

DEEP TIME, BLACK MAGIC, AND UGLY STUFF: AN INTERVIEW WITH ZACHARIAH WELLS

INTERVIEWER: JESSE ECKERLIN

I came across Halifax-based writer [Zachariah Wells](#)' most recent book of poetry, [Track & Trace](#) (Biblioasis, 2009), in what I suppose was a somewhat unorthodox fashion. Last summer I undertook an agricultural apprenticeship in Valleyfield, PEI, Wells' native province, and just happened to be working at the same Charlottetown farmers' market where, among myriad stalls of produce, meat, coffee and assorted foodstuffs, his mother sold her artisanal wares. Amongst piles of toques, mittens, sweaters and other painstakingly crafted handiworks was an unassuming table bearing some of Zachariah's books: [Unsettled](#) (2004), [Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets](#) (2008), [The Essential Kenneth Leslie](#) (2010), and the book mainly discussed in this interview, [Track & Trace](#). I hadn't heard of him; but struck by the handsome design and inimitable illustrations of renowned visual artist [Seth](#), I decided to browse through [Track & Trace](#). I bought a copy upon finishing the first poem I flipped to, "He Finds An Acceptable Way to Grieve," Wells' ode to his deceased dog Mut and an instance of what Wells calls below "the oft-conflicting imperatives of ... money and soul."

For awhile I thought that the clashing sensibilities involved in this experience—buying a poetry book in a farmer's market from the poet's artisan mother in a province all but clichéd into oblivion—were completely antithetical, or at the very least amusing. But upon rereading [Track & Trace](#) several times and conducting this interview, I realized just how mistaken I was. Nothing was out of place; in fact, a better scenario couldn't have been dreamt up as an invitation to his milieu.

The following interview was conducted via e-mail from July 17-19, 2011.

Jesse Eckerlin: First of all, let me you congratulate you on the warm reception of [Track & Trace](#). Readers have responded fondly to the distinctiveness of both its printing and design (somewhere between a chapbook and trade collection, but crafted with more care than is usual for either) and the assured, concise, and prescient lyrics within. Although neither a strictly linear nor thematically arranged collection, the book's thirty-four poems, despite their apparent diversity, share unmistakable affinities, and there is a rich emotional and imagistic resonance between them. For one thing, they are almost all preoccupied with the myriad personal and/or cultural legacies both inherited and bequeathed by the speaker, sometimes simultaneously. In this sense [Track & Trace](#) reads as both a creative rite of passage and a somewhat troubled act of self-preservation. Can you talk about some of the legacies that informed the writing of [Track & Trace](#) and why you felt it imperative to document them?

Zachariah Wells: This is an interesting question to me, because I'd actually never really thought of the book in precisely these terms until now, but it's undeniably a big part of its aboutness. I think the most honest answer is that the poems embody things that matter a great deal to me as an individual, as a member of a family, as a citizen, and as a writer. So legacy was bound to pop up. We are in large measure composites of the places and people we've come from, so each of us is a legacy. And we are legacy machines, made up, to borrow [Richard Dawkins'](#) term, of selfish genes for which we are the medium of transmission. For a poet, this extends into literary concerns, too (because literary concerns and life concerns can never really be teased apart and memes can be every bit as selfish as genes): any poet is the sum of his or her influences and every poet—or at least any who doesn't take postmodernism and its ideologies too seriously—hopes to write a thing or two that lasts at least a little while after they're gone. I'm afraid I can't answer any more specifically than that, because I didn't set out to “document” legacies per se; I just wrote a bunch of poems over a fairly extended period of time and tried to arrange them, often long after initial composition, in a complementary way. The title came out of the arrangement process (as well as from a short story by [Ivan Klima](#)) really, as I was trying to do something that was simultaneously bold-face (track) and subtle (trace), trying to find a way (the book was published shortly after I turned 33, so Dante's “the right road lost” comes into it), to forge forward but leave something behind. So yeah, legacy, eh ...

JE: In the spirit of articulating matters important to both the writer and citizen at large then, part of your task seems to be an attempt to collapse the oft-held distinction between mundane and domestic reality and the so-called traditional ‘intellectual objects’ of literary pursuit. I'm thinking of [“Rhythm”](#) for example, where the metrics of your mother's knitting become an aesthetic yardstick against which lyrical measures are conceived, and knitting becomes a metaphor for the way disparate words are ‘stitched’ into larger utterances and, ultimately, poems; or [“The Poetry in Him,”](#) in which, counter-intuitively, your father's ‘poetic qualities’ are seen to reside precisely in “his honest / talk [...] stripped of artifice / and ornament.” Why do you think the commonplace yields so many incandescent moments for you?

ZW: I'm glad you brought up those two poems. The book is dedicated to my parents and I think of those as the “mother poem” and the “father poem.” I don't think it has a lot to do with “the commonplace,” however. My mother was my first role model for actively choosing an

unconventional life. A highly educated type-A personality, she chose to quit a well-paid federal civil service job, with all the security that attends such a career, and moved from Ottawa to rural PEI, a place where, at the time, she knew only one person: the man she was marrying. She stayed at home with me and my brother and once the most intensive years of child-rearing were finished, her past-times of dyeing, spinning, knitting, weaving and designing grew into her [principal occupation](#). The metrics of the knitting are a metonymic figuration of the lessons in rhythm—writ large—that I learned from her example: that you can dedicate your life to creativity as well as productivity; that satisfaction in life can't come from following a groove.

With the other poem, it isn't so much that those poetic qualities “reside in” my father's plain-spokenness, as that it's “not hard to miss” the poetry because it's hidden beneath a taciturn exterior and because it inheres more in deeds than in words. (Conversely, it can be easy to mistake empty rhetorical grandiloquence for poetry.) My father's working life was dedicated to politics, that realm in which circumlocution and prevarication are altogether too normal. But he wasn't a politician; he was a civil servant, an advisor, an aide. It was a better setting for someone of my dad's disposition than elected office, where by necessity one has to compromise a great deal more—unless one has no interest in being elected. We think of “speaking truth to power” as the province of otherwise disenfranchised activists, but my father's life course is an example of how it can be done within the structures of power. It cost him in the end. He played a very central role in the administrations of Premiers Alex Campbell and Joe Ghiz, but a falling out with Ghiz over his dalliances on the federal scene (it was the [Meech Lake](#) years) and subsequent lack of favour with Catherine Callbeck and her principal advisors led to his being pushed to the margins (heading up the Housing Corporation and Workers' Compensation Board) and eventually forced to take early retirement at an inopportune time. After that happened, he went public with his grievances against governmental mismanagement. That's why I compare him to King Lear's Kent in the poem. Kent is a loyal servant and he speaks his mind, even when it isn't in his own best interest. And even once he's banished, he still comes back to serve surreptitiously, in disguise. There's a fantastic exchange between Lear and the disguised Kent early in the play, part of which goes:

KING LEAR

What services canst thou do?

KENT

I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly: that which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in; and the best of me is diligence.

The other dimension of that poem is that my dad is, like my mom, someone who makes things. He built our house virtually all by himself and he's a very fine self-trained woodworker. From both of my parents I've learned the lesson that just because something is beautiful doesn't mean it has to be useless. A poem can't be useful in the way that a sweater or a box can, but it can be insofar as it reveals to a reader something they'd never thought about before, perhaps. I've also learned many things about fidelity, in its broadest sense—or "diligence" to use Kent's word—from both parents. "The Poetry in Him" isn't a statement of poetics along the lines of Plain Speech = Poetry. Too many other poems in the book contradict that. Rather, I think it's crucial to use language that is faithful to the subject matter and diligent in its choices. I think that's where a lot of poets go off the rails; they have a personal style that perhaps fits some subjects, but when they turn to other matters, they stick to that style and it simply isn't appropriate, so you get a slippage between structure and content. [Randall Jarrell](#) called it "the real graveyard of poets, My Own Style," the other principal danger of which is writing essentially the same poems over and over again for a lifetime.

To get back to your question, then, I think there's very little commonplace about the subjects of those two poems, so I'm not sure really that the commonplace does yield me incandescent moments. I draw far more on external reality than on pure imagination in my poems, if that's what you mean. I don't tend to think abstractly; I need the concrete world of facts and objects, people and places, as a ground to my imagination. This is perhaps a weakness for an artist who uses language as a medium, but it's one I hope that I alchemically convert into a strength. My favourite poets tend to be those who have their eyes trained on the ground rather than the heavens.

JE: The lone long-poem of the book, "[After the Blizzard](#)," seems to me an anomaly in regards to this tendency to emphasize "external reality" over "pure imagination." The physical reality of the blizzard is certainly the backdrop against which the sonnet sequence is framed, but it seems more a dramatic means to yoke a playful musicality and the embellishments of the writer, rather than an imminent threat. Much of the 'action' occurs squarely in the writer's mind, and the poem seems to emphasize this fact more explicitly than others in the collection. What was the strategy behind

“After the Blizzard,” and why did you include it in a collection of mostly short and self-contained lyrics?

ZW: The stupid answer to your good question is that I mostly write “short and self-contained lyrics,” so I’d be unlikely to find somewhere else to put it. As long poems go, it’s a pretty short one, just 98 lines, and it’s composed of seven sonnets, so it’s really more a linked series of short poems, each with its own internal logic, than a long-poem, per se.

And yes, the poem is about an actual blizzard and its aftermath, but as you suggest, the occasion becomes a blank page on which the speaker doodles imaginatively. But he also does a fair bit in the poem. In the first sonnet, it’s snowing and the speaker looks out at the blizzard as it happens. Not much else to do during a storm. He shovels his parking spot in the second section of the poem and accidentally sends snow down his own neck, which causes him to look up, where he sees the crows that become the catalyst for the third sonnet, in which the poet character finds himself at the end, bone weary from his physical exertions and writing sonnets (postmodern meta moment alert!) about, we imagine, shovelling snow. He gets tired of concrete images and so goes for a bold declarative statement, which leads to the rhetorical centre-piece of the fourth sonnet, which in turn unfolds into a primarily descriptive sonnet itemizing the state of the sidewalks and the hazards they present to pedestrians. In the sixth sonnet, the poet is himself a pedestrian, out in the world at night, stumbling through a graveyard in a half-drunken state (and coming up with crazy-bad cider-inspired similes) and he is arrested, upon exiting the graveyard like Jonah from the belly of the whale, by the wonderful spectacle of a loader clearing the street. It’s a moment similar to when he sees the crows and is very much about how “external reality” engages the artist’s imagination. In the seventh, the speaker is back home, “danc[ing] and shiver[ing]” because there’s no heat in his flat and the poem ends with him once again contemplating the blank possibilities of the “empty parking lot.” So it’s a poem with a lot of movements and shifts of perspective and tone, which I think a longer poem not driven by narrative has to be, if it wants to keep a reader’s interest.

As to why it’s in the book, I think it fits because it is quite literally concerned with tracks and traces—which the corona form itself embodies none too subtly—but also because it has this confrontation of the urban, human world with the non-human hugeness of a once-in-a-lifetime storm, the oft-conflicting imperatives of city and self, money and soul. Standoffs of that sort come up frequently in the book.

JE: As you have just alluded to, one such recurring standoff, explored variously in such poems as “Dream Vision of the Flood” and [“Water Works,”](#) is the point at which human endeavour and natural catastrophes, sometimes irreparably, collide. A poem like [“Orkney Report”](#) for instance, with lines like “The Old Man of Hoy’s a peedie boy / compared with what’s crumpled about him,” seems an inquiry into something similar to what Gary Snyder has called “deep historical time.” In previous interviews you’ve refused to be pigeonholed as a ‘nature poet’ per se; rather than contenting itself with traditional pastoral subjects, would you say that *Track & Trace* explores certain shifting ecological paradigms?

ZW: It isn’t so much that I don’t want to be pigeonholed as a nature poet; I just think the term is pretty meaningless. It has more to do with staking out territory in the poetry world than it does with either nature or poetry. I couldn’t write traditional pastoral poems if I wanted to, if only because there’s no dramatic interest in it. As Ruskin suggested a long time ago, most of what passes for “pastoral” is just sentimental treacle, “poetry written in praise of the country by men who lived in coffee-houses and on the Mall.” I tend to write about things I’ve seen and places I’ve been. I grew up in the country and I spent years living in some of the most isolated territory on offer in this huge country. Exposure to both bucolic settings and hostile, barren wilderness makes it rather hard for me to idealise either. (The poem of mine that was reprinted in an [anthology of nature poetry](#) was about Canada geese getting killed by the downdraft of an Airbus ...) Someone invested in the idea of being a “nature poet” will probably never tell you how boring “nature” is most of the time. But really, everything is nature. If you write poems about anything, you’re a nature poet. I’m as much a nature poet when I’m writing about city traffic—did you know that traffic flows according to the laws of fluid dynamics?—as I am when I’m writing about animals or the ocean. I’m keenly aware, as most people who pay attention to current events are, that, for whatever combination of reasons, the environment is changing fast and that the change often manifests in catastrophic events. And I have no bloody idea how it might all shake down and neither does anyone else, if they’re being honest. The only thing that seems clear at this point is that we’re not likely to slow down, much less stop or reverse, the temperature trends unless something radical gets invented to do it or something truly cataclysmic happens. Which makes me anxious, occasionally, in the way that living beneath a long-dormant but potentially active volcano must make people nervous as they go about their daily round. So these things show up in poems.

“Orkney Report” has a lot to do with deep time, yes, as do a number of the other poems. I read geologist Richard Fortey’s great book [Earth: An Intimate History](#) a few years back and I think it’s probably had more influence on my writing than I’ve realized. And if any place on earth is going to make you think about deep time, it’s Orkney, with its Neolithic sites that are so old in human terms, but nothing compared with the archipelago’s geologic past.

JE: In some of the poems with decidedly rural settings though, lack of idealism and sentimentality does not necessarily preclude a sense of wonder. In [“Field of Floes,”](#) for instance, the speaker dreams of “get[ting] lost in the million acre flow” of ice floes off P.E.I.’s northern shore; in [“Doe,”](#) the tail of the observed creature of the same name is “a beacon.” It seems that even in spite of something like P.E.I.’s well documented history of agricultural exploitation, and its somewhat fraudulent tourism industry (of which, to say the least, you write unfavourably), certain mediated images retain their power to move. How do you find stable ground from which to frame an authentic emotional gesture in a cultural climate of increasingly rampant and contrived givens?

ZW: Absolutely. Sentimentality (false emotion; wishful thinking) and sentiment (genuine emotion; fraught feeling) shouldn’t be confused, as they often are, for example, by some writers who self-identify as avant-garde.

If those two images you cite work—if they succeed in being unsentimental—it’s because 1) they contain no explicit emotional content and 2) the implicit emotional content is mixed. They’re both ambivalent moments. Stepping off the land and getting lost on a frozen sea with your lover may have a romantic side, but is also terrifying, life threatening. “We could” do this, but everyone reading the poem, I think, knows it ain’t gonna happen. There’s something melancholic about it.

Same with the doe’s tail. The word “beacon” has the ambivalence built in. It’s at once a summons (“beacon” shares a root with “beckon”) and a warning to stay away (as with a lighthouse beacon). An earlier draft of that poem actually ended with “a summons, a warning,” but it was helpfully pointed out to me by my editor that it would end more effectively on “beacon.” He didn’t have to tell me why this was so; I saw it right away. It rendered the image instantly more mysterious, less explicit. The mixedness of it was still there, but it was there for the reader to linger and puzzle over, rather than be informed of it and move on.

The problem of emotion in poetry is twofold: 1) Direct statements of feeling, with notable exceptions, generally fail to elicit that feeling in the reader. People who talk about their feelings all

the time are tedious and so are poems with similar inclinations. 2) Unalloyed emotions—pure grief, pure terror, pure joy—don't tend to be very interesting when written down. They're pre-verbal, they activate primitive brain regions too far from our language centres. They either write white or purple. The most authentic and the most poignant emotions tend to be mixed ones, and mixed feelings defy articulation because there's more than one thing happening at one time. Which is the same thing language does in a poem. So there's a kind of black magic involved in trying to write something that instils emotion in the reader. Shortcuts are always tempting, but they almost never get you where you want to be.

So in this way, the ugly stuff you talk about (agricultural exploitation, fraudulent tourist bumph) can actually be an ally; by incorporating that stuff into a poem, the poem resists the sentimental lies of omission on which tourism ads depend, while keeping on board the truth of the place's beauty and the possibility to have authentic, relatively unmediated experiences of beauty in that place, which is what made it a draw for tourists in the first place. This reminds me of Alden Nowlan's sonnet about the St. John River, in which he talks about the pollution and the lies of the tourist brochure, but concludes "and yet the real / river is beautiful, as blue as steel." The ambivalence the poem builds up licenses the final couplet. It's one of those rare instances in which the use of the abstract word "beautiful" is justified, I think.

JE: You seem to have a deeply rooted propensity for turning "ugly stuff" into allies: you neither resort to omitting paradoxes for the sake of convenience, nor dismiss them with token ironies. You could choose to focus on surface beauty, but that would mean embracing tourist kitsch, advertisement. There is a great segment in your tribute to Al Purdy, ["At the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium,"](#) that reads "Jeez, maybe I should write flower poems / But the North I know is not the same / as the place Purdy briefly toured in '65," and then goes on to enumerate the differences. As far as legacies go, Purdy's is a tough one for Canadian poets to tackle, if only because of its near omnipresence. In an article you wrote about Charles Bruce's *The Mulgrave Road*, "Going Back Down the Mulgrave Road," you say that "the understated Bruce, ever distrustful of trends and ever faithful to the local, has been overshadowed by more forceful poetic personalities, [&] nationalistic visionaries." In addition to fidelity to anachronism, is it some kind of aversion to the potentially nationalistic poetic tropes of an Al Purdy that prevents you from writing "flower poems"?

ZW: Ha! I guess not, because I have indeed written flower poems. The speaker in the Purdy tribute is a younger me, fresh off his first summer in the Arctic, just starting to write poems, just figuring out a few things about being an adult and being a citizen. Purdy was indeed an early influence and one I moved beyond, as one must, but still a poet I admire at his best—even while I recognize that he has been overrated for pretty dubious reasons. And that reading at the Cohn was a pivotal moment for young me. The place was packed and the reading was amazing. I came away from it recognizing that one could devote a significant portion of one’s life to writing poems and yeah, you’d probably wind up old and tired and poor, but if you were lucky and did what you did well, you might just be admired and loved for what you did. Which can’t be said of many other occupations. The nationalism espoused by writers of Purdy and Atwood’s generations was understandable in its time, but I don’t think it’s something my generation identifies with. (I didn’t go north to get to know my country and write poems about it; I went north to pay for my education. The book I eventually wrote about the place was the product of seven years of actually living and working there, not of a summer excursion. Purdy didn’t stay long enough to really get over the north as exotic locale.) Nationalism begets its own form of sentimentality, its own rhetorical claptrap and a lot of what Purdy wrote fell into that claptrap. Personally, I think what’s great about being a Canadian is that you don’t have to have an identity. The place is too big, too heterogeneous for that. I’ve travelled the breadth and height of Canada and I’ve lived in a lot of different parts of this country—all three coasts and several of its major cities—and most of those places might as well be foreign lands to each other. Someone growing up on P.E.I. probably has more culture in common with a New Englander than with a Vancouver Islander, who in turn would be more at home in Washington State than in Labrador. I think someone aspiring to be the poet of Guysborough County is more likely to meet with success than someone who wants to be the poet of Canada. The local, vividly realized, is more universal than the national, dimly so.

JE: My last question regards the poem [“Skunk,”](#) which, judging from its placement as the closing poem of the collection, and its supplementary presence on the back cover, is of central thematic importance. The poem seems to explore the mutability of experience and memory: “When you live with a constant / scent in your nostrils, you can’t / stand it at first, then come to love it, then / it grows so faint you forget its existence.” It also points to a movement from youth to maturity; from the anger of the reactionary child, to the feigned acceptance of the young adult, and finally, to the

forbearance of an adult. Is the final stage of this fidelity to a “constant scent” akin to the true love that dare not speak its own name?

ZW: The placement of the poem isn’t so much because it’s of central importance as because it was a logical poem to put last. (And it’s on the cover because I loathe conventional cover copy.) I arranged the poems in a kind of arc and “Skunk,” as a quiet, reflective poem, looks back on everything that precedes it. The arc is also, like the corona form of “After the Blizzard,” a loop—a closed track, if you will—and I like the way “Skunk” talks to “What He Found Growing in the Woods,” the book’s first piece, which is very much a forward-looking poem. (Which is itself a trick of perspective, since I had to look backward to write “What He Found” and forward to write “Skunk.”) The last sentence fragment of “What He Found” is “His last full head / of hair and the first faint traces of stubble.” The last line of “Skunk” is “it grows so faint you forget its existence.” I didn’t write the poems to echo each other intentionally—they were composed two or three years apart—but the rhyme definitely helped me decide where to put them. I also really like how the book closes with that line, because poems and books, the ones we live with all our lives, can be like that scent of skunk spray. As for what that final stage stands for, let’s just say that I prefer to leave my metaphors open-ended.

Jesse Eckerlin lives in Montreal. Poems have appeared in [*Existere*](#), [*The Maynard*](#), [*kill author*](#), & others. He has critical work forthcoming in [*The Antigonish Review*](#).