

MISSING YOU // SEND IN THE NOUNS:

A Review of [Jon Paul Fiorentino's *Indexical Elegies*](#)

[Coach House Books](#)

80 bpNichol Lane

Toronto, ON M5S 2G5

2011, 80 pp, \$16.95, ISBN: 978-1-55245-234-9

REVIEW BY [JESSE ECKERLIN](#)

Jon Paul Fiorentino takes his [Post-Prairie](#) fascinations, smart-ass inclinations, and pharmaceutically-impaired hipster stand-ins down a decidedly more somber path in his latest collection of poetry, *Indexical Elegies*.

Here, Fiorentino's acerbic verse is divided into three thematically diverse sections of roughly equal length. The first, "Elizabeth Conway (A Montreal Suite)," chronicles ennui and disillusionment in the heart of [Quebec's cultural capital](#), where Fiorentino [teaches creative writing](#) and edits [Matrix](#) magazine and [Snare books](#). The marked departure from his other collections here is tone. Fiorentino uses not one but two epigraphs from poet and drunk extraordinaire [John Berryman](#) to introduce the section, and he takes the proverbial highball from him, spinning world-wearied poetic threads about the anxieties engendered by addiction and existential affliction reminiscent of [The Dream Songs](#). The poems in "Conway" also suggests a nod to Berryman's alternately parodied or mimicked diction and syntactical play as well as his dense, intertextual academic style. Sometimes known as a poet of lyric excess and buoyant playfulness, qualities which have at times garnered him [comparisons to the likes of Allen Ginsberg](#), Fiorentino has really pared things down here, applying austere measures to his verse. There is a quality of compression in *Indexical Elegies*, achieved through a focused use of mono- and disyllabic language and concise couplets and triplets, that results in a minimalism that is simultaneously oracular and jarringly elliptical: "Intentions pulped or stapled / closer // So close to sleep / yet so closed // The epiphany changes / whenever the font does." The Fiorentino edge and embitterment are still there, but the pyrotechnics are subdued, the measures less propulsive, the delivery more [procedural](#). He seems to be thinking of more contemporary and radical ways of utilizing formal constraints, crafting densely-packed poems that lose none of their vigour or rapidity:

Abjective

Abject stirring
prose project stalled

Stab injection
the wrecked and the appalled

When does the second head drop

When does the adjective leave you alone

Jab injure
zero

When does the crop
come?

In contrast to “Conway,” the third section, “Transprairie (A Post-Prairie Suite),” expands upon Fiorentino’s fraught and ambivalent relationship with his hometown of Winnipeg, explored previously, and variously, in such books as [Transcona Fragments](#) (2001) and [Stripmallings](#) (2009). Here we get a version of the Fiorentino most readers have grown accustomed with and have come to either [love](#) or [hate](#): the wisecracking, irreverent, self-effacing, but unexpectedly tender and moving humourist. In entertaining poems like “Famous Grey Chevette” and “Processional Development” Fiorentino remixes found material, regional colour and absurd childhood reminiscences to great effect, creating a vivid portrait of the city that is simultaneously a source of his annoyance and his spiritual locus: “Don’t read me wrong—” he writes in “Dying in Winnipeg” —“I plan on dying in Winnipeg // In a strange way I / believe Winnipeg is where everything always dies: // Grandfathers, clock radios, Chevrolets / faith, fine-tip pens // Earle Nelson, hockey dads / your best friend from the old street ...”

Sandwiched in the middle of these two place-based excursions is an ode to absence. The title sequence, “Indexical Elegies,” is a moving tribute to Fiorentino’s recently deceased friend and mentor, famed Eastern Townships writer and former Chair of the Creative Writing department at Concordia University, [Robert Allen](#). Here Fiorentino crafts an oblique and fragmentary version of the elegy, supplementing his self-described “lyric/alyric” play with sophisticated collage and sound-

based approaches, mediating personal grief and confessional tendencies with the [indexical theory](#) of philosopher [Charles Sanders Peirce](#) whose epigraph evocatively frames the section: “The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair.”

[In a recent interview](#), Fiorentino explained some of the difficulties he faced when wrestling with the elegy, as well as what originally led him to incorporate Peirce’s quotation: “[*Indexical Elegies*] documents and presents an archive of four years attempting to come to terms with losing my friend and mentor, Robert Allen. Archive theory and indexicality played a large role in the composition of the book—for a long time, the poems I had composed for Robert were too raw and lacked a sort of artful disconnect. Putting a theory into practice made these poems work, at least for me.” Just as [Anne Carson](#) uses historical inquiry and Greek etymology as a form of counterpoint and a means to engagingly frame her grief in her recent celebrated elegy [*Nax*](#) (2010), Fiorentino employs (perhaps less revolutionary) notions of the archive and index in recurrent, divided, and sound-based “Hymn” segments. He also uses slantwise commentary in “CSP” (Charles Sanders Peirce) pieces to sustain a kind of tension and rhetorical distance from the more immediate lyric outbursts that occasion the elegy. Here is an example of how the “Hymn” sections read:

Wicked tension bloom
blast wistful tenor
tensor black winter

Wilted tenure blessed
blown window terser
tepid bloke wither

Wilful tested blame
bliss winded temper
tester bleach widows

Aspects of the personal narrative are there, but buried, parsed into almost concrete phonetic and imagistic associations—the detached and indifferent index representing a whole realm of archival sorrow. Likewise, the poet uses Peirce’s epigraph to invoke the complex dynamic between the elegist and elegized as illustrated in this version of “CSP”:

Primary protégé

Secondary supplicant

Mediatory muse

Every failure follows from a failure

These are complicated poetic gestures which serve, in Fiorentino's own words, to "distract and defer" readers, as well as justify the elegy's eventual emotional release. As Fiorentino concedes, "I do tend toward the almost confessional, intense moment in some poems. I would like to think that I earn that moment through some sort of process of rigorous play or strategically deployed poetry. What I mean by this is that where there are overt moments of intensity, those moments are hopefully offset by the poetry things of the poem—form and trope." Fiorentino resists sentimentality and hagiography out of tact, knowing his loss is a boring story to a stranger. Thankfully, indexicality proves a better organizing principle and coping mechanism for Fiorentino than unmitigated and inarticulate grief or feigned emotional avoidance of embittered irony. We can permit him his rarer emotional indulgences. This is a poetry of world-weariness beginning to supersede the trickster's ability to laugh it off:

It's over

The invalid townships

insist

The sickening tenured
posit

Let it rest
no more mythologies

Stash pain
in a volume of poetry

Where no one could possibly
find it

Jesse Eckerlin lives in Montreal. Poems have appeared in [Existere](#), [The Maynard](#), [kill author](#), & others. Critical work is forthcoming from [The Antigonish Review](#).