case gods)” and “self-identification with spirits”. In the first long section of McCaslin’s book the poems conjure, they bring the Greek gods into the modern world and they create a link between the narrator and those gods. The poems are overtly centered on Demeter and Persephone and the experiences of abduction and rape and how those experiences are interpreted by these goddesses through a twenty-first century lens.

In the second section, titled “Old Love” the poems are infused with the suggestions of the gods and goddesses but they rise away from the direct links to them. Here the narrator indirectly identifies with the experiences of Demeter and Persephone. These poems have an underlying tremor, a depth without being overly linked to the stories of Demeter and Persephone.

It’s as if McCaslin has, through the first poems, prepared the reader (and herself) for the second section where the personal experiences can be held in the palm of the goddess Demeter and her daughter. It is as if the mother and daughter in one poem can mirror the goddess and her daughter in another but without this connection being overtly pointed out.

In the section titled “Demeter Goes Skydiving” each poem has the god or goddess it is about in the title, such as “Demeter has a short Colloquy with her Inner Gaia”:

D: Inside or outside?  
G: *Both*  
D: Mother or daughter?  
G: *Both*  
D: Pilgrimage or marriage?  
G: *Both*  
D: Festival or funeral?  
G: *Both*  
D: Resting or moving?  
G: *Both*  
G: What do you want then?  
D: *The heart, dear craft, not untimely ripped  
from the mother  
but sailing out of its own accord*

The Demeter of these poems can see the grey-areas of her daughter’s abduction – how there is choice and no choice, how it is both festival and funeral. In the end, however, the mother wishes for a gentler transition for her daughter from childhood to womanhood. This poem exemplifies how the poems in this section take on the myth head-on so that the poems veer on the political; on the roles of society in how women’s bodies and men’s actions are perceived.

In the second section “Old Love” McCaslin circles around the questions that arise in the first. The poems sit on the ideas in the previous section, on the reminders of mythology enabling them to come at the same topics a little less directly. The poem “I have Heard the Cows Lowing for their Calves” is a good example of this:

*The first month in our rural home  
a shrieking ruckus in the night  
startles us from sleep.*



*Demeter Goes Skydiving*  
Susan McCaslin,  
University of Alberta  
Press, 2011

*Perhaps the cows wish to warn  
of an impending storm,  
maybe even an earthquake,*

*their disconsolate bellowing and braying  
prolonged like Rachel’s weeping  
for her children who were not.*

*Next day, a neighbour says  
this was just the keening of cows  
for young untimely weaned,*

*the bawling calves’ sad repartee,  
providing at last a sound  
commensurate to my inward lamentation*

*for my own dear child.*



Susan McCaslin

The poems that take on the myth directly are intriguing and sometimes clumsy simply because they are taking on this parallel between now and then; goddess and the twenty first century. Poems in the second section resonate with the personal.

When McCaslin pairs Persephone with a well-known female character from Biblical myth, the poem chills, reminds us that these characters, of course, come before those other ones we know so well:

*Persephone Finds Ruth on the Threshing Floor*

*(...)That night on the threshing floor,  
when Ruth crept up to her kinsman Boaz’s mat,*

*Persephone, Queen of the Dead,  
dripping with golden gleanings,  
whispered into her ear*

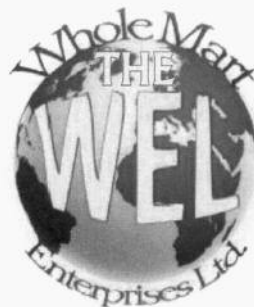
*(...)*

*And out of that night flew Jesse, and David,  
and the numberless unnamed daughters.*

Yvonne Blomer lives in Victoria, BC where she works as a poet, memoirist, writing teacher, event organizer and mom. In 2012 her series of poems “Bicycle Brand Journey” illustrated by Regan Rasmussen will launch with Jack Pine Press as well as a collection of poems titled *The Book of Places* with Black Moss Press.

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# THE BEAUTIFUL ONE HAS COME

*Hillel Wright*

**T**he *Beautiful One Has Come* is the title story of this collection of 12 stories, and is a translation of “Nefertiti”, the name of that legendary Queen of ancient Egypt. Billed as a “collection about expatriates in Cuba, Egypt, Australia, Japan and France,” the book divides into two sections. The first six stories, first or third person narratives, do indeed portray experiences, some unique, some mundane, of people living in cultures alien to their own. This includes Japanese living in Cuba, Egypt, Australia and France, a gay Hawaiian living in a small Japanese island town, and an American woman married to a Japanese man, also in small town Japan.

These stories display Kamata’s sharp eye for seemingly insignificant details which later prove to be essential, often ironic, facts. They also reveal her well-tempered sense of humor, which falls just shy of cynicism. In “Hawaiian Hips”, a tale of Victor, a gay Hawaiian hula teacher in love with Jiro, a closeted, local Japanese businessman who he met while the latter was vacationing on Maui, the narrator, an American woman married to another local Japanese businessman and a member of Victor’s hula class, becomes her teacher’s confidante.

As Victor’s relationship problems intensify, the narrator spends more and more time with him at a little bar across from the town hall where the hula class meets. These meetings provide her with some relief from the stresses and boredom of her everyday routine: “I can tell by the way he drinks,” she says; “by the furrows on his forehead, that Victor is in pain. The agony of love is hard to conceal. I listen to his story and pour him another drink because I want to help him, but I’m secretly thrilled. This is better than a soap opera.”

Except for the expatriate theme and settings, the first six stories are unrelated. Beginning with “Mandala”, which foreshadows the last five stories, the book turns to a group of related stories, all dealing with the gynecological and obstetrical complications of an American woman living in Japan with her Japanese husband, a high school teacher and baseball coach. Her medical problems lead first to a pregnancy by in vitro fertilization, which then leads to the conception of twins, a boy and a girl. But the couple’s initial joy becomes a long and trying ordeal when she is forced to give them birth by C-section after just 28 weeks in the womb, and a three-month-long period of incubation in hospital changes the placid lives of the parents as the preemies struggle to survive and the parents struggle to cope, and finally, to adapt.

Kamata tells the story of the birthing and incubation trauma in the story “You’re So Lucky” using the second person address narrative technique: “But then you see your newborn twins are trussed up with wires and tubes.” She then goes on to tell the same story from the father’s perspective, told by a third person narrator: “...Coach Hideki Yamada...slept only a few hours the night before, having stayed at the hospital with his wife Christine until after midnight, after which he’d gone home and worried about the batting order for another couple of hours.”

Since the bio notes tell us that Kamata was editor of the anthology *Love You to Pieces: Creative Writers on Raising a Child with Special Needs*, we might be tempted to see the last five stories as autobiographical. However, as she showed in her formidably well-edited and compiled anthology *The Broken Bridge*, which featured fiction from expatriate writers in “literary” Japan, Kamata understands the broader range of fic-

(continued on page 19)



**The Beautiful One Has Come**  
Suzanne Kamata  
Wyatt-MacKenzie Pub.  
210p. \$15.00



Suzanne Kamata

# SONGS FROM A YAHY BOW

*John Carroll*

**S**cott Ezell’s inspiration for *Songs from a Yahy Bow* was the hundredth anniversary of Ishi’s surrender to white settlers in the Mount Lassen foothills of northern California. Ishi (a name given to him, for he never revealed his true name) was the last surviving member of the Yahy or Mill Creeks, a sub-group of the Yana tribe. His tribe was systematically wiped out in a process that can only be called genocide, the common fate of Native Americans due in part, at least in this region, to the “trauma of California gold,” as Thomas Merton describes it. Ishi’s story became more widely known when Theodore Kroeber published his 1961 biography *Ishi in Two Worlds*.

When Ishi was first discovered crouching in the tall grass by a slaughterhouse in the vicinity of Oroville, California, the first instinct of the teenager who found him was to club him with a pig gambrel since no Yahy had been seen in the area for twelve years and they had generally been considered a threat to the white settlers. Ishi and the few remaining members of his family had been in hiding all that time. Ishi was rescued by a professor from the anthropology department at Berkeley and he lived out his remaining four years in San Francisco in an anthropological museum where he worked as caretaker and sometimes “live exhibit.” Known as “the last wild American Indian,” Ishi died of tuberculosis in 1916. Gary Snyder has referred to Ishi as “the patron Bodhisattva of our Northern California nation.”

Scott Ezell has attempted to put together what he calls not an anthology but a work whose “parts combine into an integrated whole.” These parts include Mike O’Connor’s poem-cycle from the 1970s entitled “Song of Ishi”; “Quatrains for Ishi” by Yusef Komunyakaa from his *Thieves of Paradise*; Scott Ezell’s own collection entitled “Ishi”; and finally, an essay by Thomas Merton from the 1960s, “Ishi: A Meditation.” Inserted between these selections is a series of paintings by Jeff Hengst. As an integrated whole, the work is tasteful and evocative.

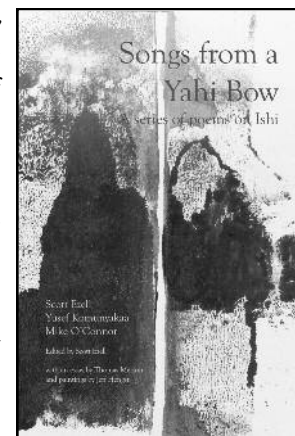
In some ways the book is an effort to see our modern world through Ishi’s eyes. For example, O’Connor writes “A plane is nothing when you see the Hawk/Don’t feel bad, but a skyscraper/is a poor mountain.” This same reflection on what would Ishi think is apparent in O’Connor’s “Thinking of Ishi While Reading the Want Ads.” Naturally, this kind of thinking brings out the contrasts and conflicts between the two worlds, Ishi’s and ours. Ezell writes “I am a benevolent bear,/wasted with circus tricks . . ./we are chains and cages,/we are free.”

Ezell’s particular focus, as he suggests in his introduction, is his “own sense of living in two worlds,” for which he finds an obvious and direct connection with Ishi. Ezell eloquently writes:

*Ishi existed in public consciousness as “what we have destroyed”; and by the 21st century maybe we have begun to recognize him as “what we are”—and to realize as industrial society paves over ecosystems, languages, and indigenous cultures, we destroy not some abstraction or “other,” but ourselves, and that the erosion of human and natural diversity diminishes us all.*

Much of Mike O’Connor’s poetry attempts to catalogue that lost world: “You know the joy/the acorn’s ripeness brings.” He often uses an array of imagery to effect this recreation: “Fawn cry, arrow whiz,/snake rattle, coyote yip,/water fall, timber creak,/fire crackle and wind pine roar.”

(continued on page 19)



**Songs from a Yahy Bow: Poems about Ishi.**  
Scott Ezell, ed.  
Empty Bowl, 2010



Ishi

# MOONLIGHT IN THE REDEMPITIVE FOREST

Marjorie Romme

Michael Daley's *Moonlight in the Redemptive Forest* is a strongly affecting book, from its striking black and white cover art, "The Child's Song," by Gae Pilon, to the unexpected delights of its accompanying CD, "Frankie The Milkman's Song & Other Poems," composed and read by Daley, accompanied by Brad Killion on guitar. This is a keeper, a book that *should* be read aloud, word by word, line by line, to an audience, if possible, even if only an audience of one.

The patterns in this tight, strongly textured, beautifully crafted, intensely personal collection of poems are not formal, not regular in any conventional way, and readers who are bothered by this may find it easy to get lost in the tangle of shifting times, places, pronouns and tenses, a certain ambiguousness, the persistence of elusive meanings, characters who may be real (and relative), borrowed, reimagined, or flat-out fictional. But as the late Canadian poet Robin Skelton demanded of us, "Why should the novelists have all the fun?"

Daley's language is, as always, intricate and thrillingly evocative, served up in a modified stream-of-consciousness style not unlike that of Eliot, Joyce, or Wolff — a postmodernist feast for the discerning reader.

Nothing in these poems is absolute, except their emotional content, the passion — and occasional humor — with which they are told. Close attention is required to get all the juice from them, as the poet definitely tells his stories slant. Still, there is a narrative of sorts, its shifting shape much like that of the traditional shaman's journey into darkness, transformation, and the return.

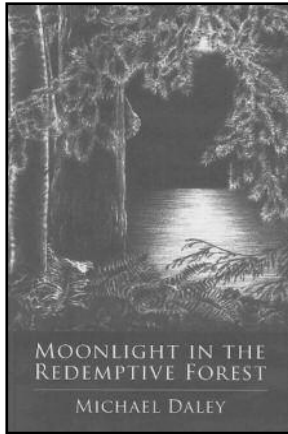
Among significant hinges in this collection are "The Child's Song," so dreamlike, "On Air," and the desperately bitter, funny/sad "The Pariah's Tale," especially the Pariah himself, who seems to have dropped in on us like that man who fell from the moon, afflicted with global amnesia, yet able to survive by doing things that alienate him — even more than he already is — from the unfamiliar country and people around him, stealing fish from the gulls, dropping his pants to the neighbors.

The last lines of this poem are a sucker punch to the gut: "Who will love me? Who will want me now? ... I have drifted so far from the map now everybody's angry." It's the question we all ask, pretty much every day of our lives. The speaker's plaintive cry reminds me of that old man of Chaucer's, knocking on the earth, pleading, "Mother! Let me in!"

There are deep affinities, which took me a while to unravel, between "The Pariah's Tale" and "The Second Father's Tale." Together, they make a darker forest, a more luminous moonlight, for "The Child's Song" to shine through. "On Air," its speaker in so many ways Daley himself, his childhood and adolescence, his drifting, and the sense of redemption at finding himself at home here in the Pacific Northwest, acts as a very long coda to "The Child's Song."

Elusive meanings — part of the complexity we look for in poetry — are everywhere in *Moonlight*, if one pays attention and has done the necessary reading. I don't at all mind admitting Daley has sent me back to Eliot and Chaucer...maybe even to Ashbery, though I'm still thinking about him — that perpetual sense of listening, through the wrong end of a drinking glass pressed against a motel room door, to a quiet and somehow disjointed conversation taking place in the room on the other side, frustrates me right out of my skin, and to begin with, Daley did too.

The poems in *Moonlight* seem almost hallucinogenic, but that's the way memory and consciousness work. Listening to the CD that accompanies the book, hearing the poet speak his poem, "Frankie the Milkman" and others, points up the humor, the despite-everything buoyancy of the cozily humdrum everyday that co-exists, in this



*Moonlight in the Redemptive Forest*  
Michael Daley  
Pleasure Boat Studio: A  
Literary Press, 2010  
\$16.00, 111 pp, paper



Michael Daley

collection, with what I can only describe as despair. I love that.

It's true that to me — surely I'm not alone — cozies (and Hobbit Holes) often seem safer places to be than the forest, so alien to us in these latter days. But when push comes to shove, few of us seem able to resist the its wild call, though gooseflesh rising along our limbs signals our recognition of dangerous territory ahead, where no moonlight shows us the path, and total darkness threatens to steal our sense of direction, our awareness that others of our kind, and still others not entirely unlike us, are out there too, stumbling around among the roots of ancient, closely crowded trees.

Like most of us, I have — now and then, here and there — made myself an at least temporary pariah. I've been lost in woods of one sort or another many times in my life, desperately afraid of never being found, never finding my way. Oh yes, I do so vividly remember crying out, "Who will love me? Who will want me now?"

In *Moonlight*, Daley shows us the forest is redemptive, moonlight does shine there, at least here and there, now and then — and remade by the journey through it, we can find our way, if we persist, mind our own and the world's past, and attend to the present, to the wild world around us. At least, I would like to think we can.

Marjorie Rommel is a graduate of the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. She has taught creative writing at PLU, Highline and Pierce community colleges over the past 25 years.

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BEAUTIFUL ONE (continued from page 18)

tion's possibilities. Her strength as a short story writer is her control of strong emotional situations, and in this latest collection of her own work she uses finely honed powers of observation and mastery of narrative techniques to avoid the pitfalls of pathos which might trap a less talented author.

Hillel Wright is editor of *Jungle Crows: a Tokyo Expatriate Anthology*. His new book, *River Road: a novel of 6 stories, a sequel to his 2006 novel Border Town*, is forthcoming from Printed Matter Press in April 2012.

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YAH! BOW (continued from page 18)

Ezell does some of the same, but most often his effective imagery moves beyond simple nostalgia: "reams of light stack page by page/across the slush and bray/of slaughterhouse corrals." Or, "sirens unzip the sky . . . /old bums with birdnest beards/suck wine and nicotine/by the back doors/of strip tease matinees—" In contrast, Yusef Komunyakaa dramatizes Ishi's arrival in this new "home":

when they swoop on you hobbled there  
almost naked, encircled by barking dogs  
at daybreak beside a slaughterhouse  
in Oroville, outside Paradise,

California, draped in a canvas scrap  
matted with dung & grass seed,  
slacked-jawed men aim rifles  
at your groin. Wild Man

Merton's essay concludes the collection. His emphasis is on the issue of genocide with a particular focus on a comparison between the Indian Wars and the Vietnam War. The essay, however, still feels modern if one considers all the issues of so-called collateral damage and drone warfare.

Ezell has put together a fine collection. His attempt at an integrated wholeness is manifested in the theme. What is home? What is being at home? Where is home for us today in a world that feels for many increasingly foreign and ironically, or not, more and more engorged with homeless peoples. The final line of Ezell's poem resonates with this theme: "die at home wherever you may be." Ishi comes to represent for him then "an example of regeneration, and the integrity and suppleness of spirit that may come with being 'home' in one's own skin."

John Carroll is a longtime contributor to PRRB. His most recent book is *The Plastic Heart (Ekstasis)*.

# EKSTASIES 2012

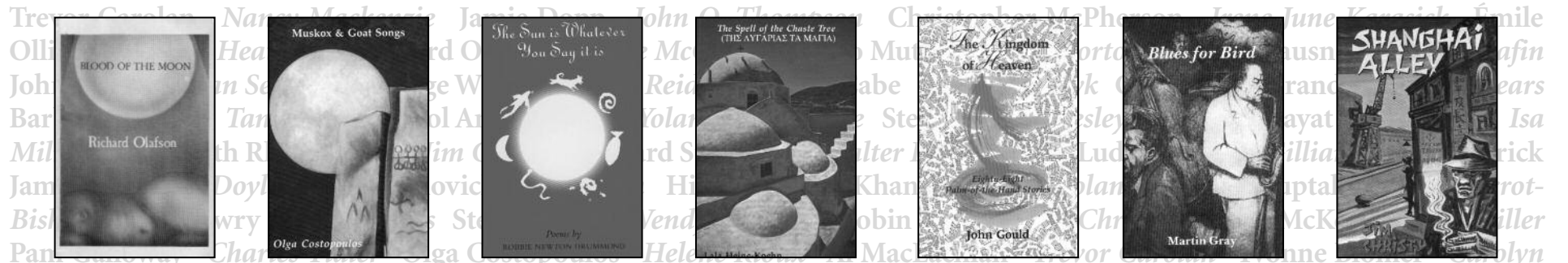
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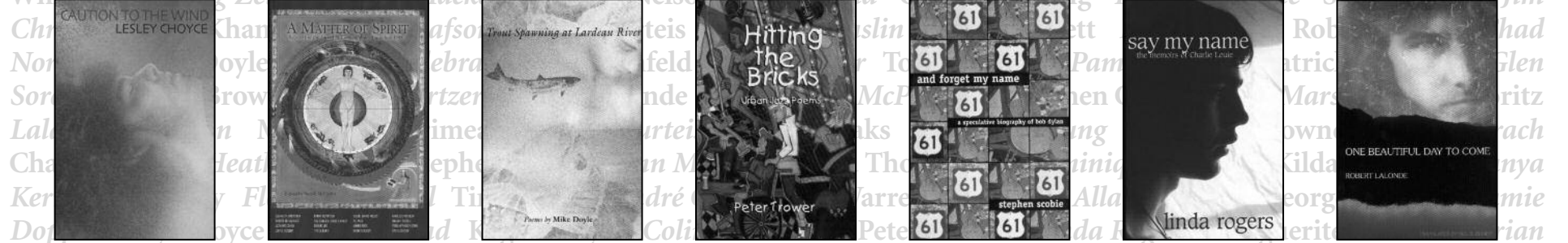
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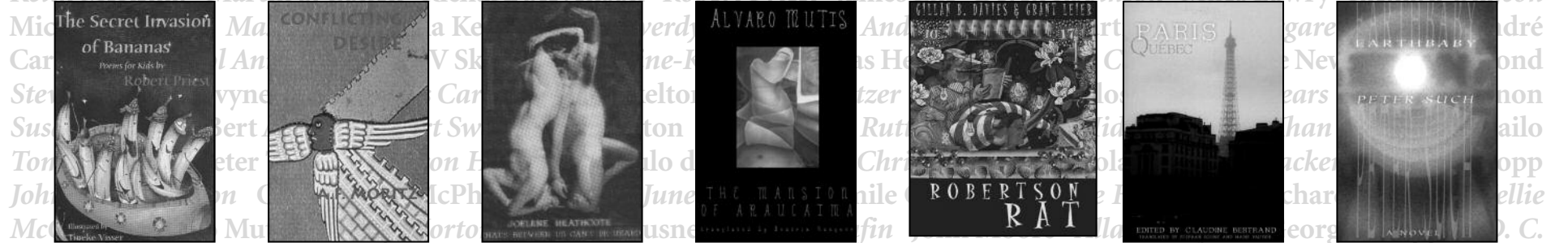
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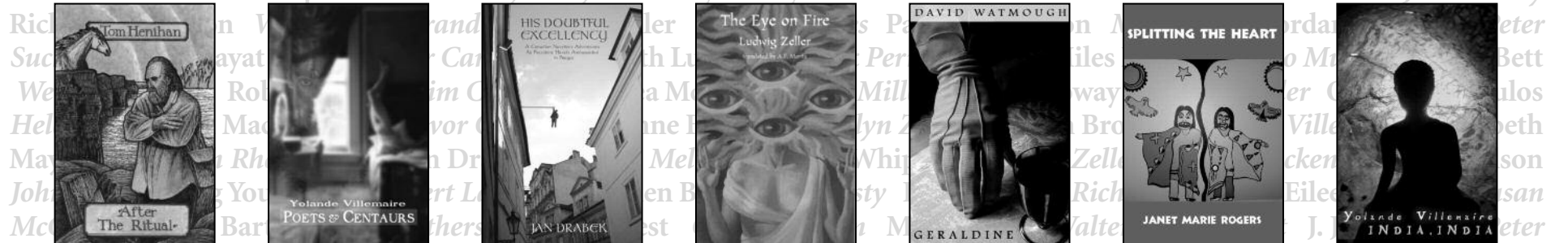
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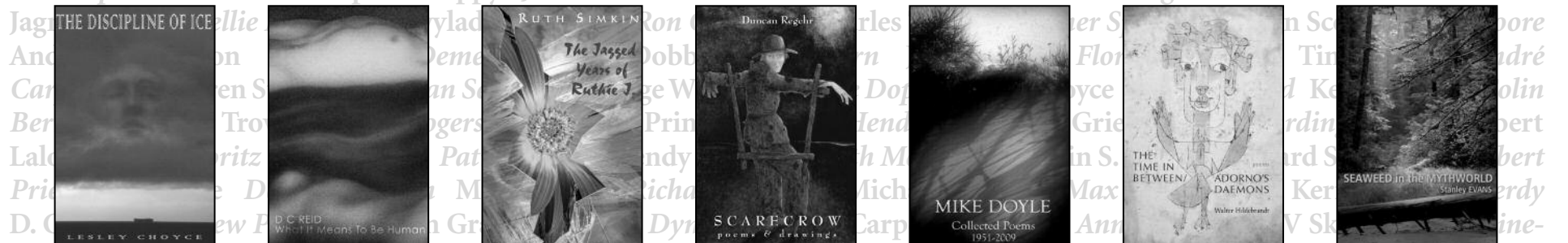
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# TRAVAILS OF A SIKH-CANADIAN WOMAN

*Eric Spalding*

Many Sikh-Canadians live in Surrey, the vast suburb in which I live. Seeing them in my walks and drives around town, I've often thought that it would be fascinating to read a novel written by one of them. What is their experience of BC? What are their private lives like? Unfortunately, I did not know of any novel written by a Sikh-Canadian. Then I came across *Everything Was Good-Bye* by Gurjinder Basran.

The front flap of the book announces that it was "winner of the Search for the Great BC Novel Contest, chosen from sixty-four manuscripts." The book also won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize at the 2011 BC Book Awards. To me, *Everything Was Good-Bye* is indeed a winner. For one thing, I definitely got my Sikh-Canadian perspective as Meena, the narrator, offers the reader an intimate look at her life.

In the first few chapters, she is 17, living with her mother and sisters in North Delta in 1990. The story subsequently jumps forward, to capture this woman as a 24-year-old and, later still, as a 28-year-old in the winter of 2002. The author is adept at making this and the other main characters come alive. The narrator's mother, notably, is an ominous presence throughout the book. Very conventional in her values, she tries to restrain her daughter, disapproving of her interests in Western fashion, music and, especially, men.

In its broad lines, this story has been told many times before. The conflict between the traditional parent and the freedom-loving child is a commonplace of novels and movies about immigrants to North America. The other main storyline is not especially original either: the narrator is torn between two men, a successful but cold lawyer of Sikh descent that her family wants her to marry and a sensuous free-thinker whom Meena loves but whom her family does not approve of because he is "gora" (white) and a little too wild in his ideas and behaviour. (I recently read *The Razor's Edge* by W. Somerset Maugham, in which the female protagonist faces a similar dilemma: should she enter into a loveless marriage with the rich man who will help her maintain her social standing or elope with the love of her life who offers adventure but no hope of financial security?)

In Basran's defence, I have to acknowledge that there are only so many stories to be told, as Vladimir Propp demonstrated decades ago in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. The originality of the novel lies in the author's focus on the Sikh-Canadian community and many issues of relevance to it, such as the contrast between tradition and modernity, prejudice against Sikhs in Canada, family pride and honour, the caste system, arranged marriages and domestic violence. Moreover, the plot is well thought out: it unfolds in a manner that is consistent with the characters' personalities and their situations. Also, from the perspective of how the book ends, you recognize that Basran has carefully set her story up to build logically towards the final chapters, which are quite dramatic.

The writing at times seems precious: "Thin clouds that pulled apart like spun sugar covered the tops of buildings, obscuring the streets below and hiding the sky in grey fibres that made me want to unravel" (p. 177). Yet it can also be direct. I liked for instance the following passage in which Meena expresses her reservations about the Sikh-Canadian lawyer, telling her mother that she is "not sure" about him. Her mother is incensed:

*"Not sure, you are not sure," she said, nodding her head. "I was not sure when I married your father and moved to England, had six children and*



*Everything Was Good-Bye*  
Gurjinder Basran  
Mother Tongue Publishing  
2010, 262 pages



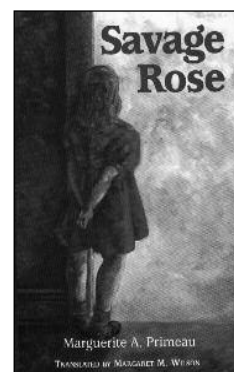
*Gurjinder Basran*

*then moved to Canada. I was not sure what I would do when your father died and I had to raise all of you alone. I was not sure while I emptied ash-trays or picked berries twelve hours a day to put you through school. I was not sure how to make a better life for you and now you tell me that you are not sure," she said without taking a breath. "Meena, sometimes in life you must do the things you are unsure of." (p. 91)*

Basran is a talented writer and I hope that she publishes another novel. Her description of the Sikh community and its issues seems very comprehensive, but I'm certain that she can explore other aspects of this world, or move on to other worlds entirely. I would be very interested in seeing the results.

*Eric Spalding writes from British Columbia's Fraser Valley where he teaches Communications and Media Studies.*

This issue of the *Pacific Rim Review of Books* is dedicated in part to the memory of Ekstasis author Marguerite Primeau (1914-2011).  
Novelist and teacher, she will be missed.



ISBN 978-1-896860-41-1  
*Savage Rose*  
Fiction  
6 x 9, 146 Pages  
\$17.95

**Marguerite Primeau**

*author of*

**Savage Rose**  
**The Totem**

In *Savage Rose* a woman after travelling the globe, trying to escape childhood disappointment and refusing to love. Finally, she returns to the west coast of Canada to survey a personal history of devastation and revenge, confronting the bitter spirit in herself who replaced the freely loving child of nature she once was.

The six tales in *The Totem* demonstrate Marguerite Primeau's mastery of the story-teller's craft. Her writing is poetic and dream-like, with deft characterization and a gift for interior dialogue, bestowing on ordinary moments a startling intensity.



ISBN 978-1-896860-79-4  
*The Totem*  
Stories  
5 x 8, 128 Pages  
\$18.95

Marguerite Primeau was born in Saint Paul, Alberta on May 10, 1914. She taught in rural schools in an era when young teachers were billeted with local families. She lived in France and Italy before returning to Canada where she received the first Masters of Arts in French from the University of Alberta. She first came to Vancouver in 1954. She later became Associate Professor Emerita of the UBC French department. Having written her novels in French, Primeau had little recognition in the English writing community until Margaret Wilson translated her fourth novel, *Sauvage Sauvignon*. It was launched in its English version as *Savage Rose* at the Paris International Book Fair in the spring of 1999. Memories of a fairytale childhood are the basis for *Savage Rose*, winner of the Prix Champlain for the best novel written in French in North America (1986). As an under-heralded five-time novelist, Primeau died at age 97 in Vancouver, at Vancouver General Hospital, on October 29, 2011.

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# OPERA BUFA

Amy Henry

**O**pera Bufa is the latest collection of poetry from the Greek poet Manolis, who now resides in British Columbia. A departure from his more serious poetry of the past, this collection toys with the ideas of Albert Camus and his concept of absurdism. The result is at times comic, poignant, and often striking in the truth revealed in illusions.

"In Camus' works...his emphasis had been on the presentation of the absurd as a crisis for the self's yearning for lucidity and meaning in a world that is opaque and unresponsive." And yet he further explains that "the sensibility of the absurd is not born out of any dark, morbid sense of nihilism, but is the result of a certain love and longing for life" (Thoyakkat 3).

Camus contrasted, with his *Myth of Sisyphus*, how poorly the purposed, meaningful life fits in a world of chance and unpredictable outcomes. Essentially, how can one find meaning if no meaning is to be had-do they continue to persevere or give up? Camus acknowledged that some find purpose with a belief in a higher-power God figure, while others live for the moment, intending to enjoy the here-and-now rather than live for a distant and possibly nonexistent future.

In a different avenue of entertainment, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the 'theatre of the absurd' found its way into popular culture, when operas were designed to appeal to the common, working man and to the topics particular to such. These "Opera Buffas" were a place for an ordinary man to laugh at the inconsistencies of his existence and featured a comic take on life's painful travails.

Pablo Neruda followed along this style with his "La United Fruit Co." poem, which examined the good and evil forces in the same comedic fashion while tackling the serious subject of the US and the 'Banana Republics' of Latin America (Fernandez 109).

Manolis takes this idea further in his *Opera Bufa*, which is decidedly more humorous, and creates altering poems of Hour and Canto in a 24 hour day that tweaks the concept of absurdism. He contrasts two types of individual: one that seeks to improve their lot in life, and the other that responds to complexities with a "who cares" attitude. In each Hour, an ironic personage dismisses the attempts at meaning with an aggrieved "who cares," while by contrast, in each altering Canto, the other reaction, to virtually the same experience, is to diligently respond "we can do better." Both sides expose their own sort of absurdism in relationship to how they view the world.

To illustrate: in the Fourth Hour, God appears and intervenes:

*He elects  
To throw punches at  
Old philosophically-hardened  
Death who laughs His guts  
Out sending up a pair of  
Devils disguised with velvet  
Veils to reduce the game  
To a parody of errors while  
Despicable people persist at  
Loving and sharing things  
Like nothing happened  
An absurdity of seriousness*

While in Fourth Canto, the viewpoint is different: devils and veils appear yet again, but this time

*turn ever-prosperous  
Fears to maverick months without  
Songs eluding to the graveness of this  
Absurdity and soil negates its  
Passive resolve to non-involvement*



*Opera Bufa*  
Manolis  
Libros Libertad  
paper, 2010

*With opera music and spirited  
Fervor of lovemaking shredding even  
The stiffest veil of darkness...*

Their ascent to earth, despite their cynicism and mocking of the pathetic humans and their rites of love, leaves these veiled devils touched with jealousy of the human condition, no matter how absurd it may have seemed to them. Similarly, in the Fifth Hour and Fifth Canto, the dichotomy of "great with minor" and "light and dark" still inspires its observers to yearn "we can do better" despite the Fifth Hour's inability to resolve the awe of colors and light and could only respond with "who cares".

Using his poems, Manolis dissects the problem of evil that Camus so articulately defined, even quoting portions of Camus' theories. To Camus, the problem was the two disparate options: "...either we are not free, and God...is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful." The two opinions plague both the angelic and demonic forces who jostle for the more relevant position. Manolis seems intent on showing how frustrated the human creature is to discern his place and his purpose when even supernatural powers are confused.

In the Twenty-First Hour, Death appears again as a dubious savior when physical disease has worn down the human:

*nothing remains but need  
For a colder heart and  
Death to re-emerge as savior at  
A moment of need with His foul  
Breath and missing teeth although  
He filters the hopeless gap  
Between ordinary and absurd  
Choice and picks who  
To take who to leave behind for  
The next round of emotional  
Excitement...*

But a far more peaceful picture of imminent death appears in Twenty-First Canto:

*My voice softly caressing your earlobes  
And your new path searches for another  
Day declaring that scattered  
Songs and lullabies  
Bring up your memory until all that  
Was past is present....*

All these contrasts, along with the unexpected juxtapositions of ordinary themes make this collection one that is difficult to both predict and put behind. The concepts succeed in seriously challenging attitudes while comically illustrating the often illogical beliefs that we cling to.

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*Amy Henry is a book reviewer who also reviews books for her website <http://www.the-blacksheepdances.com>.*



*Manolis*

# PAUSE FOR BREATH

Yvonne Blomer

Quiet and formal is the voice of Robyn Sarah in this collection of poems that capture moments of simplicity, place, and movement in lines and poems that are measured and deliberate. Sarah is an observer of the world who finds what resonates in the breath, the night, the clock and yawn. What I hear most clearly in a first read of this collection is PK Page. Something of that playful formality in free verse is familiar and is echoed in many of Page's poems.

Perhaps because of where I am in life, mother to a five year old boy, one of the poems that resonated personally is "Lowly" a poem inspired by Richard Scarry's Lowly Worm. The title of the poem brings with it all the familiar worm characteristics and allows the poem to get down to praising the worm in the real world:

*Pink as discarded chewing gum  
it comes to the surface in rain.  
Segmented like bellows.  
Hoisting its length in sections  
along puddled asphalt.*

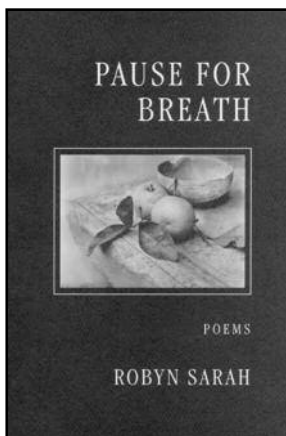
Meticulously detailed, the poem praises the worm for its worm-ness. Something Don McKay might call a "thing poem" where the object becomes thing again through the poem.

There are many poems in this collection that are in quiet praise of things. In the poem "Clock Song" Sarah writes:

*Time creeps, time flies.  
Clocks keep it and tell it,  
tick it and tock it,  
stand watch on a mantel  
or hide in a pocket.*

This is the very kind of poem which has a certain way of addressing a thing that recalls for me PK Page's poetry. Sarah has a playful yet authoritative voice in these poems. She gives a glimpse of a thought or an image – something captured through the window of a moving train, or when looking up suddenly to see a treadmill, in a new way.

Though I'm fascinated by how the poems resonate and recall PK Page and I enjoy some of the moments captured as if in a still-life, I also feel a lacklustre response from my reading mind. Nothing particularly pops out at me and catches me off-guard. That sustaining quiet contemplation feels almost too still to hold. There is a feeling of ho-



*Pause for Breath*  
Robyn Sarah  
Biblioasis, 2009

hum that happens in that moment of pause between breaths. But, perhaps, that is life.

When I open the book up at random, and read "Blowing the fluff away" a poem about a dried sprig of flowers the narrator is going to throw away, and how the flowers somehow represent a friendship come to an end. She takes the flowers and steps outside to blow off the dead petals which represent also the friendship: "-Fooled! for the fluff was nothing but a sheath,/ with tiny, perfect flowers underneath." Here a quiet little delight of surprise in the poem draws a similarly quiet smile out of its reader. In these slow rhyming lines lies the discovery of a simple truth. And perhaps this is the way to read this collection of poems, not poem by poem like a novel, but dip in from time to time when you need a moment of pause, when you need a reminder of the small joys sung in quiet lines:



Robyn Sarah

*Brush*

*Always a wild openness  
to the left and right of our path,  
a humming in the high grasses.  
what is it holds u to our course?*

*A pagan recklessness in my past  
makes me conservative.*

*Today when I was reading on the balcony  
a bee buzzed my knuckle, close enough  
for me to feel the wind of his wings,*

*and all day long I have gone on feeling  
the wind of those wings.*

Yvonne Blomer's first book a broken mirror, fallen leaf was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. She has twice been shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards and has been published widely in Canada and abroad.

## Ekstasis Noir from Al MacLachlan

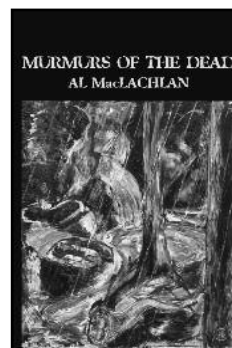
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# ANDRÉ MALRAUX: TOMB ROBBER

*Jim Christy*

Before he was Minister of Culture for France, head of an air squadron in the Spanish Civil War, Resistance hero, famous novelist and revered art critic, André Malraux was a tomb robber. As brazen as any other desecrating thief, the future great man went into the Cambodian jungle in 1923 with hired help, and came out with a couple of temple panels bearing friezes. One might say these were the first stones in his eventual monument of mythomania.

Young André had realized as a young art-obsessed literary hustler back in Paris that Khymer art was the hot thing and he intended to get him some of it. He knew also that a colonial regulation of 1908, declared that any art discovered in Cambodia had to remain in situ. Malraux didn't care.

He journeyed overland from Saigon to the Mekong River and sailed up to Phnom Penh. Almost ninety years later, I followed his route by bus and freighter canoe.

You half expect a crescendo of temple bells and booming organ chords to accompany the Silver Palace as it rises out of the plain to herald Phnom Penh, and the Mekong gracefully merges with the Tonle Sap. Malraux stayed in town just long enough to meander through the outdoor market and sip rum and sodas along Sisowath Quay.

The Tonle Sap River flows out of the lake by the same name and you can travel by boat to Siem Reap, ten kilometers from Angkor Wat. Siem Reap was a sleepy backwater in 1923 but is a thriving small city now with every grade of hotel to appeal to the foreigner, and there are plenty of them here, most waiting to go out to Angkor Wat and hoping to perhaps get a glimpse of Angelina Jolie, who owns property in the area and who only *played* in a movie called *Tomb Raider*.

As there are musical combos for one's entertainment and sympathy, groups made up of landmine victims: legless guitarists, one-armed drummers and the like.

Angkor Wat is probably the most spectacular "ruin" in the world. So splendid is it, the complex is overrun by tourists. Angkor Wat has outlived the civilizations that built it and the Pol Pot regime that systemically defaced it but it may be defeated by tourism. In 1993 there were 7,500 visitors; last year nearly a million.

Angkor Wat wasn't secluded in 1923 either, therefore, Malraux and his party decided to move on, having heard of a ruin called Bantey Srei. He found it and started immediately to try and cut out panels. After several days working with chainsaws picks and crowbars, the party succeeded in detaching a few friezes. These they loaded on to oxcarts to be shipped out of the jungle. Eventually, they got their treasure, stored in camphorwood trucks labeled "Chemical Products", on board a steamer bound for Saigon. André was asleep that first night when the police knocked on his door. His jungle adventure had lasted ten days.

By the time, I reached Bantey Srei, built in the tenth century and dedicated to Shiva, it resembled a miniature Angkor Wat with its own tourist buses and digital camera-pointing hordes. I was traveling with a couple of soldiers from Platoon 37, Unit Six of the Cambodian Mines Action Committee (CMAC). I had spent a couple of days in the bush with the unit as it cleared land mines and gathered unexploded ordnance, known as UXOs. We got out of the jeep the better to observe the scene. I wondered what my friends were thinking. There was absolutely nothing in the picture to call to mind anything remotely resembling Malraux's escapade. The temple could have been at Disneyland.

We drove northwest fifty kilometers to a place known as Beng Melea where they let me off. Beng Melea is a vast crumbling temple complex situated along the banks of the Kbal Spean river. CMAC had been working here weeks before but the men warned me there were mines still under the rubble. Wherever possible they had been marked with red 'x's, or with a death's head on a red flag.

The entire place was "guarded" by a pleasant-looking old character sitting at a card table in the shade of a silky oak tree. I walked past him and into an archaeologist or adventurer or antiquity thief's fantasy. I thought of how Malraux, in *The Royal Way*,

his Cambodian novel, described his first sight of Bantey Srei, "It looked like a mason's yard invaded by the jungle."

A mason's yard where every stone was worth a small fortune and the stones bore friezes, parts of stelae and overturned statuary, and every other face wore the famous *aspara* smile. It's all just lying there. Easy to pick up and carry away. I knew ways to get some of this priceless stone out of the country. There had been advances in "chemical products" since André's day and ways to disguise the friezes. Bribery, however, existed in 1923 and is still around. I often wondered why he hadn't just slipped a few francs to the arresting officer. It must never have occurred to him.

I had been told by the UNESCO program specialist in Phnom Penh that thieves had stolen a half-metre-tall head of Vishnu right here along the Kbal Spean. "Just went in one night with a chainsaw and cut it out." She assured me that the river was well-protected now by "armed guards." The only guard I encountered as I hiked for five kilometers along the river was a kid who looked about twelve years old but assured me he was sixteen. He wore overalls and flipflops, and wasn't packing.

In the rainy season, the Kbal Spean carries water from the highlands to irrigate the rice fields far below Beng Melea. On the stone bed of the river and visible only in the dry months are carved vaginas, with prominent labia and clitoris; they assure a pleasant harvest and a fertile rice crop. The river is lined with statuary and sometimes one's mind visualizes it as colonnade meandering through an open-air museum, (a concept devised by Malraux).

Malraux was eventually taken to Saigon and placed under house arrest. In Paris, his wife Clara gathered support from prominent people that led to her husband being released.

Malraux went on to become a great man and is ensconced in the Parthenon.

Me, I got on a small flat bed truck carrying workers to the Laos border that was an hour away. I had no intention of smuggling but I wanted to test the waters so to speak. I toted a bulky, black shoulder bag but the border guards were not inclined to look inside.

*Jim Christy is the author of almost 30 books in many genres. A poet, novelist, essayist, journalist, raconteur and traveler, he currently makes his home in Ontario. He has a book of tales called Jackpots forthcoming Ekstasis Editions.*



André Malraux



André Malraux

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# WATCHING THE RAIN FALL IN HILO TOWN

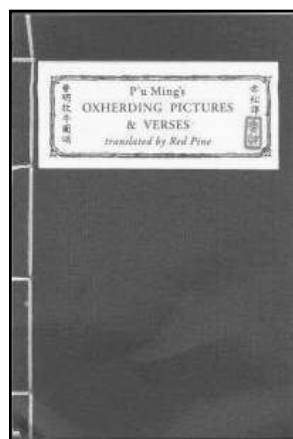
Trevor Carolan

For thirty years we've journeyed to the Hawaiian islands, mostly in northern wintertime and it's always medicine. Maui and Honolulu draw the sun-tourists and all that goes with it. Both great in their own ways but the big island, Hawai'i, has more space than all the others and is far less visited. Nowadays, Kona-Kailua on the west coast where King Kamehameha, unifier of the islands in 1810, came home to die is the island's only really busy strip and its five or six blocks of waterfront hotels, inns and bars makes some noise, but that's what constant sunshine and palm trees will do when there's an airport nearby. It was different when Mark Twain came in 1866 during his four-month Hawaiian sojourn. That was before a *coup d'état* by wealthy American planters deposed Queen Liliuokalani, author of the beloved hymn *Aloha Oe* which still serves as the unofficial anthem here. Thirty-two years after Twain's visit the islands were annexed by the U.S., and became a state in 1959.

The islands' volcanic-cone topography is fairly consistent; the tradewinds blow in warm and moist from the west and south, hit the peaks and the rains fall. One side wet and jungly, other side bright, dry and home to the beach resorts. We love shady-side Hilo, its worn South Seas funkiness. The old aloha is always here if you're willing to slow down and invite it in. The big island's east coast from Laupahoehoe southward is always rugged, not your barged-in white sand that tourists love. Hilo's higher end accommodations, a few, are on Banyan Drive at the south end of the bay, and there are backpacker digs in town and just over the Wailuku River, five minutes walk from downtown. The spartan, but lush and friendly Wild Ginger Inn on Puueo St. and the costlier Dolphin Bay nearby are worth checking out. Hilo's farmer's market on Wednesday and Saturday is the best you'll find until Chiang Mai a long way to the west in Thailand, and Tomas Belsky's woodblock prints capture the feel of old Hilo town better than anyone. Browse around and they don't take much digging to find. You can pick 'em up for a song. At Suisan Fish Market's snack-shack over at the end of Banyan Drive, the characters he depicts slicing up giant tuna walk right out of the frame and plant themselves beside you talking about the snow up on Mauna Kea 13,700' in the near distance. We've always reckoned the local *hula* here in Hilo gets you in the heart as much as what you'll find on Molokai'i where legend says it all began. Folks like working hard around here, but not too hard, and when they dance it's all nectar. The aunties start swaying and bringing down the soul with their paradise tai chi and when singers like Uncle Stan Kaina come in with the ukelele and the unique island falsetto you won't find a dry eye in the house. Catch them at the historic Palace Theatre on Haili Street, Wednesdays at the unlikely time of 11 am. At \$5 a seat you can't afford to miss 'em.

Ocean Seafood is a great Japanese-style place to eat, Bear's Coffee, K's Drive-in diner up from the new Courthouse, picnics fresh from the market—you eat wonderfully well in Hilo. Keep an umbrella handy though. Rainy days in the tropics are perfect for reading and visiting museums. The East Hawaii Cultural Council in a the colonial-era building on Kalakua Street is worth a call. Over the years I've caught theatre productions of Lois Yamanaka's work in pidgin, and in December we viewed an overpowering exhibition of photographer Wayne Levin's images from the Kalaupapa colony for residents with leprosy/Hansen's Disease. You can learn lot about compassion from the heartbreak in these pictures. An epigraph gleaned from William K. Malo, taken away from his family and sent to the colony in 1940 sums it up. "To Hawaiians," he says, "it was always 'Nui aloha manua a ka mak'u'—Great Love Over Fear."

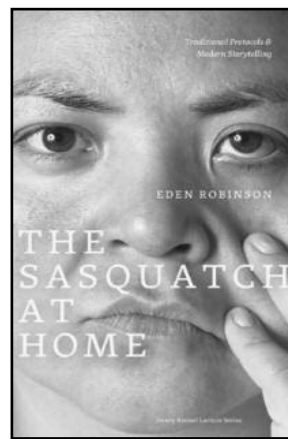
Some quiet-time readings from a Big Island Book Bag:



*P'u Ming's Oxherding Pictures & Verses*. Empty Bowl, Trans. Red Pine. 201, 28 p.

The ten oxherding pictures are a classic of Chinese Buddhist teachings and in one version or another have floated among readers in English since appearing in D.T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism*. As Master Red Pine informs in a brief, rich preface, the earliest edition available to us appeared in 1609. The learned monk Chu Hung who published it didn't know who P'u Ming was, but he knew the work. Versions had circulated since the Sung dynasty (960-1279) P'u Ming's text the translator notes, added something to the series of pictures—the ten paramitas, or “means to the other shore.” As Casey Stengel said, you can look these up, but Red Pine is cor-

rect. These wonderful little teachings linked to the virtues of self-discipline do lead us to the higher heights. Short version: young herdboyc gets dark, angry ox. It's a handful—running off, trampling other peoples' crops. Add a rope through the ox's nose and a switch to wallop its arse—already there's progress, but not easy. A tiny blotch of white appears in the woodblock image of the ox. Step by step there's taming and restraint. It's like training an unruly young dog—the best ones are always a little wild in the beginning. The pair get along; there's music and affection, there are heavenly stars. Steadily there's a transference of colours, then an ending full of stillness. Boy, what a lovely teaching this is—ideal for youngsters and greybeards alike. Every library with the least interest in Asia or the philosophy of religion needs this for its patrons. The images that accompany the Chinese cotton-bound ten epistles are simple and lovely; verses appear in both languages. The epistles hang together as poems, simple and calming. Perfect Zen, perfect Tao. You feel better just holding this book. I couldn't put it down.



*The Sasquatch at Home*, Eden Robinson. Univ. of Alberta, 2011

Since publishing *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson has been one of Canada's most engaging writers. Nothing she publishes goes down easy. Yet to borrow from an old Redbone line, if her books are heavy as a ton of lead, she never makes the mistake of taking herself too seriously—just like Dr. Coyote. Her home range is the Heiltsuk and Haisla First Nations territories ranging from the central to northern B.C. coast, a huge, wild chunk of the map from Bella Bella up to Kitimat (that's roughly from bottom of the Alaska Panhandle, then halfway south to Vancouver). Consider: towering conifers, the Coast Range peaks, grizzlies and salmon country. Nobody writes with such authority from here as Robinson and from her first publications she has never hesitated to throw a punch in telling what it's like to grow up aboriginal in B.C. in these parts, or in East End Vancouver. Her latest work is flat out *delicious* reading, entertaining and informative at same time—I mean, who *wouldn't* want to know more about the Sasquatch? Sub-titled “Traditional Protocols & Modern Storytelling”, the book comprises Robinson's presentations for the Henry Kreisel Lecture Series at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Part one begins with the magic of names and naming among Robinson's people. Important business because you can't potlatch or attend certain feasts without one. Robinson talks to her *Ma-ma-oo*, grandmother, and learns her real name means “Biiiiiig Lady.” That brings up matrilineality and how mom met dad: “My father was a hottie and all the girls wanted to dance with him...” Somehow, that leads to the hard-to-define Heiltsuk concept of *nusa*. It seems odd to morph straight to a week in Memphis with her mom, where they visit Elvis Presley's Graceland home which Mrs. Robinson has yearned to see, but that's the way of it. Storytelling, wonder, history, Elvis. Suddenly we get an inkling about what *nusa* might really mean. Like James Brown, when it comes to modern days storytelling Robinson's got a brand new bag.

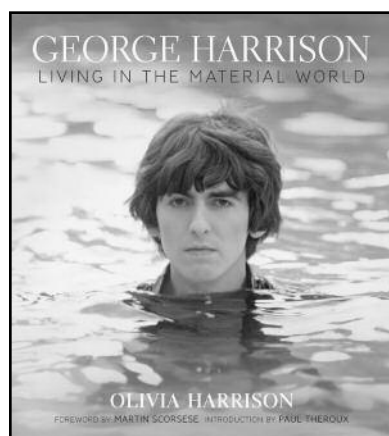


Eden Robinson

In the Kitlope Heritage Conservancy area at Douglas Channel, Robinson turns up more stories by inquiring into the vanishing *oolichan* candlefish runs. Once they ran so thick in springtime rivers here that even immigrant kids could kick them up onto shore with bare feet. Now they're a focus for stark contemplation: “thousands of years of tradition dying with my generation.” You don't need to come from B.C. to feel a lump in your throat when Robinson talks this way. You can see and feel the elders standing around her. *Mea maxima culpa*.

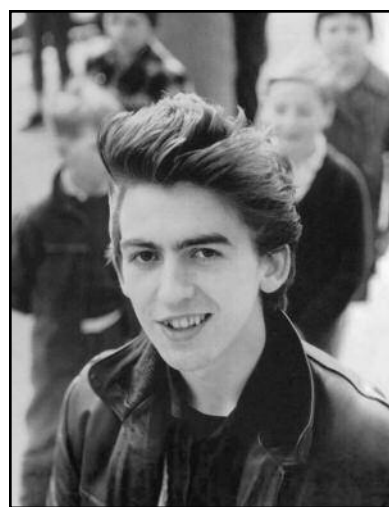
And the mysterious Sasquatch? “These were large, hairy creatures that were reported occasionally in the Q'waq'waksiyas shoreline area just above Bishop Bay” Robinson reports; “and for that reason it is known as Monkey Beach. These Bekwis have come to be called Sasquatches or ‘stick men’ elsewhere...” Oh boy, who doesn't get a little chill at the back of the neck when the Sasquatch might be around, usually

just beyond the reach of urban imagination? That's Robinson's method—righteous storytelling, straight from the heart. With this new one, Robinson further cements her place as a national treasure.



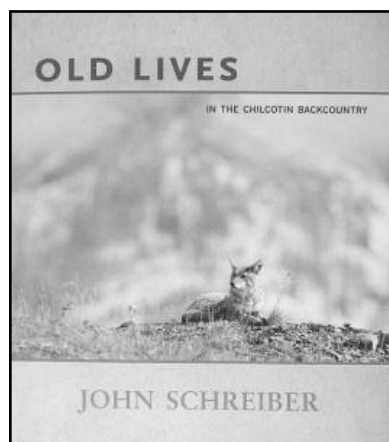
**George Harrison: Living In The Material World.** Olivia Harrison. Abrams, 2011. 400 p. \$45.

For anyone who's ever appreciated George Harrison's work, this book is a keeper. A lovingly, painstakingly researched work by his widow, Olivia, it's a weighty compendium of epigraphs and quotes from Harrison himself, and of interview selections from friends and family, with photographs and ephemera from throughout his life—youthful letters, pages from notebooks, sketches, postcards and holograph letters from his years on the road. Cumulatively it offers a meaningful lens into the slow development of an artist we came to know and love, becoming an official biography of this truly enigmatic modern cultural hero. The remembrances start to add up. From his early schoolyard days in a savagely WW II-bombed Liverpool, through teenage years knocking about in music and on to mega-fame after his celebrated Hamburg sojourn in company of the group who'd become The Beatles, then the long next chapters in which he sustained his creative edge and clearly found great stillness and spirituality, this book tracks it all—and with real acuity of vision. Paul Theroux offers a perceptive guest introduction, so that's a clue to the calibre of the work that follows. The vast collection of photos itself is a treat, serving in some ways as a weather-vane into how we subsequently changed as a culture for Harrison's influence. They show how he came to love nature and gardening. Harrison



A young George Harrison

also loved Hawai'i and his neighbours there cared about him and his family deeply. They still do. So there's a smile in reading his words on first seeing Tahiti—"It blissed me out"—and in sensing his attunement to earthly possibilities in the here and now. From there on, he never seems to have given up on the idea of everyday transcendence in the real world—a teaching he helped bring to an entire generation and now their children. We can be grateful to Olivia Harrison for her tender work in producing this book. There's likely no better way to express the news it brings us all over again than through Harrison's own words: "Each person has to find for himself a way for inner realization. I still believe that's the only reason we're on this planet. It's like going to school again... Everything else is secondary."



**Old Lives.** John Schreiber. Caitlin Press, 2011. 224 p. \$ 22.95

John Schreiber writes authoritatively about Canada's British Columbia backcountry in a way that few others currently match. In his previous book *Stranger Wycott's Place* (2008), he registered a narrative style grounded in sure knowledge of the terrain he travelled about in—a knowledge gained through old-fashioned rambling and gambling on what George Woodcock used to call the luck of the road. While his territory is again the rugged Chilcotin country, I enjoyed this latest work even more. All the local geographic signals are there, but if

anything I'd suggest that Schreiber's narrative tone is now more compassionately resonant. The book's cover image itself sets the work apart: a beautiful red coyote resting on what looks like a scree ridge, big ears cocked. That's our departure cue. We're headed into territory that most folks will never see. What makes *Old Lives* eminently readable from here on is Schreiber's willingness to settle in deeper and poke about in the places the rest of us routinely pass by on the back roads—a collapsing settler's cabin, an old barn, a curious piece of local weather, a trail or viewpoint that deserves a deeper look. Often in company of his partner Marne St. Claire, whose photographs

(continued on page 32)

SCHNACKENBERG (continued from page 6)

truth often comes from unexpected places, if there is any truth anywhere, the Holy Spirit inspires it. But what we have in *Heavenly Questions* are references for an evolutionary universe which result in a kind of pantheism, a geo-politics, a worship of Creation rather than the Creator. This approach seems to abandon Christianity. One can only presume that Schnackenberg has been writing out of the Christian tradition, and tradition does not necessarily translate into belief. Academics are quite capable of this intellectual approach but academics do not write "Supernatural Love." Given the strength of her finest poems, I couldn't help but notice the absence of her Christian sensibility.

*Heavenly Questions* opens with "Archimedes Lullaby." The apparently effortless unfolding (but oh what effort, what talent, what technique!) of line after iambic pentameter line, sublime beauty of cadence and end rhyme to enhance the symphonic effect that sets the stage for the final stage of her husband's impending demise:

*And all is well now, hush, now, close your eyes,  
And one...by one...by one...by one...by one  
The flakes of mica gold and granite crumbs  
Materialize, and dematerialize.*

Note the comma notation in the last line. And the bitter irony of the consolation of the repetition that occurs throughout the six poems: "And all is give-and-take, all comes and goes,/ And hush now, all is well now, close your eyes." She makes her loss our loss, her husband's death in the end brought to light in a sophisticated cantata of love overflowing with compassion. We are at the beginning of a magnificent flowering.

The following "Sublimaze" is a 16-page of one of the many nights she spent in the hospital by his side but it is so much more. No quotation can do it justice. What catches the eye and the ear is the way she employs repetition as pulse or pattern (dare I say heartbeat?) in lines that move from poem to poem as a kind of refrain. It is a technical achievement of the first order.

In the third poem, "Venus Velvet No. 2" her pencil writes:

*The surgeon, seeking only my surrender,  
Has summoned me: an evening conference.  
We sit together in the Quiet Room.  
He cannot ask for what I'm meant to give.  
No questions anymore. Just say he'll live.  
...Smell of sweat embedded in my clothes.  
The surgeon says" we've talked with him; he knows.  
A seraph leaning near: Oh say not so.*

Do we need to know the cause? Dear Reader, we do:

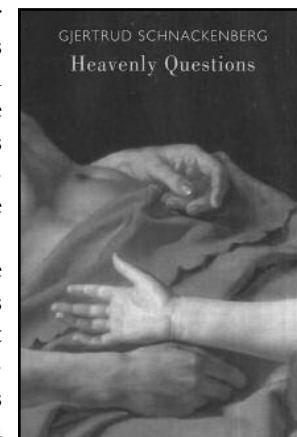
*A pinpoint leak of blood that can't be traced.  
A mass embedded underneath the heart.  
Hepatic portal vein that routes the blood  
Throughout the tract of the intestine maze  
And soaks the liver's capillary beds.  
The intima. A bleeding deep inside,  
Something smaller than a grain of sand.*

The questions continue to come. "The universe is where? Is hanging where? "Is matter the enchanted lathe? Or mind?/ But which one spirals from the other's blade?" In "Fusiturricula Library" the repetition of certain lines ("and all's well now, hush now, close your eyes"), images and words (lullabies, sand, water-ceiling, play, materialize) all contribute to the symphonic nature of these truly amazing poems.

The genesis of the penultimate piece, "The Light Gray Soil", comes as Schnackenberg sits on a park bench three months after his death, still "...seeking the house/ Where no beloved person ever died," one of several reoccurring images that haunt this lovingly polished work of art.

The finale of this requiem in six parts entitled "Bedtime Mahalabharata," is an imaginative re-creating of the Sanskrit epic where Schnackenberg sees the great battle fought by her and her husband as "a tale about the origins of chess." The heavenly

(continued on page 34)



Heavenly Questions, UK cover

# VERSED

## Bill Pearlman

Spending time with *Versed*, Rae Armantrout's Pulitzer Prize winning poetry collection. My friend Geoff Young (The Figures Press) published her first book in 1978. Thought of her as part of the Language Poets, but never could quite dig what any of them were doing, though I knew them through Geoff and Steve Rodefer in the Bay area in late 70s.

This is from Wikipedia about Armantrout:

[Rae Armantrout] was a member of the original West Coast Language group. Although Language poetry can be seen as advocating a poetics of nonreferentiality, Armantrout's work, focusing as it often does on the local and the domestic, resists such definitions[3]. However, unlike most of the group, her work is firmly grounded in experience of the local and domestic worlds and she is widely regarded as the most lyrical of the Language Poets. [4]



*Versed*  
Rae Armantrout  
Wesleyan University  
Press, 2010.

I think it's interesting to note here that they are referring to RA as a lyrical Language Poet. Is this more evidence of the new hybridity? HYBRIDITY. Interesting term...I'm going to look at a couple pieces from *Versed* and see what I can find out. It is oddly strong work, but I'm not completely sure what it is doing.

From the first section of *Versed* ("Versed"):

### Operations

The child fights cancer  
with the help  
of her celebrity fan club,

says  
"Now I know how hard it is  
to be a movie star"

"Hey,  
my avatar's not working!"

The small hawk on a wire  
above tangled flowers.

Speech, too, was thought  
to be inhabited  
by a god.

Then hunger  
invented light.

Odd, quixotic, strangely lyrical, sad, stretching toward a comic despair. Witty, yet not at all consoling, though maybe it is. One gets the sense of a poetic of almost demanding despair/reward simultaneously. A story in disrepair, a hard line of living. But light at the end, invented by hunger.

Or this from the 2nd section, *Dark Matter*:

### Slip

1  
As if we know  
what bliss is

this lozenge  
dissolves,



Rae Armantrout, photo by Rosanne Olson

purple and pink  
a warm largesse,

into the cool sea.

2  
I want to catch  
myself

if only  
in the wrong

as if in the nude  
in a recurring dream.

Contradictory, random, a slip of the tongue, dissolving in words caught in a downward movement to an 'as if' that is modestly redemptive. She takes words we use so glibly, like bliss, and wonders where it can go, metaphorically, poetically, and finds 'largesse' and ending in 'cool sea' and then the finale, 'as if in the nude/in a recurring dream. One word, Slip, leading to other words and ending with something of a formidable (though wrong?), dream, bringing a 'slip' of a song to a concluding beat.

### Anchor

"Widely expected  
if you will,  
cataclysm."

Things I'd say,  
am saying,

to persons no longer  
present.

Yards away trim junipers  
make their customary  
bows.

"Oh, no thank you"  
to any of it.

If you watch me  
from increasing distance,

I am writing this  
always

Irreverent, language from anywhere or nowhere, 'cataclysm' omnipresent on the soundwaves. And yet the desire to say things to others, not present to the writer, gone or distant or... And then the curious rebuke or renunciation of "Oh, no thank you" (to any of it). The cliché turned tormented afterword, but the concluding ascent of 'If you watch me/from increasing distance, I am writing this/always... Tough, anchored in a spread of words that come into meaning step by step. Something hard-edged, like a rock thrown onto shore by a vocal seafaring scout or a figure who listens and then talks, takes and gives back, invisible and yet seen here as the poem.

There is a troubling lyricism in RA's work, a fury or a caricature of a mind disrupted, and yet finding—what? a correlative to her living/dying that makes sense? The final poem in this section:

#### Fact

*Operation Phantom Fury*

\*

The full force  
of the will to live  
is fixed  
on the next  
occasion:

someone  
coming with a tray

someone  
calling a number

\*

Each material  
fact  
is a pose,

an answer  
waiting to be chosen.

"Just so" it says.  
"Ask again!"

Stay with it. The poem as a signal illuminating something/somewhere in the biosphere, the lunging particulars of our bodily existence. Of course, the full force/of the will to live/is fixed/on the next/occasion: All is hanging from the facticity, the objectivity of time that keeps us in the mix, the world, the call, the arrival of another element. Not sure I entirely like the reduction to 'a pose' but it leads to a concluding set of propositions that seem to me slightly (though maybe only slightly) hopeful, if determined also by action: "Ask again," as if in this un-oracular circus of a life we need to keep trying it out, keep finding it out, discovering what we need to keep going.

But a strange, engaging, quick read to each poem, yet I have found myself re-reading some of it. There is something interesting here, and Armantrout may have found some form of hybrid poetry that moves the dynamic of verse forward, perhaps further into language and life itself, the quest for meaning, the Versed-up revival that reminds us of 'the holiness of the heart's affections', amid the sounds and gestures of our words, re-versed here in a new way.

**Bill Pearlman has published several volumes of poetry, including *Brazilian Incarnation: New & Selected Poems* (1967-2004). He divides his time between California and Mexico.**

# COYOTE

## Kevin Watt

Elizabeth Rhett Woods employs two characters in *Coyote: A Tale of Unexpected Consequences* that are not just opposite, they contradict each other in a good way. On one hand there's the main character Zöe, a gritty poet who uses technology (cameras) to better understand the world, and on the other is Peter, a brilliant scientist uncovering a new form of artificial intelligence while seeking human affection.

*Coyote* is art meets science meets life and Woods has created a familiar world where it all takes place. In her version of the often drizzly Vancouver, day-to-day occupation is splashed with discovery, epiphany and outrage. At least that's what Zöe will have you think.

I bet you know a Zöe or, more to the point, know an artist who would love to be her. She's a writer who rattles around the Greater Vancouver Area, including her huge heritage mansion, alternating sips of coffee with tokens of weed tending to her primary responsibilities: scribbling down ideas for future consideration before she forgets them and shooting nature photos.

Zöe's wealth is attributed to an unexpected inheritance from her rich grandfather and it's revealing when people get rich quick. She takes the socially conscious, street-smart life experience she earned scraping by on the minimum-wage margins and combines it with the new found power of a pocketful of blank cheques. Zöe uses her wealth to finance a film-project-turned-protest of heavy-handed U.S. border policies starring an expensive robot Coyote designed for smuggling marijuana over the aforementioned border.

Her economic and creative attitude is best described when she visits the house of an accomplished female filmmaker (who is labelled a mentor, but is treated more as a rival) and describes the nervousness she's feeling by saying, "It wasn't her house which made me uneasy, being less grand than mine..." Instead, Zöe says it's the mentor's enviable film and writing credits and fear of making a fool of herself that makes her uneasy, but when the woman gives suggestions for improving Zöe's script, she ignores them.

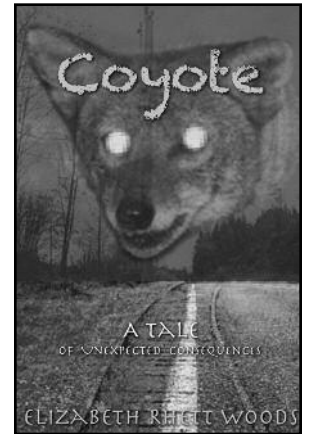
That's Zöe.

Enter *Coyote*: the product of the intellectual union of Zöe and Peter—built with Peter's ingenuity but, in an insightful twist, programmed by Zöe's poetry. The *Coyote* goes from "it" to "she" as its five senses are installed and identity follows through the evolution of consciousness. Inevitably, questions begin to arise around freedom.

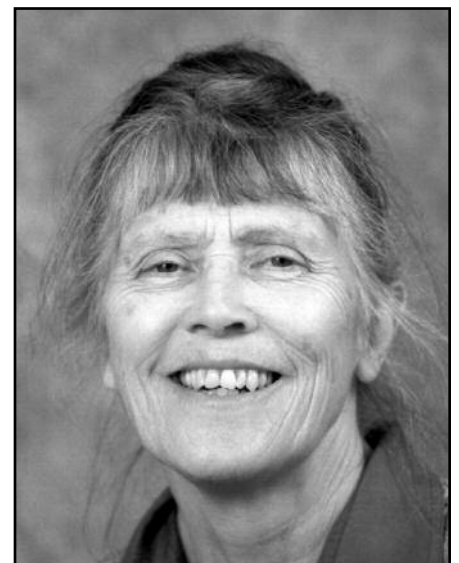
*Coyote: A Tale of Unexpected Consequences* is in many ways like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. However, instead of the creation of life as a means to prove the power of science and related responsibility for it, Zöe sets out to make a political point and unexpectedly creates life.

Zöe is not a mad scientist, she's a left-wing British Columbian writer and *Coyote* is not an abomination, she's an example of the beautiful, useful (as a biker gang with interests in smuggling finds out) and surprising things that come alive both real and learned when human beings pursue art.

**Kevin Watt is the proprietor and publisher of Sudden Publishing Company in Victoria BC.**



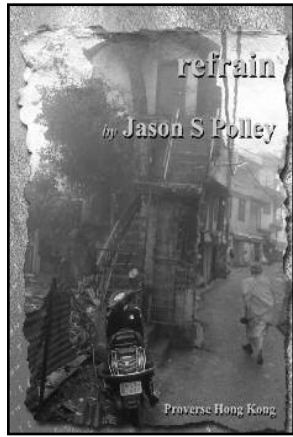
*Coyote: A Tale of Unexpected Consequences*  
Elizabeth Rhett Woods  
Ekstasis Editions, 2011  
\$24.95



Elizabeth Rhett Woods

# REFRAIN

JoAnn Dionne



## refrain

Jason S. Polley  
Proverse Hong Kong  
2010, \$25.00

In twelve poems and less than 67 pages, Jason S. Polley's *refrain* gives us a raucous ride through Northern India more visceral and real than travel tomes five times its size. With the rush of Kerouac's *On the Road*, the word play of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the tumbling lines of Ginsberg's *Howl*, Polley takes us, the reader, the "you" protagonist along with him on his wild, first wide-eyed journey to "incredibleindelible india".

Form and content are one in *refrain*. Words and worlds collide. They come barreling at you like India often does to the first-time visitor, like a

*bigbreakingscreamingorange transporttruckred shiva  
yellinghollering.*

The first poem, "textbooks yelltell truth" is also the longest and perfectly mirrors that jet-lagged surreality where the first days in a strange new land feel like forever. Arriving in Delhi at 3:30 in the morning after more than 26 hours in transit, Polley and his travel buddy,

Denton, fall prey to a taxi driver who tells them their guesthouse-of-choice is unavailable and takes them to another one — an age-old scam. The room is shabby but at least the door locks. Sleep is impossible in Polley's over-exhausted, overly-paranoid state. As dawn creeps over Delhi, he sneaks a peek out the window

*and balcony view cursescompelscatapults you to hide all  
over again.*

Later he ventures out:

*roarrun rickshaw desperate dodge  
and dustfree mercedes disparity  
and realbright hot sun  
and overstepping stillblanketed hopefully stillbreathing  
bodies*

only to

*bustback to bestworstqualityhotelsir hotel  
heavenandhell after brusque offhand horror to  
regroup pulsing mind to fear and trembling  
feelingsweavings of whitedevil pillage  
white privilege*

Later that day, a charming Kashmiri man sells them an expensive trip to Kashmir. They leave that night in a "toomuchgood van", its windshield like a TV screen, the wonder and horror of India reeling past on constant loop:

*armless man aiming stump through  
window in hurried holy hope Baksheeshbaba  
Baksheesh begging  
and His arms bustedbroken off His arms off His arms  
fucking busted off*

After another sleepless night and a long day's drive on the treacherous Jammu Kashmir highway, they finally arrive in

*curfew commanding martialawliving random  
strike day dwelling kill shoot bang think walk in  
groups of three indiacontrolled kashmiri summer  
capital srinigar*

They've been in India less than 48 hours.



Jason S. Polley

The second poem "coughed awake sudden" details their bus journey from Srinigar to "dalailama dharamsala". Or their attempt to get to Dharamsala. After one bus breaks down and another drops them off on the outskirts of a strange town (and nearly takes off with their backpacks), they don't know where they are until, arriving at a government bus station, they see "reallive widewide smiled tibetans" and dharamsala is just "five everlonger hours away".

In "shivers shove eyelids", there are, at last, spaces between the words, spaces that echo the vast silent spaces of a mountain-top monastery. Here Polley catches his breath, inhales and exhales, while a

*cinematic real guru sits  
swollen strong hands shifting prayer beads  
silent mouth mantra meditating  
and big black thermos retipped repoured*

But not for long, because soon Polley is back down on the plains, travelling through a town in mid-festival — or is it mid-funeral? And then he is on a train at a station, chatting out the window with a friendly gentleman, only to discover, minutes before the train is to leave, that someone has stolen his rucksack from the roof rack. A moment of shock, then resigned acceptance:

*you miss your journal and novels for they were  
sleeping in your pack which is now running on  
the back of conniving conspiring disappeared  
friendly language gentlemans accomplices  
unseen longgone quick crafty hands*

The prose speeds up, as does the reader's heart rate, when Polley races down the platform searching for his pack. He finds it, just in time. We sigh relief as he sinks back into his seat on the train and hangs his

*biggerburdennow bag on hook  
knowing there are light bulbs watching and surer  
plots pondered and This is india*

Soon, however, India is no longer the menacing "other" he needs to guard his wallet from. He encounters other travellers whose attitudes and behaviour are questionable if not hypocritical. In Bodhgaya he meets a baby-boomer from New York, a western Buddhist who "wears Armani threads". In a cafe in Darjeeling, a British hip-

(continued on page 31)

# J-BOYS

Peter Tieryas Liu

Part historical fiction, and part coming-of-age tale of a 9-year old boy growing up in Tokyo circa 1965, *J-Boys* by Shogo Oketani is a collection of stories that attains something akin to sublime joy. The Tokyo of 1965 is in flux, caught between a land devastated by warfare and yet reaching, through a new generation, towards the futuristic metropolis it would one day become.

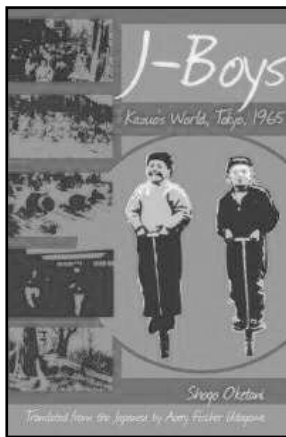
Oketani's narrative strength lies in his ability to capture the nuances of a childhood, buttressing his tales with the wisdom of age to look back and chart out the muddled maze of this foreign world in a way that is easy to read for children and adults alike. The collection of stories take place over a year and is split into separate months. Relationships form the delicate thread that ties them together, with each story focusing on a different connection.

Young Kazuo Nakamoto's world is imbued with both a sense of innocence and melancholy. What's interesting is that childhood relationships here are just as complex as adult ones. In the story "Pet Phrases" (or "Mother and the War"), we're treated to a set of signature statements made by various people in Kazuo's life. His mostly reticent mother's is, "I'm sick and tired of war," a response to the graphic images of the Vietnam War on their television. Eventually, we get a glimpse of her past as she survives the firebombing of Tokyo, her description evoking streets of unimaginable carnage from showers of incendiary bombs. You can smell the char in your nostrils.

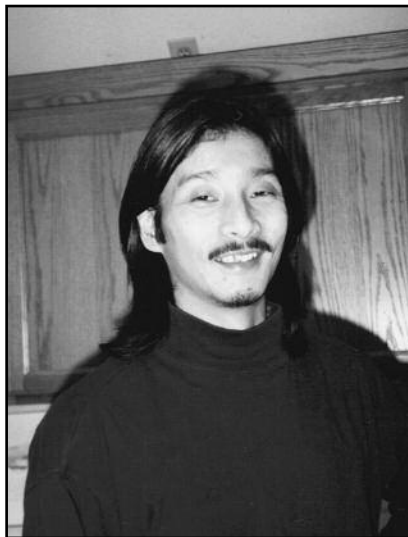
While tragedy looms in the background, quirky sketches of Westernization and childhood abound. Kazuo's experiences with the local "Tofu Maker" give us a peek into local life and its sudden vicissitudes. "Milk" is about Kazuo and his classmates' introduction to *miruku*, or milk, although it also serves as an invitation to observe Japanese school life. "What Wimpy Ate", in reference to Popeye cartoons, looks at desire and broken bonds, disappointment, and Kazuo's yearning to eat a real hamburger for the first time. "Keiko Sasaki", an amusing and oddly disturbing "first love" story turns on a pivotal moment in a Japanese bath house where everyone strips naked and shares the massive steam room. Like most of Oketani's tales, the climax is equally ambivalent and poignant, with the author painting scenes in a way so that it's our own childhood playing out in a completely new setting, rife with embarrassment, confusion, and a glimmer of expectation.

At the heart of the collection is the title story "J-Boys." It's in reference to the friendship shared by Kazuo and his friends. Few will remain unmoved by its depiction of the fate of Korean families living in Japan after the war. Minoru, the son of a scrap-man who collects paper, metal and trash from neighbors, is a giant among his peers, a good sumo wrestler who forms an unlikely friendship with Kazuo. The racist abuse one of the other students hurls at Minoru is startling and provocative. Yet it's their teacher's unlikely defense of Minoru that's even more of a revelation. The story doesn't wince in its approach to some of the stark realities that marked the topography of post-WWII Asia. Much of what happened to the Koreans and Chinese during World War II can cause one to despair, so to see this friendship bloom is heart-warming and the unlikely chemistry among characters is emblematic of Oketani's style.

Disparate cultural elements intersect throughout the book as in the case of the Beatles and Yakuza gangsters in "Bathing and the Beatles", or the Tokyo Olympics and unemployment in "Winter Earnings." In "Yasuo's Big Mouth", a restaurant outing leads to an encounter with an old woman who lost her son in the war and who carries



*J-Boys*  
Shogo Oketani  
Trans. by Avery Fischer  
Udagaw  
Stone Bridge Press  
2011, 211 p., \$9.95



Shogo Oketani

a doll, symbolic of her grief. While others maintain a polite distance, Kazuo's curious younger brother Yasuo asks the mother directly about the doll. Kazuo's family is shocked by his faux pas. But the grieving mother welcomes the question, eager to share and adding an unexpected emotional twist to this deeply layered story.

Photographs and sidebars that explain certain references and details about Japanese culture add to this collection. If adults may find this information redundant, younger readers will find it a useful supplement.

It's not easy being a kid. Oketani's refreshingly honest stories remind me of the welts and bruises that mark any childhood. In reminding us of the hopes and aspirations those precious, but precarious early impressions can inspire, *J-Boys* joins the ranks of classics like Marjorie Rawling's *The Yearling* and John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*. In this sense, *J-Boys* is not simply a journey back to Tokyo in 1965, but a remembering of all our childhoods. Deep down, we are all *J-Boys*.

*Peter Tieryas Liu divides his time between Los Angeles and Shandong Province, China. He has stories published or forthcoming in Bitter Oleander, Existere, the Indiana Review, Pank's "This Modern Writer," and ZYZZYVA.*

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DICKINSON (continued from page 14)

of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: "In English, Celan devoted himself particularly to Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare. Though his German Dickinson is less rhythmically edgy than the original, he seemed to find in her a kind of compression, syntactic and metaphorical, that he could learn from." (J.M.Coetzee, "In the Midst of Losses," *New York Review of Books*, July 5, 2001). Celan refused to look away from the abyss that destroyed so much of Europe, and that haunted him until his suicide by drowning in the Seine. Dickinson looked into another abyss, restrained, yet very deep in its undertow. And she may have written that "Abyss has no biographer." But she has certainly found hers in Lyndall Gordon.

*James Edward Reid is a Canadian writer whose family moved every two or three years. Seven years of Latin study during that time provided a kind of continuity. His work has appeared recently in Vallum: Contemporary Poetry, The Sarmatian Review and Off The Shelf.*

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REFRAIN (continued from page 30)

pie bangs his fist on the cash desk demanding the manager, as imperious as any imperialist from the Raj. Tourism itself, and Polley's role in it, is questioned when he climbs to a sacred temple in Sikkim only to find row upon row of souvenir trinkets and a Tibetan monk who "fasthands neverending banknotes" and

*its all desire and suffering  
cameras capturing very most least of it  
and buddha gifts warm butterfly fuzzy unfeeling  
and the cafe de stupa emptyhollow packed to the gills*

*and not even zen could laugh it away*

The second-to-last poem in the collection, "air india announces" is only one page, and slips by as quickly as the "three / thinning dwindling days" Polley has left until his flight home. As much as this book — and India itself — is about the outer journey, the frustration and exasperation of simply getting from place to place, it is often an inner journey, too. On his last night in India, in his Delhi guesthouse room, Polley thinks back on his time in India. He realizes it has forever altered him and

*candle forgetting the dark difference  
so perspective changes*

*JoAnn Dionne is the author of Little Emperors: A Year with the Future of China, a finalist for the City of Victoria Butler Book Prize. She recently spent a year in India living in "dalailama dharamsala." She is now at work on a book called Kicking the Sky about her travels through India, China, and Tibet.*

# THE BIG ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Joel Smart

The explosion threw us all off guard. I stood behind a thick pane of glass, watching riot squads on horseback attempt to bring order to the teeming masses. Across the street, the garbage can which had contained the explosives now lay in burning pieces all across the sidewalk. Thankfully, no one was hurt. Just 100 feet away from where I watched the game, I now stood safely inside the confines of Jimmy's Tap House on Homer Street. It was pandemonium on the streets. I felt numb. The nightmare had been fulfilled. The Canucks had blown a 2-0 game lead and failed to win the Stanley Cup in their 40th and most promising year.

Recovery from such a heartbreaking defeat can take a long time. So, it's tough to say if Grant Kerr's *A Season to Remember* has come out too early. If it brings perspective, it does not bring healing. While my still-bruised hockey spirit warned me not to look back lest I be turned to a biblical pillar of salt, for me Kerr's book offers an irresistible opportunity to reflect.

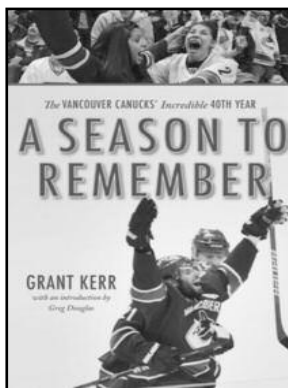
A seasoned Vancouver sports journalist and BC Hockey Hall of Fame inductee in 2009, Kerr paints vivid pictures and provides insightful background as he walks us through each step from offseason to postseason in the Canucks' fateful 40th year. Trades, player impressions, coaching decisions and statistics: it's all part of the journey that Kerr takes us on. The constant present-tense writing style does take away from the flow early on in the book. Some of Kerr's sentences are awkwardly-worded to fit the style, yet it's a technique that allows him to lead us through each of the 25 playoff games with startling precision and drama. At times, it is almost like reliving the experience.

Vancouver fans will relish reading about Alexandre Burrows' seventh game series-winning goal against the Chicago Blackhawks in the chapter entitled "Slaying the dragon." The same is true of the highlight-reel game four winning goal against the Nashville Predators when Kesler maneuvered past two defenders and shot the puck past Pekka Rinne with a marvelous wrist shot. Keith Ballard's hip-check and the three quick goals against the San Jose Sharks also stand out as fantastic memories that Kerr is able to capture. Then in "Wrapping it up in eleven seconds," he describes the last great moment of the Canucks drive to the Stanley Cup. Following the miraculous return of Manny Malhotra, Burrows skates around the Boston Bruins goaltender to put a wrap-around into the net in overtime, putting the Canucks up 2-0 in the final series. I wish I'd stopped reading there.

The next five chapters describe the worst-case scenario meltdown that saw the Canucks fall apart at the seams – finishing in flames on the streets of Vancouver. Reading it is nothing short of self-inflicted torture, made all the worse by Kerr's dramatic play-by-play. These excruciating moments feel unnecessarily drawn out. Perhaps it was a necessary step to accurately tell the story of the defeat, but I'd have preferred a more condensed version. That's why it's usually victors who write the history books. This way feels too painful.

While the season's disgraceful ending still leaves a bitter taste, Kerr concludes the book on a positive note. Its final reflection—familiar to every sports fan and, alas, championship loser—stands in the caption for the book's last image: "Thanks for the memories – and just wait until next season." It is this optimistic passion for the game that fuels the book, and it comes through loud and clear, making it a great keepsake for a season that will not soon be forgotten. Sixty expertly-chosen photographs ensure the book is as gripping to flip through as it is to read.

Joel Smart lives in Abbotsford, BC, and is the copy editor and former sports editor for The Cascade.



*A Season to Remember: The Vancouver Canucks' Incredible 40th Year*  
Grant Kerr  
Harbour Publishing.  
232 p. \$19.95.



Grant Kerr

# LET GO!

Joseph Blake

Victoria jazz singer Carol Sokoloff's CD debut opens with her self-penned title track, Let Go. It's a sweet, swinging invocation for what follows. Backed by her veteran band, Trio Espresso, Sokoloff offers ten originals and a lyrical adaptation of Wayne Shorter's Footprints, (She calls her sultry, seductive version Follow the Footprints), as well as daring reinventions of Skylark, Jeepers Creepers, I've Got the World on a String, Moon and Stars, and Without a Song. (The last two standards are twinned to clever originals.) It's an impressive, open-hearted collection of studio performances. It's got a nice clean sound too.

Sokoloff's sweet and sour, rhubarb-like vocals are well-matched with her band's supple, playful support and equally slippery and surprised-spiced arrangements. Pianist Kenny Seidman, bassist James Young and drummer Kelby MacNayr are joined by Colin Campbell on trumpet, flugelhorn and guitar on several cuts. Bassist John Wright takes over for Young on three tracks too.

Throughout, the leader's well-articulated, horn-like vocal readings sail and swoop above, beyond and deep within the band's rubbery swing. Sokoloff's scatting has an effervescent charm, and she digs soulfully and skillfully into the heartwood of several of her original songs. The veteran vocalist also produces wise, singular readings of her smartly selected cover versions from the Great American Songbook. Bravo!



*Let Go!*  
Carol Sokoloff  
Wild Song, \$20.00



Carol Sokoloff

Joseph Blake is Music Editor for PRRB.

## HILO TOWN (continued from page 27)

bring further definition to the work, this is a writer with a keen interest in who these pioneer settlers were, what their stories were like, how they made their place and found common cause with other pathbreakers like themselves and with First Nations neighbours in what are still isolated upcountry ranching communities. Here's a typical chapter entry: "So here we go again... We are walking up the slopes at the south end of the Potato Mountains on the southwestern edge of the Chilcotin Plateau. This time it's mid-September and snow is falling..." ("A Short Walk In The Potato Mountains"). Within pages we learn of which large mammals and smaller critters alike have also recently walked this trail, the nature of their passing. On the white-tailed ptarmigan most urban dwellers will little recognize: "There is a quality about their tracks, something seemingly unimaginative and dead serious about their forthright forays out into this great, white, windblown, dangerous world..." Then a raven in flight, "slow-winged and sure and black against the Nemaiah Mountains across Chilko Lake." There are bears and beloved local characters like Chiwid, who took to the woods and lived off the Chilcotin lands for the rest of her life. Schreiber loves sharing the credit for his discoveries and spreads the aloha around—Sage Birchwater, Gary Snyder, and a host of people he meets along the way. This is what percolates so strongly throughout the book: it's more than just a love letter to a place, it's an homage to a way of life and thinking, of the Big Voice out there. It's like medicine. From a Tewa prayer he quotes, "Within and around the earth / within and around the hills, / within and around the mountain, / your authority returns to you." Schreiber is a writer worth spreading the news about.

Trevor Carolan is the International Editor of PRRB. His latest work, *The Lotus Singers: Contemporary Stories from South Asia*, is published by Cheng & Tsui.



# THE CURE FOR ACHE BY FLYING

Hannah Main - van der Kamp

“A man desires and longs after things...” This epigraph from Martin Luther opens Wynand’s eleventh collection of poems in which memory is played with and questioned, and the present is fraught. What does the future forebode?

What is the difference between depression, repression and discretion? “*On the Morning of my Father’s Funeral*”, the poet describes, in acute detail, a trip across the Burrard Inlet. The voice is that of a (presumably adult) son who is traveling to be present at his father’s funeral. The dry dock, freighters, tugs, cranes are precise documentary photographs as if taken with a Zeiss lens. Not an emotional word; there is not one word in the poem about the father or the funeral. What is the poet conveying? That the father’s funeral means nothing to the son or that the event is too big to look at directly so the son distracts himself by being a lens? Is this askance-ness an evasion, a cover-up or a discrete Northern European Protestant way of avoiding the public display (fear of excess!!!) of emotion? Looking closely at the poem, are there are hints? As in, “*spun and bobbed, nudged into place, visibly shifted, slow shadow, hoist, efficient, shuttled, hardly troubled.*” Perhaps it is the unrequited, and now never to be realized, longing for deeper connection with the father?

Interesting that the poem immediately after is a plea for looking at things objectively, “*without sideways or lowered glance*”, “*the heart... no longer has a need to win.*” In another poem about mood swings, the poet berates himself, “*You have let yourself become/ far too slick with the high-protective factor.*” This is emotionally complex territory.

The German-Canadian theologian, Ronald Rolheiser, author of *The Holy Longing*, commenting on St John of the Cross, writes, “...we are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods and which leaves us incurably restless, seeking, longing and insatiably drawn to ...unity beyond our selves... it creates a perpetual tension at the centre of both our conscious and unconscious lives. This restless dis-ease constitutes the human spirit. What we do with it is our spiritual life.”

Of the forty-seven poems in this volume, almost one half of them are about travel in Mexico and Cuba. Traveling, Wynand’s disposition, at first, seems sunnier. Is he a little in love with “*tristesse*”? Even a light-weight poem about blue butterflies includes this word. Nicely observed tropical birds, the bitter aftertaste of tourism, the flash flash of relentless cameras, all add up to dis-ease again. This poet is not a happy tourist. Why not? The pervasive longing has not been left behind at home.

Ache and the easing of it have many names in this volume: “*a fist in the chest, wanting, heartache.*” Travel adds to the weight of ache; “*small birds, the shacks of the poor.*” Added to that, writer’s block, the death of parents and the immigrants’ anxious longing to be at home, somewhere.

*how all that you’ve wanted to escape  
reconstitutes itself inside the gap between  
and summons you back.*

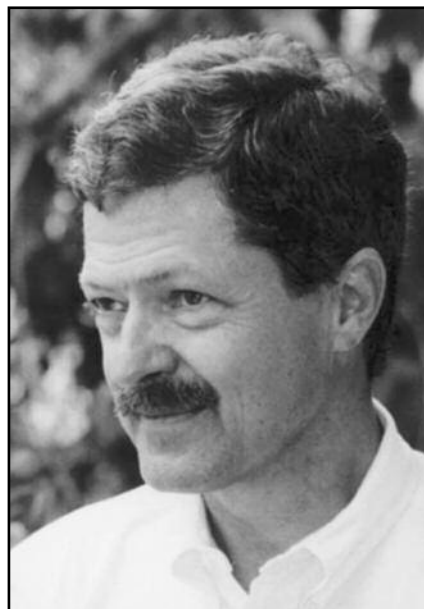
from “*Homesick*”

Wynand’s parents immigrated to Canada from Germany when he was eight years old. In a long poem, titled *Reconstruction* and dedicated to his brother, he recounts the origin and costs of that uprooting. Yet, “*The children grew up much like children.*” He



*Past Imperfect, Present Tense*

Derk Wynand  
Bayeux Arts, 2010



Derk Wynand

and his brother learned how to speak “*with barely a trace of an accent.*” The reconstruction, though it refers personally to the friendship between the brothers and the immigrants who are “*sleeping with easier dreams...sometimes laughing, laughing more and more often ...good smoke from good chimneys*”, has an underlying sense of loss.

What is this ache or longing? In both the poems about the imperfect past and the tense present, there is recognition that whatever that inward tendency is, it’s here to stay and only occasionally alleviated by moments of true lightness.

In another poem, *Airborne*, (8 pages of thick prose) a solo pilot flies a Cessna over his familiar neighbourhood. “... *aware of the uneasy balance of presence and absence*”, the pilot surveys the cherished miniature world below, flies in and out of the past, current world events, dreams. It’s a tour de force, breathless,

*startling eagles  
out of their circular patters and himself too  
to ignore the earth, the soil as well as he can, turning  
a deaf ear to the buzz and roar of whatever claims  
his attention...*

So there is a care free Nirvana: flying! If not a cure for the ache, it lifts ache momentarily. The pilot/meta-observer steps out of himself for the bigger picture. He has discovered “the way of non-possession.” He does not need to own or understand all that he views; he just slips in and out of it, breathing. This is a contemplative stance. The opposite of self-absorption though, at times in other poems, the poet narrowly avoids that. It’s playing with longing and loss and satisfactions, all of them shifting, transient states.

Neurochemical theory says that to imagine or remember something deeply is to (re-) experience it. Neurochemical responses do not differentiate between “real” and “imagined.” To fly in a dream, or in a well-imagined poem, relieves because the poet, as far as cell level chemistry is concerned, *is* flying.

There is another cure for longing: emotional homeopathics. Taking a little more of the substance which ails you completes a process. You just have to go back in there and give that aching a little more expression. Making a poem about aching is like taking arnica for a bruise: it makes a bruise a little more bruised so it can complete and fade away. Sadness can be alleviated by writing about it just a little bit more. Applying homeopathic strategy to the poetics of sadness allows that unrequited longing to get unstuck. There are hints in *Past Imperfect* that the poet is attempting this. It may be a muse.

Rolheiser again, “We come into life neither restful nor content but precisely, fired by love’s urgent longing, dis-eased, our souls sick in an advantageous way.”

A well-known poem by St John of the Cross includes the lines,

*to reach satisfaction in all  
desire its possession in nothing.  
To come to possess all  
desire the possession of nothing.  
To arrive at being all  
desire nothing*

The cover design is unusual and charming; a blue butterfly emerges from a cage that is a man’s head, referring to one of the travel poems. On the back cover, a hand holds up a photograph of Wynand’s mother, Odette, (1920- 2000). The photo speaks volumes.

A young, new-immigrant mother, she smiles openly at the camera, from her perch on a teeter tooter in Stanley Park. Perhaps it is her first visit to that park (where one is not charged admission!). Perhaps she has come to the stage of immigrant life where there is less of the ubiquitous “*potato and kidney*” and more laughing. She is almost airborne and her smiling gaze invites the viewer to fly with her.

The book’s last poem pays tribute to Odette and ends in the vein of St John’s lines above,

*The breath returns to the water.  
It rises to the clouds, the cloud*

(continued on page 34)

# THE BRIGHT WELL: CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN POEMS ABOUT FACING CANCER

*Christopher Levenson*

An anthology of poems about cancer, written mostly by poets who were themselves cancer victims, is not everyone's idea of easy reading, and Fiona Lam is to be congratulated for even attempting such a thing. That the poems she has assembled not only enlighten but also inspire and delight is amazing and can only be ascribed to a combination of intelligence and sensitivity that is matched by virtually all her chosen poets.

Unlike some recent anthologists, she has shown good judgement in selecting up to four pieces by some of her twenty poets rather than including more poets but allowing each only a single poem. The sense of cohesion this gives is helped too by the clear four part arrangement: Diagnosis; Going Under: Surgery; Treatment; and The Other Side.

Although pain, uncertainty, dread and all the other negative emotions caused by cancer apply just as much to colon, pancreatic, or lung cancer (still the biggest killer for both sexes) it is not just in terms of public awareness and funding that breast cancer is so prominent in this book. So it is no surprise that all but four of the poets are women: for breast cancer strikes at a fundamental and very visible aspect of a woman's identity. Thus even if, in my view, most of Canada's best younger poets were not female, this disease represents an existential challenge especially for women poets.

Their responses, as they scavenge for, and salvage, comfort, even hope, wherever they can find it, range from Elise Partridge's sardonic "Granted a stay", which starts:

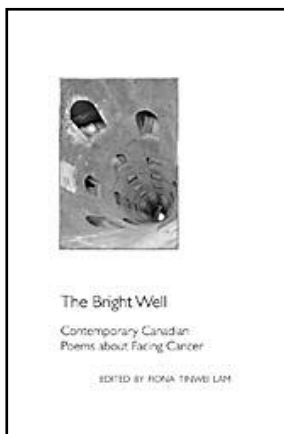
*Was there a midnight call from a magistrate's office -  
gold-fringed flag, sleek pens, curt "Let her go"?  
—The vulture-clique flapped off, the hearse  
glided its unctuous self back to the garage.*

*Perhaps distracted by a good steak  
and a surge of bonhomie.  
the deputy himself decided, what the heck,  
not today — the guillotine needs disinfecting. ...*

through the unexpected insight, as when Betsy Warland in an excerpt from 'Only this blue' writes 'what we call perception/ is mostly habit.// just well enough to run for the bus/ i move with surprising exuberance/ unusual ease// - then the body recalls itself -// this is me/ before/ i had breasts' to the brilliantly evocative metaphors of Sue Wheeler's 'The sound of no shore' where

*The alphabet blocks in the waiting  
room toy box cannot imagine  
what the words will be,  
In the corridor's white-out  
no sense of direction.  
The old woman in the pink robe stands  
in the doorway of each room asking  
Is this North?*

Of course some poems do not affect us as deeply as others, or handle the language with as much tact and expertise, but none disintegrate into sentimental self-pity or make us feel like voyeurs. Rather they help us to imagine That so many contributors have risen



*The Bright Well :  
Contemporary  
Canadian poems about  
facing Cancer*  
Fiona Tinwei Lam (ed)  
Leaf Press,  
68 pp \$16.95



Fiona Tinwei Lam

to this poetic challenge is truly heartening and makes this, purely in poetic terms, a moving and valuable collection.

*Originally from England, Christopher Levenson is a widely published poet and reviewer, whose work has appeared in many journals. He has published several books of poetry and edited anthologies and is the co-founder of Arc.*

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SCHNACKENBERG (continued from page 27)

questions exhaust themselves:

What makes the indivisible divide?  
... What is it binds us to our deeds? What is  
The sacrifice that can't be asked of us?  
Unbidden universe, what summons us...?

And all ends when "...the god of writers broke his pen." *Heavenly Questions* is an elegy of a love that is unsurpassed in its compassion, detail, and depth. To reiterate the words of Gjertrud Schnackenberg's late husband, "Nothing can conquer her." Nor I might add, her art. It takes a long time of dedicated work to achieve such eloquence. Eight years in the making, 61 pages of poetry. There is so much to celebrate here. The last heavenly question: Why is there so little room in our world for such an exquisite gift?

*Doug Beardsley is the author of eleven volumes of poetry. He studied at Sir George Williams University where he came under the poetic tutelage of Irving Layton, with whom he corresponded until Layton's death in 2006. He lives in Victoria.*

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PAST IMPERFECT (continued from page 33)

*Rise into the blue and the blue  
makes room for them. The ache  
breathes cloudward, eases into the blue  
and behind, where the silences are.*

Editor, translator and professor of Creative Writing at UVIC for decades, (now retired), Wynand has a long history of publication. He is a master of form. Except for a risky poem that considers the garden-chewing deer of Saanich as the Albanians in Greece, there is not one word out of place or an awkward line. If anything, Wynand is sometimes painfully precise and polished. Little things like an insect bite can obsess him but then "little things are very large up close." This line from Shiki illustrates Wynand's characteristic poetics.

One hopes that the future is not foreboding but will include, either in real air-space or in dreams, a lot more flying.

*learning to abandon the need to see everything  
imagined or real, letting go the fear of blindness  
taking the constellation as they come and assigning  
no names to them, allowing them to rearrange themselves  
and letting them go, not wanting the darkness filled  
not needing the silence cluttered with cries of triumph  
or loss, approving the lack of approval, not fearing fear,  
not loving love, not hating hatred, not thinking thoughts  
about thinking, without mouthing words that cannot add up  
to truth or falsehood, flying over the world's thin skin  
and grazing it lightly, borne by nothing but air.*

Not wanting the darkness filled; a mystic might have written that.

*Poet, editor, reviewer, Hannah Main – van der Kamp, lives on the Upper Sunshine Coast where she watches sea planes and reads the Spanish mystics.*

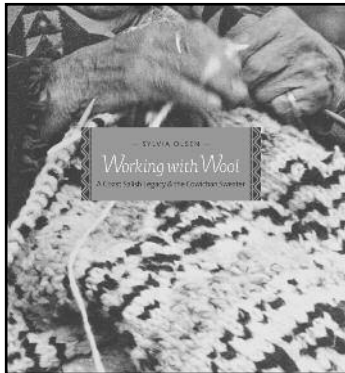
# KNITTING ALL NIGHT: THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE COWICHAN SWEATER

*Peter Grant*

This lavish book celebrates the iconic Cowichan sweater. It's the first ever full-dress account of the handsome serviceable outerwear invented by Coast Salish women of Vancouver Island. The many photos of smiling owners — kings and queens, prime ministers and presidents, movie stars, captains of industry, fliers and fishers and just plain folks — attest to the garment's high status. Now see (goes the subtext) the circumstances in which Cowichan sweaters are created. Come inside the three-room shack of the First Nations knitter. See the piles of wool, the spinning wheels integrated in a living space that includes ten children and various relatives and hangers-on. See the women knitting all night after working all day, sitting back to back on the floor, their needles clacking quietly away to earn them a pittance from the white dealer — just enough to put a little food on the table, the rest of their meagre payment in wool to knit more sweaters for the same dealer. See the family eating their Christmas dinner of dried fish. See too some reasons for First Nations' poverty — systematic disenfranchisement; theft of their economic stake; official promotion of marginal livelihoods; their reduction to wards of the government. Migrating to hop farms in Washington every summer to earn just enough money to feed themselves and get home — and those were the good old days. All the while working, working so hard just to stay on the treadmill. Not a pretty picture — not nearly as pretty as the decorated products of their industry. For those who can handle history free of idealization and stereotype, this book serves as a crystal-clear window on First Nations society.

The author is a woman of European descent who learned knitting from her mother, left home at 17 and lived on reserve for more than 30 years, raising a family with her First Nations husband. She co-operated the Mount Newton Indian Sweaters shop on the Tsartlip reserve for 12 years and learned how to knit Cowichan sweaters herself. I hope someday to read a memoir of Sylvia Olsen's life. It would recount the remarkable story of her writing career. (I was privileged to hear her relate her story to a group last year.) She began as a storyteller and had to learn the skills of the writer, with the guidance of such people as Diane Morriss, of Sono Nis Press. When she began recording stories of First Nations peoples' experiences in residential schools, she submitted to the wisdom of the elders, who were very firm about, for example, conveying the abusive character of a priest without reproducing his abusive language — "We heard it already; we don't need to hear it again." The result was the fictionalized *No Time to Say Goodbye*, first of the 13 books Olsen has published in the past 11 years. *Working With Wool* evolved from a master's thesis at the University of Victoria. It took Olsen eight years to complete the book. Now her writing is beginning to reap the recognition it deserves. She won the City of Victoria Bolen Book Prize in 2010 for *Counting on Hope*, an historical novel for juvenile readers. *Working With Wool* took the 2011 Lieutenant-Governor's Medal for Historical Writing and was nominated for a BC Book Award. Olsen is working on her doctorate, her thesis a history of First Nations housing. She consults on housing with First Nations across Canada.

With her insider perspective and scholarly dedication, Olsen's detailed account



*Working With Wool: A Coast Salish Legacy and the Cowichan Sweater*  
Sylvia Olsen  
Sono Nis Press, 2010



*Sylvia Olsen*

of Coast Salish woolworkers bears the stamp of authenticity. I found particularly fascinating the account of the origin of sweater knittcraft from the ancient Salish textile industry, wherein goat and dog hair were combined with various vegetable fibres, hand-spun and woven into blankets — the principal currency of the traditional Coast Salish economy. Much of the early evolution of knitting, following the introduction of needles via European immigrants, is conjectural, veiled in obscurity — the craft was learned by observation; the industry purely cottage; the marketplace hugely one of barter; records were not kept. The focus sharpens considerably in the chronicle of recent evolutions in both the knitting industry and the larger context of First Nations society. Olsen interviewed numbers of knitters, beginning with her mother-in-law, and incorporating generous portions of the transcripts, in which we can hear the real voices of these hard-working women. Here is Cecelia, born 1923:

*I was eight years old when I started knitting with my mother. Our dad went fishing once in a while, but it was seasonal. My dad used to card the wool, my mom would spin and knit, and I would knit. They paid us \$4.50. I guess that would have been in 1935 about. When I first got started we bought the farmers' wool for three cents a pound. We washed it in the spring and summer so it was ready in the winter. I got left with eight kids when my first husband died. I was knitting about five sweaters a week at that time. I stayed up most of the night. I would pack wood up from the beach for the fire. Then I would knit all night. I always liked knitting. All the kids would go to sleep and I would knit. We didn't have electricity. I don't think anybody got electricity or running water on the reserve until 1958 or 1959. We had oil lamps and if we didn't have enough oil we would use candles. The kids had to eat and we had to work whenever we could.*

*Working with Wool* is constructed a bit like a Cowichan sweater — knit in the round so you keep coming back to the same threads, building layers with each go-round. One works through its 320 pages in hope of a good outcome, of a knowledge that fair play won the day, that Coast Salish knitters are accorded their rightful status and economic means. While there have been success stories of fair-trade indigenous enterprises like Modeste Wool Carding on the Cowichan reserve and Mount Newton Indian Sweaters at Tsartlip, the sad fact is that success and popularity has taken a dreadful toll on the authentic Cowichan sweater. It has been co-opted and mass-produced or become an object of designer fashion. Particularly galling was the Hudson's Bay Company's huge contract to supply knock-offs of Cowichan sweaters to the 2010 Winter Olympics Canadian teams, with barely a nod in the direction of the rightful proprietors of what is after all a species of intellectual property. We can only hope that *Working With Wool* isn't in the nature of an eulogy.

(The book is a hard-cover beauty with high production values. It has a gorgeous feel. Just one minor cavil. A reader with aging eyes that have recently graduated to 2.5-power Pharmasave reading glasses, must squint with dismay at blocks of quotation printed in medium-grey ink.)

*Peter Grant is an historian and poet who lives in Victoria, British Columbia.*

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# MARCH END PRILL

James Edward Reid

*If the Homeland's security was under threat,  
we weren't accountable to anyone.*

Imre Kertész, *Detective Story*

Bryan Sentes' first book, *Grand Gnostic Central* (1998) signaled the arrival of a significant poetic voice. The seven vigorous "Budapest Suites" that concluded this book promised more lively contemporary writing, informed by a deep sense of history. *Ladonian Magnitudes* (2006) fulfilled that promise. There are only a few poems that I have read as often as I read the passionate "Reasons Why" from Sentes' second book.

*March End Prill* dissects the poet's baleful and humorous anatomy of melancholy, during the mendacious drumbeats leading up to the war in Iraq during the dark winter of 2002-2003. Let's recall one of the fantastic statements from that time by a senior aide to President Bush that the "judicious study of discernible reality" is "not the way the world really works anymore." Daily lies like these feed the onset of the poet's seasonal affective disorder, and some of the ground is cleared for the concerns of Sentes' third book.

The main pillars driven deep into the ground of *March End Prill* include echoes from lines like "tack tick-birds & firewood. The dream is already ended and we're already awake in the golden eternity" from Jack Kerouac's *Old Angel Midnight*. Another pillar is the Pisan Cantos Ezra Pound wrote while imprisoned in Italy with only four books, and little to go on but his recollections: "nothing matters but the quality / of the affection— / in the end—that has carved the trace in the mind / dove sta memoria" (where memory lives), Canto 76. The third pillar is Paul Celan's refusal to resist the undertow of the river of darkness that he eventually allowed to carry him away.

Most of us cannot live on this overcast ground, but some of us are able to explore it, as Sentes does, in order to return with the news that poetry delivers. Humour helps to leaven the bleakness. As anyone who has tried to drive away the winter blues with sudden excesses may recall in moments like this:

*Ate a whole  
baggacookies  
tonight  
What's gotten into me?!*

What's gotten into Sentes is the refusal to look away, the refusal to pretend that things are okay. As well as the necessity to put his arm around melancholy and walk out into the overcast light. To laugh when necessary, and to grieve for our world when we must. Sentes is in the good company of many poets. Some of *March End Prill* recalls another poet who just received the Nobel Prize for making a career of refusing to look away:

*Those that run messages for death don't shy from daylight.  
They govern from glass offices.  
They swell in the sun.  
They lean over their desks and look at you askance.*

Tomas Tranströmer

However, here's the trouble with the results of seasonal affective disorder in Canada. When Paul Celan drowned himself in the Seine River, we can only imagine the sorrowful grist turning in the Gallic mills, the Gauloises cupped against the coming of the winter winds, et les vins de table clinking dans les cafés. But in Canada? If a major poet drowned himself in the St. Lawrence, the zealous new mandarins in Bytown would only nod briefly and mumble, "Downsizing the system is working." Then return to calculating their ballooning pensions at retirement. And the death benefits for their wives, and for the rest of us once they're gone.

Unusual coincidences were unfolding as *March End Prill* was launched in the



*March End Prill*  
Bryan Sentes  
Bookthug  
85 p. 2011

winter of 2011-2012. American troops were being withdrawn from Iraq, as commentators lamented the terrible death of the 4,500 US soldiers who died in the war. And the deaths of these young men and women are terrible. Fortunately, at the war's end, we did not have to watch again as "Donald Rumsfeld slowly / raised a cold blue hand," an image from Sentes' "aglow" to explain the hollow justifications for war. Unfortunately, we did have to hear from one of the intellectual heavyweights of the Bush administration. We did not hear from her about the 100,000 Iraqis killed, and the hundreds of thousands displaced. Instead, former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice explained the *casus belli* in her trenchant new memoir in this way, "The fact is, we invaded Iraq because we believed we had run out of other options." Sentes' "cannon-fodder fever" explains it better:

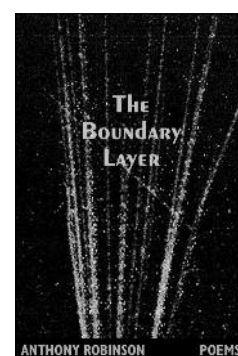
*This isn't a democracy  
My parents would say  
It's what you call  
A benevolent dictator  
ship!*

A clear picture of what we faced then, what we face now, and an unshakeable resistance to it, all lightened by good humour, is at the core of Bryan Sentes third book. And it is a book that is less political and more personal than I have made out here. On the cover of *March End Prill*, the great Chinese poet Du Fu reads a book, perhaps a book of good poetry like the one inside by Bryan Sentes. The end of winter, and the bright prills and thaws of spring are not that far off. *March End Prill* is a reliable companion to carry us into the light.

James Edward Reid is a regular contributor to PRRB. He also publishes in *The Sarmatian Review* and *Vallum*: new international poetics, and most recently published "Inside the Glacier" in the Alaska journal *Cirque*.



"New World" influence Gary Snyder



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## THE BOUNDARY LAYER

poetry by  
**Anthony Robinson**

Robinson's poetry is ravishingly imagined, viscerally conveyed, and partakes equally of traditional and modernist forms, like a Shaker deacon whiting up the darkness with an abstract ballet. At its best, this is verse that stuns you, makes you lay the page down on the table with trembling hands, as Emily Dickinson said of the finest poetic expression. His images pierce you with uneasy reminders that the perilous and contingent infuse the commonplace.

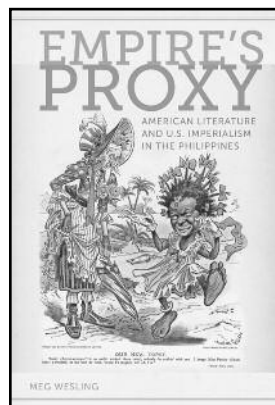
~ Richard Wirick, author of *100 Siberian Postcards* and *Kicking In*

Anthony Robinson was educated in Philosophy and English at Berkeley and he began his career as a designer and builder in the desert in Arizona. He is co-editor and publisher of *Transformation: A Journal of Literature, Ideas & the Arts*, and he teaches Environmental Sustainability at Southern Methodist University.

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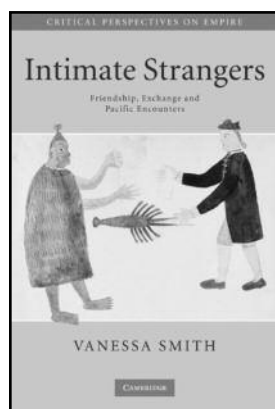
# LITERATURES FROM AROUND THE PACIFIC

## Trevor Carolan



**Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines.** Meg Wesling. New York University Press, 2011. 235 p \$21.

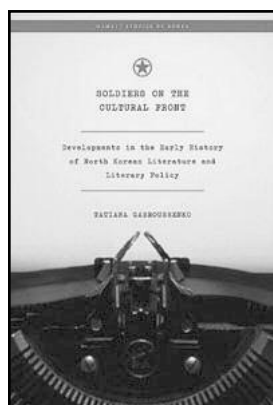
With its defeat of the Spanish fleet at Manila in 1898, U.S. occupation of the Philippines began and its extra-continental expansion surged a year later. By contrasting bellicose 'white man's burden' Congressional views from 1900 with the anti-imperialist sentiments of Andrew Carnegie and William Dean Howells, the author demonstrates how U.S. anti-colonialist attitudes were set at odds with conventional "middle-class Protestant Americanism." Thus, Wesling establishes a "competing logics of imperialism" in her examination of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines. For almost a half-century, she contends, the enforced use of English and selective moral criteria in American educational policies masked its colonial venture there as a "democratic intervention." The parallels Wesling draws with current U.S./NATO rhetorics of involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan make uncomfortable, but valuable reading. Discussion of actual American literature is limited. Carlos Bulosan is the sole Filipino author accorded serious attention. Rather, critical analysis is directed upon conscious U.S. administrative use of literary themes addressing racialization, gender and appropriate civic behaviour as sanitizing instruments of colonial rule.



**Intimate Strangers: friendship, exchange and Pacific encounters.** Vanessa Smith. Cambridge UP, 2010, 323 p.

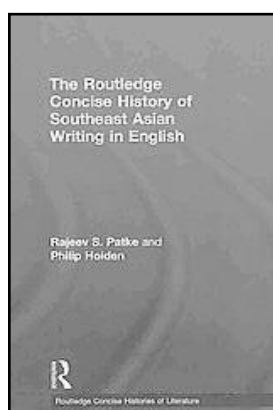
With disciplined focus on Tahiti, Sydney scholar Smith tracks a critical 40 year period of early European contact and discovery in Oceania, 1767-1806. Covered are Cook's three voyages, and those of Bligh, Vancouver, and the London Missionary Society. Spanish, French and Russian contacts are also considered. Working from a rigorous understanding of "taio"—friend, in Polynesian, Smith explores how friendship-building was essential in European awakening to Tahiti, and to South Pacific empire-building. Taiois discussed mainly as male bonding, however attitudes toward female sexuality, and postcolonial ideas concerning Loyalty, Sentiment, and Contact-making inflect the narrative. Smith's dissertation-style analysis of Cicero and Derrida on friendship will likely see readers hitting the fast-forward switch, but her excellent chapter on "Ruinous friendships" with its treatment of the legendary *Bounty* incident is very readable. Overall,

Smith depicts an inter-civilizational encounter as strange as Starship Earthlings meeting intergalactic space-folks, complete with "secret instructions" for diplomatic, economic, religious, and unspoken sexual conduct. Usefully illustrated. Its heavy cross-referencing of other Pacific researchers like Lamb, Rennie, Brain, Bell and Coleman, makes challenging, if informative reading.



**Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy.** Tatiana Gabrussenko. Hawaii UP, 239 p.

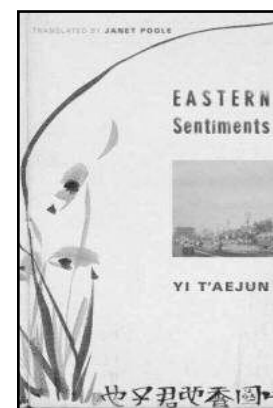
In 1946, the DPRK leader Kim IlSung described North Korean writers as "soldiers on the cultural front." Without prior official traditions to lean on, imported Stalinist-era Soviet "socialist realism" models were implemented and the result has been a reliable barometer of shifts and seizures in the official communist party line ever since. Good commentaries in English on North Korean writing are few, with Brian Myers' *Han Sorya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* (1994) a fine exception. Gabrussenko, who teaches in Australia, now joins that company. As she contends in this superbly researched, readable study, North Korean literature "has indeed been a field of exceptional uniformity, unchallenged by any alternatives." Citing the late Marshall Pihl, she observes, "The doctrine of socialist realism, a Soviet aesthetic canon, holds that literature must not be a simple 'realistic' or 'naturalistic' reproduction of life but must describe reality as the party defines it." Tracking North Korea's little-known political upheavals, and analyzing the roles and fates in these of DPRK literary heavyweights Cho Ki-ch'on, Yi Ky-yong, and Yi T'aejun, Gabrussenko's account of writers in the last "socialist paradise" is invaluable, if tragic, reading.



**The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English.** Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden. 2010. 272 p.

Declaring their intent to promote "historical and critical awareness", the authors present a comprehensive handbook covering literary developments in English from Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines from colonial-era beginnings onward. Thirteen chapters offer digestible commentaries on how narrative fiction, drama and poetry have fared in attempting to deal with "the pluralities of multicultural society." Organizationally, the region's literary production in English is managed in three phases: up to the political watershed year of 1965, then from 1965-'90, and 1990-2008. This permits cogent discussion of such major influences as post-colonialism, the effects of migrant societies, shifting economic inequalities, the rise of urban elites, and evolution of the region's women writers since the 1960s. These critical interpretations typ-

ically associated with International Relations are especially welcome. Recognizable veteran writers under analysis include Wang Phui Nam, Edwin Thumboo, Shirley Lim, Nick Joaquin, Carlos Bulason, Philip Jayarenum, Ee TiangHong, etc. Newcomers receive insightful treatment also. Critical judgment is suspended in examining development of the book trade in English, as much early work was entry-level at best. Useful contemporary elements address the region's growing diasporic writing community.

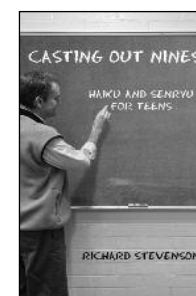


**Eastern Sentiments,** Yi T'aejun. Columbia UP. Trans. Janet Poole. 2009. 189 p. \$45.

Apart from the story anthology *A Ready-Made Life*, (trans. Bruce Fulton & Kim Chong-un), or early works that turn up here and there by Kim Tong-ni and Hwang Sun-Won, Korean literature from the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945), is only spottily available in English. Novelist/editor Yi T'aejun was a socialist sympathizer during the period of Japanese colonial hegemony. On liberation, he abandoned Seoul for the communist North in 1946. Fate dealt him a rough hand. While originally a northerner himself, he is believed to have been swept away by Kim Il-Sung in a purge of "southern" party cadres in 1956. Yi's place in Korean literature is assured, however. As this collection's 57 anecdotal essays written through the lens of a Confucian gentleman-scholar reveal, he worked diligently to represent Korea's fading native culture and the colonial underclass alike. These *Reader's Digest*-style essays range from covering visual art aesthetics to the meaning of friendship. While not all are memorable, his Manchukuo travelogues are unique, and when he discusses the role of classical *kisaeng* singsong girls or the ultimately Korean *pansori* folk epic *Ch'unyang*, there's simply nobody like him.

Trevor Carolan is the international editor for the PRRB.

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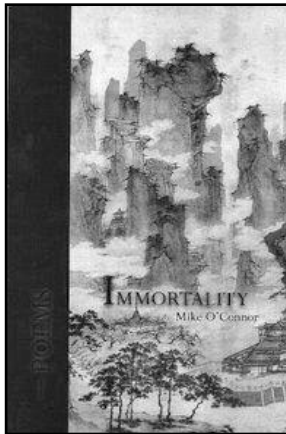
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# IMMORTALITY

Paul Falardeau

Perhaps best known as a founder – and later resur-recter – of Empty Bowl Press in Port Angeles on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula, Mike O’Connor has nonetheless marked out a career of poetry, prose and translation that befits company among his peers in the Northwest Pacific Rim.

*Immortality*, from Pleasure Boat Studios, is a selection of poetry that firmly grounds O’Connor amongst the group of poets and writers in the general sphere of Gary Snyder’s new west coast poetics. His life as sustenance farmer, student, and forester blend with his time spent in Taiwan to provide grist for the mill in this compact collection of verse, most of which has been published previously in various journals and magazines. This compilation is welcome as some of his titles are hard to track down in their original format, and the new titles equally so. O’Connor lets his poems settle into three categories: “Immortality,” “Icarus” and “American Spirit.” The first two center on longer poems, while the latter is a collection of poems saluting his friends and peninsular



*Immortality*  
Mike O’Connor  
Pleasure Boat Studio  
2010. 112 pp.  
\$16.00

homeland.

The titular “Immortality” is a poem of 1,260 lines, previously published in online and hardcopy formats of *Narrative Magazine*. The book’s centerpiece, it is framed by a Buddhist poet’s conversation with his onetime master in 827 AD. The bulk of the poem is made up of scenes that alternate between Ezra Pound writing *The Cantos* as his capture after the fall of Italian fascism becomes imminent, a legionnaire, Caius Domitius, marching with Emperor Julian on his ill-fated campaign against the Sassanid Empire, and a fifteen year old girl in T’ang China seeking immortality. Each story is a meditation on immortality, its meanings and the ways in which we attempt to achieve it. O’Connor does an admirable job of sewing these stories together and without ever summing anything up, a meaning starts to form, but it’s all very Zen and, in the end, the master is asleep.



Mike O’Connor

“Icarus” is another long poem inspired by a conversation with Allen Ginsberg and loosely narrating O’Connor’s return to Taiwan. Again, the poem seems to be a composite, this time however, it is of phrases and short scenes. Very dense and seemingly loaded with potential energy, this poem begs to be unpacked and taken line by line and will probably deflect a more casual read through, yet individual moments are worth reading for their language alone:

*The blighted maples on the edge of park;  
stout full beard heading for India;  
sad tofu, sad liver –  
here it comes, corrected, hear it coming.*

Finally, are the collection’s smaller poems which bristle with names like Ginsberg, Finn Wilcox, Red Pine, Robert Sund and others amidst stories of mountain work, poetry readings and the same postcard sent to three different girls. The natural world is never far away and neither is the dharma, but O’Connor is always grounded in the real – he walks the walk. This comes across in authentic description of place—he knows a sword fern from the deer—and specific namings of small communities, mountains, and even ferries.

Thankfully, in this poetry that is so intent on tying places together with names, conversation, and time, there is never a concern that it is all merely a vanity; name-dropping. O’Connor uses specifics to create an unspecific mosaic. At its best this technique works to derive deeper meaning from the mundane and to honour his peers. For example, in “Sailing to Keystone: A Salute” Finn Wilcox gets the treatment:

*A poet who,  
raised in Oregon  
ran away as a teen  
and mostly stayed ran away;*

In this sense, it comes as no surprise that O’Connor has also done fine work as an anthologist. His work has been—and is—to extend memory; to capture his subjects on the page, and still let them breathe.

*Paul Falardeau writes frequently for PRRB on Pacific Coast literature.*

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# DREAMING IN BLACK AND WHITE

Carol Cooper

Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* is the best first novel I've read since William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. And although it's a dark metaphysical fantasy set on the cusp of the 1900s while Gibson's book was near-future science fiction that foretold the rise (and mixed results) of a commercialized Internet, they have in common intensely evocative and visual styles of writing that makes the imaginary worlds they create unforgettably vivid and provocative.

*The Night Circus* also shares a Dickensian view of childhood and child labor with the Harry Potter franchise and the Battle School scenarios of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. But where Morgenstern differs most from multi-volume series writers like Rowling and Card, is that she dares to compress a trilogy's worth of character development into a single well-crafted tome. Just when you think the hackneyed device of a gifted-but-starcrossed sorcerer's apprentice has been worked to death, a new writer appears who knows how to give it new life and meaning.

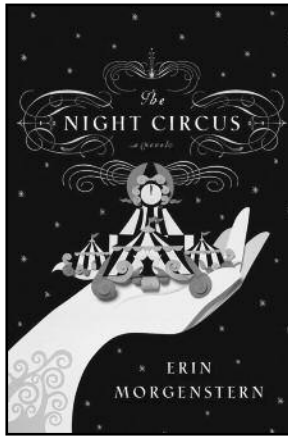
Morgenstern weaves together many different ideas to reinvent this well-worn trope, from post-Impressionist art theory to the fiction and poetry of the French Decadents. Here philosophy, romance, history and stage magic are juggled together into a surprisingly profound entertainment that satisfies a part of the human psyche that neither pure logic nor pure physical pleasure alone can touch. *The Night Circus* is not the only work of genre fiction to use a mysterious travelling circus as its central metaphor and staging ground—as fans of Charles Finney's 1935 satire *The Circus of Dr. Lao* can attest. Moreover, the yearly high-concept tours which take the striped big-tops of Le Cirque Soleil around the world can't help but have been a subconscious influence. Nevertheless, Morgenstern's reinterpretation of such possible source material—whether mundane or arcane—produces unique results.

The two adult male protagonists that set this story in motion are solitary near-immortals who've learned to metaphysically manipulate reality to the point where all religion-based definitions of "good" and "evil" no longer apply. Because their abilities would be neither understood nor welcomed by society at large, they interact with ordinary human beings much as we might interact with trees, pets, or food animals.

Alienation makes them fall into the same existential trap Michael Moorcock explored in "An Alien Heat," where once humans achieve both immortality and an effortless supply of natural resources, they gradually exhaust all animal urges except a relentless need to alleviate boredom. In this case, Hector and Alexander (each masters of very different metaphysical styles), decide to entertain themselves by training two protégés for a Battle Royale to prove which instructional method is superior.

The contest begins with competing attractions within the confines of a magical circus constructed for the two combatants where they push the envelopes of art and science to fabricate interactive exhibits that not only probe the limits of molecular physics, but also the nature of love and the power of innocence. The diverse array of individual tents and the grounds they straddle are all striped or colored in oppositional black and white. This monochromatic rigor is underscored by the black wrought-iron fence which surrounds them. This elaborate arena soon becomes internationally known as The Circus of Dreams and opens to the public only at night.

A Smith-trained studio artist, Morgenstern constructs each sentence and chapter



*The Night Circus*  
Erin Morgenstern  
Doubleday, 2011  
384 pages, \$26.95



Erin Morgenstern

with the architectural instincts of a sculptor. Clues to the several mysteries which propel the action are folded like origami into unexpected twists and turns so that readers can follow her circular narrative as it loops and doubles back on itself like a minotaur's labyrinth. Each new character when introduced is marked by some colorful sign of their nature and purpose in the plot like the iconography which encodes a tarot deck.

In fact, color and the symbolic meanings of color: grey, silver, blue, black, white, gold and red, are strategically invoked throughout this novel. The author is literally painting with words, using allusive visual cues to trigger persuasive cascades of synesthesia, especially during scenes that revolve around signature circus illusions. There is no doubt that all the implied dangers and delights of *Le Cirque des Rêves* are real to its creator, which is why she can make them equally tangible to her readers. Morgenstern admits to revising this book at least twice, but I would imagine she needed a third or fourth rewrite to think through the clockwork precision of every extraordinary machine and event described herein. Not only is *The Night Circus* simply fun to read more than once, it was obviously crafted to reward second and third readings with more information and emotional resonance each time around.

Carol Cooper is a freelance culture critic at the Village Voice. She is the author of *Pop Culture Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race*. She lives in New York City.



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**In Long, Secret Rivers**  
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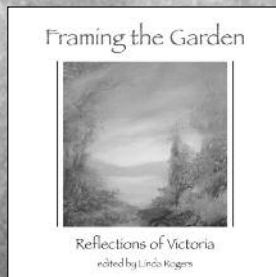
In *Woman Arborescent* four songs evolve, progressing from the sufferings born of a child's love and love lost to a young woman's liberating rebirth, from the torments of girlhood to its integration in a flourishing adult, from the intimacy of dream to the passionate vibrancy of life. Sensual, expressive images lead us into symbolic worlds rich with the pains and joys of being; where magic mingles with the voices of trees, water and wind.

The waters of *In Long, Secret Rivers* express both vehemence and serenity as they meld the minuscule and the cosmic, water and air, exulting in the mysteries, pains and joys of flesh, spirit, life, light and hope. These exquisitely nuanced, compelling poems awaken the senses with lush layering of sensuous detail and mythic resonance. The writing is sure, lyrical, contemplative like the very best of the solar eloquence of Valéry or the meditative intensity of Saint-John Perse. *In Long, Secret Rivers* articulates the deepest impulses of our humanity to praise and reverence, and invites us to flow towards the sacred.

Annick Perrot-Bishop is a Francophone Canadian author of multicultural background (Vietnamese, Indian and French). A resident of St. John's, Newfoundland, she has published some sixty short stories and translations in literary journals and anthologies as well as five books. *In Long, Secret Rivers* is Neil Bishop's translation of Annick Perrot-Bishop's *En longues rivières cachées*, a translation for which he won First Prize in the prestigious John Dryden Translation Competition (2008), organized by the British Comparative Literature Association and the British Centre for Literary Translation.

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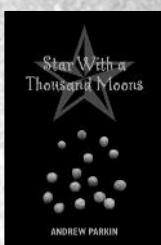
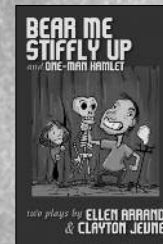
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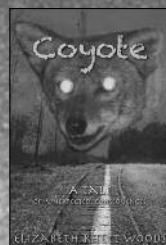
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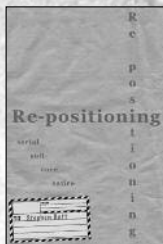
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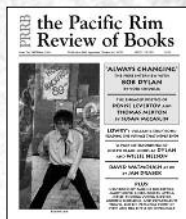
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