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ROB BENVIE

# GLASSINESS

I am on the phone with Loel, arguing semi-seriously about whether crystal meth is passé, when the buzzer buzzes. I tell Loel this discussion is not over, and let the deliverymen up.

Though there is no sender specified on the confirmation form, the stencil on the enormous crate's lid indicates shipping from Lendava—a giveaway as to its origins. The deliverymen ask if there's anywhere specific I'd like it placed. Floor of the downstairs office is fine, I tell them. So that's where it goes, flush against a bookshelf, the heavy plywood scuffing the floorboards.

I picture Tawny, prancing through Slovenian vineyards, awing sycophantic students from Tuscaloosa and Regina with her every adage, chuckling privately at her prank's extravagance.

Prying open the crate will require a crowbar, which I lack. And I have a lunch appointment within the hour, so all will have to wait.

Goddamn Tawny.

The problem is not in the terms of the rights agreement, which have been updated as per the extension, or the option fee, which is standard. The problem lies in these attached clauses and conditions, appended only in this latest round.

"It's an intimidation tactic," Bev says, finishing her iced gin.

"How so?"

She swirls a swizzle stick. "It's a way of throwing us off our game."

I am often struck by how Bev, my lawyer, tends to speak in what she evidently thinks are snarly, pointed vows, but come off more like clichés from action movies. We are having drinks at the Verdugo, discussing the latest draft of the rights deal on my first book, *Taunting the Edge*, delivered late yesterday by Collette from CAA. The actual papers sit on the table between us, ravaged by sticky notes and paper clips like a desiccated lab specimen.

"Loel says a movie represents a betrayal to my readership," I say.

"Loel says a lot of things. What's crucial here is the endgame."

"I don't know what that means."

I am drinking white tea with brown sugar, which is probably not great for my dental work, which has been expensive and grueling. This is the sort of guilt I try to enjoy.

"Look, Jaybz," Bev says, "we can pull the pin on this. Or we can go full throttle. But you gotta call it in. It's on you."

"I really don't know what that means."

On the drive home, I stop by the Barnes & Noble at The Grove to see if they have the new *Elle* with me in it. On a shelf designated Recent & Recommended, I discover last year's hardcover of my third book, *Chasing the Vapors*, the one with the terrible cover of a dripping syringe and a stiletto heel. My name, twirling in a degraded script typeface, is a brand, a known commodity.

My next stop is at Tashman Home Center for a crowbar.

The folded insert included with the crate provides some explanatory detail. Most intriguing is this stamped Certificate of Authenticity, which, along with a brief note outlining the preservation techniques, provides a reference code that can be used to obtain further information particular to this unique item, including, it says, documentation of its previous history.

"This is *so* Tawny," Loel says, standing at the opposite end of the pried crate.

I try to imagine the expense involved and time taken in having such a thing delivered. So much effort, but for what payoff? Now it sits in my modest main floor office, which is already an absolute mess—I'm actually embarrassed having Loel, my editor and lately my closest confidante, see my desk in such disarray, swamped in marked-up pages and Excel gum wrappers and tumblers crusted with red wine.

A small card has been included with delivery, reading, simply: *For inspiration, T.*

"She's insane, Jo-Beth," he says. "Clearly fucking with you."

"Of course. But now I have this."

"Well, you could probably have it sent back. But it really is quite a thing."

Lying there, cushioned in shards of Styrofoam packing, it insists on being looked at, yet defies my gaze. Quite a thing. Full-sized—that is, fully adolescent-sized—its entirety is impossible to consider in one visual scan. Its survey requires a summary of detailed concentrations: the scruffy fur boots, legs adorned in panels of greyish heavy hide, the weathered fingers gripping a truncated spear of gnarled bone. And the face: bug-eyed, lips parted in alarm.

"Must have been expensive," Loel says.

"Couldn't even hazard a guess."

Crouching like TV forensics inspectors, we look down at it, at him. I am reluctant to touch the fabric, much less the skin, but Loel is less timid. He runs a hand along the nose's bridge, through the ratty hair. He nods with something like approval.

"Where will you put it?"

The *Elle* profile is really more of a sidebar, corralling me and three other women authors in their forties or early fifties under the gruesome auspices of "Wordslingers with a Wallop." I know these others: we end up on the same lists, appear at the same conventions, compete for the same shelf space.

My specialty is the addiction-recovery-mystery-thriller, in which my characters' arcs of overcoming substance abuse mirror and/or interplay with more traditional whodunit plot mechanisms: the only way the murder or kidnapping or serial torture or whatever ghastly crime haunts these pages can be solved is via the redemption of the addict, the alcoholic, the self-harmer, and so forth.

The ills of the individual mirror those of society, as I like to quip. Blood spilled, blood contaminated. Crazy people do crazy things. Besting trauma allows a return to status quo. Et cetera, et cetera. It's not hard to grasp. It's a formula of assembly.

Now past what will likely be my life's midpoint, I find no chagrin in recognizing, or admitting, my success. My catalogue sells briskly, both paper and electronic; my portfolio is secure; my house here in Park Slope is paid up.

I own this. Solo, unchallenged. Humility is for the weak.

Still, I am still irked by my reputation of icy calculation, even malice. Years ago I faced a lawsuit from a housewife in Minneapolis claiming the plot details of my second novel, *Keeling the Drift*, too neatly matched those of her own recovery from a crippling oxycodone habit. Perhaps my subsequently calling Mrs. Janetty Reed a *deluded ding-dong* in the *Star Tribune* was not an appropriately measured response, particularly since my success has, by its nature, entailed an aura of sensitivity to the addict's plight. The suit was soon dropped, but the press made me out as exploitative and cold. Which in turn poisoned reviewers and riled up some hardcore fans against me.

The me they know, after all, is the only me they have.

So I can't help but resent the insinuations of this write-up, accompanied by my standard black and white press shot. *Jo-Beth R. Coe's maudlin crime dramas have hooked readers seeking instant*

*gratification and escape from the everyday. But it looks like a lot of readers are kicking the habit, or at least suffering from withdrawal symptoms in the long wait for another pulse-pounding hit.*

Opposite this sidebar, beaming in full colour, is Tawny, the principal focus of the feature. *America's Serial Killer Sweetheart.* I still remember her from grad school: chubby, crimped bangs, pinning bulletin boards with invitations to join the Austen Appreciation Assembly. Now she beams with impossibly whitened incisors, making appearances on BBC chat shows, and conducting interviews in *The Believer*.

Tawny also hosts a series of literary seminars in Slovenia, a partnership with a nearby winery and a conglomerate of artisanal cheesemongers. Participants lounge in two-bedroom villas constructed entirely of sustainable materials by local craftspeople, all hybrid-solar powered with blazing wi-fi, workshopping their efforts in a tranquil, nurturing creative environment. Seminar participants are encouraged to share their experiences via a dedicated social media 'soirée,' thereby cultivating a *global storytelling community*.

I have investigated: for these seminars, where space seems competitive, each participant pays up to the monetary equivalent of a small car. Last year, participants included actor/comedienne Kathy Griffin, hard at work on her first draft.

"And if there's anyone who's gonna kick your behind to crank those pages out," Kathy told *Elle*, photographed on the sundeck of her Hollywood Hills home, "it's Tawny!"

That night I dial the 1-800 number noted on the Certificate of Authenticity. While on hold, I thumb through the thin pamphlet provided, which tells me this young man is of the Gwich'in people, located in an isolated zone above the Arctic Circle. As demonstration, there is a map and an illustration of a small village. Children and elders walk hand-in-hand past small one-storey houses. Snow drapes the surrounding hills. A man steers a Ski-Doo.

After the brief lull, I speak with a cheery woman who gives her name as Sam. I provide the serial number included, along with the delivery address. I hear her clack this into a keyboard. With confirmation, she reads off prepared background info.

"Though he is dressed in replica caribou furs," she tells me, "in truth, the attire of today's Gwich'in hunter would more likely be a combination of traditional and modern garb."

"Replica furs?"

"Semi-synthetic. More for the odour. It's meant for household display."

The boy has not been preserved by ordinary methods of taxidermy, Sam explains, but rather through a concurrence of events, rare but not uncommon in the Yukon, in which Gwich'in hunters traversing the wilds, most often young men, are swallowed by fissures of unmarked tar pits, typically near tributaries of oil fields in fresh stages of development. While they are immediately suffocated, and often their ribcages and skulls are crushed by the swallowing pressure, their bodies are remarkably preserved upon retrieval. Through a special land claims arrangement between local councils, the federal government, and regional petroleum interests, their bodies are then mounted and available for bidding, with net proceeds distributed to a range of community interests. The amount paid for this young man, I am told, has helped fund a youth literacy initiative near Aklavik.

"Well, there's that, then," I say.

"Education is the cornerstone of community empowerment," Sam says.

Sam advises me on proper upkeep, which is pretty minimal. Regular dusting, protection against buildup of excessive moisture and refraining from household cleaning products containing diethylene glycol, nonylphenol ethoxylate, and other toxic agents should ensure years without noticeable deterioration, barring usual wear and tear. Hanging should be done carefully, mindful of weight distribution.

"Use a stud finder for plaster. If mounting on drywall, toggle bolts are recommended."

"What about just propping it up on my mantle?"

"Even better. Perhaps a piece of felt, to prevent slippage."

I have no felt, I tell her, but I do have these denim swatches left from a custom tailoring job for which I'd placed an inquiry, then never followed through.

"That'd do the trick," she says.

My latest novel-in-progress veers into a slightly new direction from my existing oeuvre. Hearing this, Loel expresses marketing concerns. I have tried to provide reassurances, while pushing back firmly: an author needs space, the solace of contemplation. But then those involved remind me how livelihoods depend on sales, not the whims of my muse.

My dalliances can cost jobs, destabilize shares, jeopardize entire departments. My delays have broad resonances.

The story, as it is, centres on the wife of a massively successful software tycoon who has recently shifted his concerns from capital's ruthless accumulation to a messianic crusade of environmental philanthropy, much to the misery of his directorial board and the bafflement of the

press. The wife, the heroine, expresses doubts herself, concerned about preserving their lavish lifestyle and wondering if her husband has lost his mind. Both spouses have indulged in extramarital affairs, and in the opening chapters it is made clear their marriage is one of stony silences and maintaining appearances. They appear at functions, attend symposia, host dinner parties.

Unbeknownst to all, the billionaire's wife lives a life of secret anguish, hooked on methylenedioxypyrovalerone-derived psychoactive drugs. What they call bath salts. When the cameras turn off, she undertakes day-long binges in a manic, semi-psychedelic haze, never knowing to what depths each trip will take her. With endless resources of wealth and the vigilance of her concerned staffers, she's been able to avoid prison or hospital time, maintaining illusions of a glorious life even as her sanity teeters on the brink.

When her husband leaves on a month-long journey to the Antarctic, another conservation excursion, her addiction is free to go unreined. Following another harrowing binge, she wakes up in the basement of a suburban L.A. home she doesn't recognize—next to the dead body of a man she doesn't know. Procedural stuff happens—cops interrogate, lawyers litigate, plots thicken—but she soon comes to see that retracing her steps will mean staring herself in the mirror and facing the truth about her life-threatening addiction.

Loel, reviewing some recent chapters, has insisted the book's premise is riddled with lapses in plausibility. As if this quasi-Melinda Gates character would spend days zombified on cheap drugs of sub-street quality. It's a stretch, wearying a once-fresh premise.

Loel says, or implies, that I am getting lazy.

I suppose he's right. The formula, albeit with minor adjustments, is plainly one I've plundered before. And I don't even care whether it works or not. I type and backspace in a bored stupor, oblivious to my own words. In late mornings I daydream and edit, waiting for my afternoon nap.

The boy is mounted on a wide but fairly thin solid slab of walnut lumber, held by two strong braces of steel alloy. The fireplace in my office is only about three and half feet wide, which leaves both edges of the mount protruding in a way that is both aesthetically unpleasing and impractical: when I slide back from my desk, I whack my skull on the corner, temporarily igniting a dizzying rage.

*For inspiration, T.*

When it happens again, I pause, glaring at this thing like an enemy. According to Sam, the young Gwich'in hunter's name is Jonathan. Which is/was not actually his real name, she allowed, but is a common name in what is likely his home village, so it might as well be. Jonathan's face

remains fixed in that state of surprise: by the rush of the tar, one assumes—vacuumed down by, and into, the earth itself.

I picture him hiking the icy tundra in the grey of morning, on the prowl for rabbits or caribou. Permafrost stretches in all directions; mountains hulk in an unachievable distance, hazy in the morning's mist. Boots crunch on unknowable terrain. His eyes catch stray light from my desk lamp, and looking closer I realize for the first time that these eyeballs are fake. Glass. Of course.

"My creativity flows from a private, inner space," Tawny tells me. "My soul is my cauldron, always on the boil."

"You know, the Gwich'in believe the soul resides everywhere and in everything. Like, trees and lakes and porcupines."

"Sorry, what's that?"

I'm not sure. Tawny and I are sitting on my back porch, drinking the expensive dry rosé she's brought. The year since I've last seen her has done her well: freckles spatter her nose, and her hair has that flowy abundance of generous sun and a refined regimen of upkeep: argan oil and hamamelis extract, she says, thumbing her glass.

"Writing?" she says.

"Always."

"And how *goes* it?"

She says this like it's a disease I'm battling. Tawny is very perceptive, wily in how she handles herself, sizing her way through this life of dazzlement she's found.

"Terrific," I say. "Productive."

Tawny nods, a gesture evidently meant to indicate we are now taking this conversation seriously.

"Here's a thought for you."

Pause.

"Eel plasma. The carbonic anhydrase inhibitor found in Eastern European eels, which they've tested experimentally for treating epilepsy and Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, is now being refined, you know, illicitly, and used for recreational purposes. Kids take it in massive doses for, like, warehouse parties. In Slovenia."

"Eels."

"Yuck, right? But there you go. You should write a book about *that*."

"Well, why don't you?"

Tawny smiles. "That's sort of more your thing, isn't it? Besides, I have this screenplay for AMC."

Yes, I'd heard about her development deal. Am I envious? I am not. I consider bringing up my own tentative rights deal, but then refrain—any such discussion would lead to a comparison of dollar amounts, and in that department Tawny will always win.

As she leaves we pass by my office, my anointed workplace. When Tawny glances in, I observe her reaction with interest. The way in which her eyes expediently survey the room—my cluttered desk, the contents of my bookshelves, Jonathan hovering—achieving so much in so compressed an effort, is truly impressive. This is true talent.

While dragging the aluminum bin from the laneway into my backyard, my thoughts linger on realism, the realistic. Crimes and scandals, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Transgressions and recoveries. The nastiness of lives, people's lives, flailing in ridiculousness.

I'm bored of all that now. Making mimetic extrapolations, honing details—it makes the tendons of my neck ache to even consider launching any new strand of research. I want to live in a world of the fantastic. I want to be transported to a new dimension.

I stand back from the bin as Loel lets the kerosene loose. On his sign, I strike a wood match and a hurl of flame lights the yard. The only base for this fire is a stack of old *Adbusters* magazines and Circuit City flyers I'd left around; in seconds, they are heatless, charred crinkles. But the walnut lumber catches despite the heavy polyurethane coating—the tung oil finish on the rear is apparently flammable.

Jonathan stares up at the night's blank sky.

Loel turns to me, looking very serious.

"I think I'm in love with you, Jo-Beth."

I nod, saying nothing. My distractions are many. This morning, while summoning the will to leave my bed, I had a minor epiphany for my novel. Though, like many notions stirred in half-waking's mist, these ideas might be best left as dreams.

*What's crucial here is the endgame.*

What if, perhaps, it is revealed that the zillionaire's wife *is* the killer? What if she tore a stranger to pieces for the sheer pleasure of it? What if the outcome is not that these problems, chemical and legal and otherwise, can be defeated, but that there is a netherworld, real and

completely non-fictional, of insanity and violence into which any of us might be subsumed, right there, right *here*, and perhaps justice will only be served by decisively confronting this world of such horrors? What if the book, a book which probably should not even exist in the first place, ends halfway through, with the heroine's realization of her own guilt, and the rest of the pages are simply blank?

Something in the fire catches and the rising smoke turns from black to white. I look to Loel and, why I don't know, I laugh out loud.

**ROB BENVIE** is the author of the novels *Maintenance* and *Safety of War* (both with Coach House Books). His writing has appeared in many print and online publications, including *McSweeney's*, *Joyland*, *Matrix*, and *Broken Pencil*. In his musical life, he has recorded and toured internationally with such endeavours as The Dears, Thrush Hermit, Camouflage Nights and Tigre Benvie. Born and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he has since split his time between Toronto and Montreal.

MARK JORDAN MANNER

# WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU DORIS

Yes, it's true. My name is Doris Doykle-Dohnk. I used to think it was because God hated me, but then I decided there is no God. It was a decision I made during the time Mother spent at the hospital, her body being eaten by a disease whose name contained many syllables, and for which there is no cure. So I visited her every day, sat beside her bed and watched as her shell shrank and shrivelled and gripped air like a rope. She died with clenched fists, blue veins protruding from the back of her small, tight hands. I think the last thing she said to me was, I'm falling, although she may have said *failing*. Her lips were purple and puckered. It was difficult to decipher the words.

A day before she died, Mother insisted I buy new clothes. That's literally what she said to me, stiff on her deathbed, with blood and urine and a milky, mildew-like substance collected in bags around her body: I insist you buy new clothes, Doris. Something less baggy, less brown. I'm being serious, now. Why must everything you wear always be so gosh darn baggy and brown?

I tried knitting a sweater that night, one with citrus and cinder rose lines dropping vertically beneath a rather revealing collar. But the sleeves didn't turn out so well. One was longer than the other, and the yarn kept pulling loose. I wasn't quite sure how to go about fixing it; I wound up using the sweater as a bathmat instead. But that didn't work, either. Puddles still formed on top of and around the sweater, while wet crumbs of yarn stuck to the bottoms of my feet.

There were two reasons Mother suggested I buy new clothes: 1. I'm forty-two, and 2. I'm single. Mother believed an updated wardrobe might be the first step in making me somewhat more desirable to someone else. But the newfound lack of brownness in my attire still couldn't hide the fact that I was what the flowchart at my doctor's office referred to as an *at risk* patient.

Mother used to tell me it was on account of the popcorn I ate, or more specifically, the amount of mayonnaise I had a tendency to plop on top of it. But I've since stopped doing that. No more mayonnaise for Doris. After Mother died, I started using garlic or onion powder instead. Both are a lot less fattening, while still tasting just as good. Not to mention the fact I also purchased a treadmill online. It arrived the Christmas Eve following Mother's death. It travelled all the way from Agra, India, and only cost me $300 Canadian. It also came with a free spray bottle.

I started walking for at least a half hour every morning before work, spraying myself enthusiastically with tap water as I went. The goal was to become the size of an average-sized woman by the following summer. I had my eye set on this particular bikini I'd seen at the outlet mall between a liquor store and the OshKosh B'Gosh. It was blue with glittery white clouds. I'd never been to a beach before.

I've always been heavy, ever since I was a kid. Carl used to say it was on account of the genes I'd inherited from him.

You were born into a long line of bigness, he told me one time, but it's a beautiful brand of bigness, Doris. We in the Dohnk family, our bodies reflect the size of our dreams. So if shrinking's what you want, then it's best to keep awake forever. Otherwise, just shut your eyes and let things happen.

Carl was a big man, with bad knees and a red, pumpkin-shaped face. He worked at the elementary school mopping floors, replacing light bulbs, retrieving tennis balls from the rooftop and scooping feces out of the urinals.

Every day he wore black pants, a grey, button-up shirt, and boots with steel toes. The boots were my favourite part. I used to tippy-toe on top of them, our fingers curled over one another's knuckles, and we'd dance, swaying around the kitchen instead of eating, with Carl humming Hank Williams or Arlo Guthrie.

I was shorter then, so my face was belly-height. It pressed into his gut, and I'd take deep breaths of his shirt, the smoke and sweat, the cleaning products. I tried to trap his scent inside my nostrils for the rest of the day. He always kissed me on the cheek at the end of our dance, call me his Little Lady and make his way out the door. Mother was the one who drove me to school. Her car smelled like perfume and breakfast.

When Carl died, Mother refused to believe it. She acted as if he was still in the house. He's just in the other room, she'd say. Go fetch him for *Jeopardy*, Doris.

But he's not here, Mom.

Nonsense, Doris. Fetch. Go on.

Mother continued to cook Carl's favourite meal, preparing it twice, sometimes three times a week. I was forbidden from entering the kitchen, but I could smell it, this concoction of corned beef, mustard, pickle, coleslaw and garlic mashed potatoes. I used to close my eyes and breathe and

swallow shots of saliva. Sometimes I'd even imagine my tongue was the food, and I'd gnaw it until my teeth turned red.

Mother walked slowly up the stairs, savouring each step. They whined under her slippers. She held the plateful of food in her hands and tucked a paper towel between her chin and chest. It was seven o'clock in the evening, always on the dot. I'd hear the door to the master bedroom open and close, and then the sound of laughter, crying, heavy breathing through the walls.

I was twelve, and remained seated on the floral couch in the living room, waiting for Mother to reappear. When she did, her face was shiny with sweat. She'd show me the plate. It was always empty, apart from a few breadcrumbs, maybe a couple drops of pickle juice.

You believe your father? she'd say. What a pig he is, stuffing that face of his the way he does. But God knows, I love him. Am I right, Doris? Am I right or am I right?

Mother left everything to me, and so I moved back into the old house soon after her death. It was located in a suburb called Aurora, a forty-five minute drive north of Toronto. The house had two floors and no basement. The walls were painted khaki, and there were brown marks on the white ceilings and white marks on the brown carpet. The same pea-coloured towels hung from a bar in the downstairs washroom. They smelled of perfume, cigarette smoke and sweat. The fridge in the kitchen was empty, the bulb flickering. Baby chick salt and pepper shakers balanced on the back end of the stove, tiny smiles carved into their beaks. One was wearing a white chef's hat, the other black.

I walked upstairs and stood in the doorway to the master bedroom. There were yellow stains wrapped like ringworm on the comforter. Circles of urine, or mustard. I opened the closet door, finding a large mouse caught in a small trap. It decomposed next to a pair of vintage heels, about six sizes too small for me.

I'd become neighbours with a girl named Kim-Claire Beally, who lived across the street from me, and who was seven and three quarters, with brown hair and eyes and blue teeth on account of the candy she'd been sucking.

Hello, she said.

Hi.

What's your name?

Doris.

What's your last name? My mom says I need to call old people by their last name.

Doykle-Dohnk, dear, I said. My last name is Doykle-Dohnk.

Well, I'm Kim. K-I-M. Claire. C-L-A-I-R-E. Beally. B-E-A-L-L-Y.

She wore a blood orange summer dress and what appeared to be ballet slippers, pink with flat toes. Her smile was wide, and the features surrounding were perfectly proportioned. She was a beautiful kid.

K-I-M. C-L-A-I-R-E. B-E-A-L-L-Y. She stuck out her blue tongue.

Just looking at her, you could tell she'd have it easy.

Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk? Kim-Claire called. It was early one morning in mid-August and I was dragging my recycling bin to the curb. The weather was muggy, stale. I was wearing Mother's peach bathrobe and a pair of plastic flip-flops. No makeup.

Kim-Claire sat behind a small table on the sidewalk across the street. The sign in front read LEMONAD ONLY 1 BUX. There was a stack of paper cups on the table beside a glass pitcher of pink lemonade.

It's Ms. Doykle-Dohnk, I tried telling her. Not Mrs., but *Miss*. Call me Miss, dear.

Kim-Claire pulled a cup off the stack and tilted the pitcher toward it.

C'mon over, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk, she said. It's only a dollar.

Shortly after moving back to the old house, I signed up for an online dating service called Cupid Cares. This was one of Mother's dying wishes. Not that I participate in online dating, necessarily, but that I attempt to find true love.

Cupid matched me up with several men, all of whom were somewhere between forty and fifty, and, according to their display pictures, either bald, blotchy, bearded, bloated, or all of the above. The site also provided me with a catalogue of information, including a list of their personal interests and geographical locations. Based on the latter, the only bachelor close enough was a gentleman named Thomas Smith, whose profile picture presented him as a rather pale, emaciated optometrist from a neighbouring town called Oak Ridges. His interests included eyeballs, books about maps, and BBW (Big Beautiful Women).

Thomas left a comment beneath my profile picture:

*I like what I see.*

This was followed by a winky face, followed by several x's and o's, followed by a happy face with its tongue sticking out, followed by: *Just tell me when and where.*

We arranged to meet at an Italian restaurant called Barrels of Pasta. Thomas wore a striped suit several sizes too big for him. The cuffs drooped like a wizard's, and his hands appeared childlike poking out of them. He touched me, his stubby fingers on the back of my elbow as we made our way to the table. Violin music vibrated out of old speakers. He pulled the chair for me, and I sat down and listened to the legs bend. We ordered drinks and food, and shared stories about our lives up until that point. Thomas told me he was a virgin. He said Christ burned in his soul and helped keep it clean.

I see, I said. I sipped red wine.

Thomas dabbed his lips, spaghetti sauce kisses on the cloth. He told me the second he saw my photo, he knew the search was over; he'd *finally found the one*. Your face did things to me, he said. When I look at you, I feel like I'm floating, like we're all in space. Do you feel it too, Doris?

Bristly blond hairs sprouted out the corners of his dry mouth. There were pimples planted along the border of his head where a hairline should've been. When there were no more noodles left on his plate, he used his fingers to pick leftover tomato chunks from the sauce and toss them into his mouth, sucking on each like a mint.

He told me the meal was on him, then asked to borrow $16.

I handed him a twenty and never saw the change. He asked if we could meet again. I told him yes. My glass was empty. He let me finish his.

I started to hear voices shortly after moving back into the old house. They came from the master bedroom, the one Mother used to share with Carl. The words were muffled through the wall, but I could still recognize it was them.

Carl saying things, and Mother laughing.

I made sure their door was kept shut. I never went in there, or upstairs at all. I slept on the living room couch and bathed by flicking water at myself at the downstairs kitchen sink. I watched the shopping channel with the volume turned all the way up, cancelling their voices with the sound of people pitching necklaces, exercise balls, foot massagers. Grills. A device for squeezing lemons. Special scented soaps. I was aware my behaviour was irrational, but I also knew they were up there. Mother and Carl had found their way back inside the house.

I only ever opened the door to their bedroom once. It was on the day that should've been Carl's sixty-eighth birthday. I prepared his favourite meal, carried it up to the bedroom the same way

Mother used to, opened the door wide enough so that the plate fit through, and slid it along the floor and into the room. I didn't wait to see if there was a hand inside to pick it up. I shut the door and ran, back downstairs and out the front door and across the street. Kim-Claire was still selling lemonade. I bought a cup and guzzled it like red wine. The lemonade was tepid and too sour, but I still asked for several refills. Kim-Claire wanted to know if I thought she was pretty, and I told her I did. She handed me my next cup at a 25% off discount.

When I was in kindergarten, the teacher used to project light against big sheets of brown paper that were stuck to the classroom wall. The sheets were taller than any of us, and we took turns standing between them and the light, facing sideways so that our profile became silhouetted on the paper. The teacher then traced our shadows, and we spent the afternoon colouring ourselves in. But my shadow appeared noticeably larger than the others; my belly was rounder, and I didn't seem to have a neck. Every part of me toppled and began to blend like I was a melting snowman. One kid even called me doughy. Doughy Doris Doykle-Dohnk.

Later Carl found me spread in the middle of the street, arms and legs outstretched like I was trying to make an angel on the pavement. He asked what I was doing.

The kids at school make fun of me.

How so?

They think I'm fat.

Nonsense, Doris.

They call me Doughy Doris Doykle-Dohnk.

A car drove up and stopped in front of us. Carl bent down. He reached his hand for me to take, and I took it, and he lifted me up like I wasn't heavy at all. He carried me back to the house with his hands under my bottom, and then sat me down on the front step and said, You need to quit doing that, Doris.

But Dad, I said.

It's dangerous, Little Lady. No more lying in the street.

Dad.

Enough.

I looked at my feet. There were ants surrounding my shoes, all of them the exact same size, and I thought about how lucky they were. Carl went inside the house. I tried killing as many ants as

possible, but they were too small. I'd lift my shoe and they'd still be there, scuttling around, not knowing how close they'd come.

I still smell Carl's breath. Like fire. Scotch and Pepsi. The way his veins pulsated under my fingers, cheeks grazing mine like soft sandpaper. His lips, sharp kisses. His feet were wide. Yellow toenails and a white scar on his left ankle. He was barefoot. The oven door was open and loose on its hinges. The funeral was cheap. We buried him in a cardboard coffin. Mother sobbed into my hair as she hugged me from behind. I sat on the couch. She continued to cook for him. I watched her walk up the stairs. Sometimes it sounded like there were two pairs of feet.

Thomas rode a scooter. He picked me up for our second date wearing the same striped suit, the same ketchup tie. I told him he looked *gentlemanly*. You too, he told me. Pretty as a landscape, Doris. You make me wish I knew how to paint.

It was only five o'clock. Kim-Claire was still across the street selling lemonade. Thomas suggested we go buy some. She poured us two cups, asked Thomas if he was my husband.

Just friends, I told her. You know I'm not married, Kim-Claire.

Kim-Claire nodded. You're a lot bigger than he is, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk.

Thomas took me to a Chinese food buffet. We sat next to the window, a setting sun landing in his eyes and making him squint. He rubbed his foot against my shin under the table. I could feel his big toe poking through a hole in his sock. I tried my best to blush. He blew me a kiss. I caught it, and for whatever reason, stuffed it between my breasts. He tried feeding me, holding a forkful of bean sprouts in front of my mouth, but I shook it away.

I just want to take care of you, he said.

The meal made me feel dizzy, like a head rush that wouldn't slow down. Everything was cold and undercooked and I felt puffy afterwards. Even the beverages were bad. The coffee smelled fusty, and the lemonade was too sweet. Thomas asked if I'd like to go see a movie, but I didn't; I told him my stomach ached like I'd swallowed a cactus. He drove me home on his scooter. The wind in my hair made everything feel lighter. It was only 6:30 when we arrived back at my place. He asked if he could smell me before I went inside. He said he wanted to sniff my armpit. I let him, and he said the Chinese food was caught in my pores. He asked to lick it, and I let him.

Carl and Mother met when they were teenagers. He was big, and she was little, and they dated for five years before eloping in Niagara Falls at the age of twenty. Five years after that, they had a child.

It wasn't planned. Mother never wanted kids. She believed them to be a burden, stretching your body and shortening your lifespan. But the prospect of having a baby is something that excited Carl. He tried forcing Mother to keep it. She fought back. They reached their final decision over a game of chess.

Elderly men used to play in the park. Mother's grandfather was one of these men. Every Saturday he was there from noon until six, and one afternoon, Carl and Mother sat on a bench and watched him. The deal was if Mother's grandfather won, she'd get an abortion, and if he lost, me.

The game lasted maybe forty minutes. Carl held Mother's hand the entire time. I couldn't tell whose was sweatier, he told me, many years later, but our grip kept slipping. Your mother's a difficult lady to hold.

Eventually, Carl had to let go. He stood up and paced in front of Mother, who remained seated, her back straight, her hand drawing circles on her flat belly. The chess game ended and Carl threw up into some bushes next to the garbage can. Mother rubbed his back as he spit the taste out of his mouth. She told him she'd changed her mind, and not to worry.

I arrived home early from work one evening, and Kim-Claire was still outside, seated behind her lemonade stand and yelling across the street to me, telling me what she'd earned that day. Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk! Today I made a whole entire thirty-two bucks! Thirty-two, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk!

That's wonderful, dear, I said.

Kim-Claire looked both ways before running across the street.

How much did you make? she asked.

I was unloading groceries out of my trunk. Most of the bags contained healthy foods like hummus and bananas, so I wasn't embarrassed. I pulled a lemon from one and handed it to her. She pressed on the toes of her ballet slippers and shut her eyes tight so I could see how long her lashes were.

Thanks, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk.

It's *Miss* Doykle-Dohnk, dear.

That's what I said.

She reminded me of a girl I knew in high school, a girl named Leah Carson, who told everyone I was a lesbian, and also that I diddled myself underneath the tables in the cafeteria while watching people eat.

I took back the lemon.

Hey!

I bet you aren't even the one who makes it, I told her. I bet it's your mother who does the work, and you just sell it. Tell me, Kim-Claire. Is it Quinlynn? Don't lie.

Kim-Claire wasn't listening. She was already halfway across the street by the time I started yelling. LIARLIARLIAR, and she was crying, lifting the pitcher of pink lemonade off the table and dumping it on the lawn. I hate you, she yelled back at me. I hate you, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk. You're a fat stupid idiot and I hate you.

I'm lying in the middle of the road again, except now I'm middle-aged. My arms and legs are stretched as far as possible, and I'm dressed in an elegant white gown, or maybe a coral pink gown, or maybe the gown is cornflower blue. A car stops to avoid running me over. The driver gets out. Are you alright? he asks. I sit up and show him I'm fine. The driver is a man, and the man is tall and dark and handsome and whatever else women are generally looking for. He smiles, teeth like in a toothpaste commercial. He asks what my name is, and I tell him Doris, and he tells me I don't look like a Doris. You look more like a Julia or Jennifer or Jacqueline, he says. Yes. A Jacqueline. I make a funny face, eyes crossed, tongue sticking out to the side. He tells me I'm funny, and that it's quirky how I lie in the middle of the street dressed in a gown. He says he finds me odd, and that my oddness intrigues him. He wants to learn more about me. He brushes the hair out of my eyes with his fingers and tells me his name is Jack or James or Jonathan. My name's Jonathan, he says in a voice so deep I can feel the words rumble my belly. He asks me for my number. I give it to him. He calls. He calls and I answer. It's all true.

The last time I saw Thomas, he showed up at my house unannounced, carrying a six-pack of beer and a bottle opener in the shape of a cross. We ordered pizza and played Scrabble in the kitchen. Thomas poured his beer into a wine glass, drank it through a straw. I was wearing sweatpants and my faded Minnie Mouse T-shirt, but he didn't seem to care. He told me I looked *saucy and succulent*.

Liar, I said.

I'm serious, Doris. God made you with all kinds of herbs and spices.

He wore a white T-shirt and jeans, and his bare feet smelled, but I didn't say anything about it. When the Scrabble game ended, he kept forming words on the board like *I* and *LOVE* and *YOU*. He asked if we could go to the bedroom, but I said no. The upstairs was off limits. He made a joke about someone being up there, but it was only a joke. I took out the straw and drank the remainder of his beer.

Thomas swept the Scrabble board off the table with his child-hands. I'm not sure why he did that. The letters clattered on the tiles, and spread into a mess. He took off his clothes like someone was timing him. His frame, even scrawnier when naked, flesh pulled tight against jutted bones. He was hairless, apart from his pubes and the few blond curls spiraled around his nipples. I felt bloated. My stomach and throat gurgled.

It's your turn, he said.

This was my first time taking my clothes off in front of a man. But I wasn't nervous. I knew I was a BBW, exactly what Thomas wanted. He lay back on the floor with his penis stiff in the air. I was going to sit on top of it, but he instructed me not to. He said we couldn't have sex because we weren't married, that I should smother him instead.

Cover me entirely, he pleaded. Let me get lost in you, Doris.

I felt the hardness stab into my body. The tip was wet. I pressed my hands and toes into the tiles. It stabbed my flesh. I could hear Carl and Mother fighting on the floor above us. Someone threw something at someone else. The noise shattered across the ceiling.

Thomas moaned, but the sound was stifled under my breasts. I could feel his jaw moving up and down, trying to catch pieces of me in his mouth. He pinched my thighs when he was finished. His nails left lines on my skin. I rolled off of him, and onto my back, and he wiped my belly clean with Pizza Hut napkins.

I didn't understand at first. My cousin tried explaining it. Uncle Carl died in the oven, she said. His head was in the oven, and then he couldn't breathe anymore.

I thought this meant he'd cooked himself, or maybe burned his face until his head filled with so much fire everything stopped working. But Carl looked like himself at the funeral, lying there in the cardboard casket. I mean his face wasn't burnt, and he didn't look much like food either. He just looked like Carl, mostly. I kept expecting him to wake up and call me his Little Lady, let me step on his toes and sway for a while.

It was about a year after moving back into the old house. A car nearly hit me. I was standing in the middle of the road when it screeched and stopped and started honking. I looked at the ants on the ground, and myself. I was dressed in Mother's bathrobe and broken flip-flops. The driver leaned his head out the window. It was a teenager with long hair and expensive-looking sunglasses. He yelled, Get off the road, crazy bitch.

I stepped onto the sidewalk. I was across the street from my house.

Are you alright, Mrs. Doykle-Dohnk? Kim-Claire asked.

Yes. Yes I am, Kim-Claire.

Why'd you run in front of that car?

I'm fine, dear.

She poured me a cup of lemonade. Maybe you're confused, she said. My mom says sometimes old ladies get confused when they're out in the sun for too long. That's why Mrs. Mah called me Melissa at the street sale. My mom says it's important that old ladies stay—

I was walking away, back across the street and up my driveway and into the house. I walked past the TV with the shopping channel turned up all the way, past the treadmill and the spray bottle half-empty in the holder. I managed to climb the stairs and open the bedroom door. Neither one was there, but their faces appeared in a photograph on the armoire: Carl and Mother in their mid-twenties, standing on a ferry with water sparkling black in the background, and Carl is holding me, cradling me in his big arms, and Mother's touching Carl's left bicep, and her cheek is on his shoulder, and both of them are looking down at me.

I looked up.

The ceiling fan had mahogany blades. It was spinning. The air circled coolly around the room, carrying the smell of corned beef with it, coleslaw, potatoes, pickles and mustard. Cleaning products. Lemons. My face puckered. I could feel myself budding, becoming bigger. I tried listening for the sound of Carl's voice, or Mother's, or maybe even Thomas's. But the fat folded over my ears, and then my eyes, over my entire face, and eventually I was trapped inside of myself, unable to move, or hear, or see the parts of me growing. I could only feel it, the way my body filled the room until I was literally everywhere, not an inch left for someone to squeeze inside and find me.

**MARK JORDAN MANNER** lives in Toronto. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Grain*, *EVENT*, *Riddle Fence*, *Ricepaper*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Feathertale Review*, and others.

LOUISE CARSON

# THE GIFTS

Two handfuls of baby carrots
and it's as though you've sprouted
extra fingers only summers count
loud wine suppers on the back porch
as near to extrovert as you'll ever get
the strong attraction to fidelity
no practise makes perfect faithful
to absence these years subside
the dark woods open behind the house

Hearing water opens the ears as
an old stream comes down the mountain
for the first time in this temporary bed
under this low ceiling self plays
with now only now and morning's breeze
wakens the skin two pregnant women
mother aunt full before yearning their
blueberry pancakes a field a cottage
a stream a mountain

One and two and three and four and a field of
grasshoppers jumping up your skirt up
so close to your eyes before you knew
to cover them only feel not see
their rasp on your legs dry horrible who
they jump to is like unto a god a
smaller boy his crew-cut shining blond
hand in hand in hand he laughs at insects
life runs away from you

Be sure there's another mountain there's
another stream to sit in its roar over rock
moss fern web and drink not as much fun
as in the beer commercial a different boy
tougher darker who demands works you
wrings you out turns you and picks

even the lint from your pockets
you are useful to him as
a household appliance

But leave such a scene
the heart kick planted in an
anonymous apartment tower block hallway
where we didn't live visiting a chipped
tooth to thank him for a closed account
the bank never forgets credit rating a
matter of hands jerking money out
of the machine the body remembers its
mistakes goodbye wave goodbye

Satisfaction in silence and ownership
how beautiful are the feet
of them that walk peaceful
antique lanes small fenced graveyards
playgrounds parking pads designer-gardens
uninhabited as though when you pass
everyone rushes inside once
there was a boy sat on his front steps played
guitar and sang softly too late he said hello

So still so far out at the last moment the
sea rushes at the land its
salt is what we're made of brought
to soil a mixture we pray we are
unsinkable strong enough to keep out stance
of course we sway at this work
slick oily water pulls water there
is no mind in our bodies now
now the land is dangerous

Oh separation oh attachment oh salt bliss on
my chest in my chest blinking sleepless
naked caught now a star night fish
moon sweeter than the smoke of music
burning I smell on her the sea
my smell on her I would lick
her clean but we don't do that

I give her milk and many nights before
she walks dry onto the earth

Some nights there are kisses that edge
to a centre you have to miss you look
out at the dark on dark and in
to your lamp your book the water
is still and moves the earth the breeze
is still and moves the leaves and your hands
still sprout extra fingers like
baby carrots the tenderness of years
opening to the woods behind the house

## STRANGE

that one red leaf
among so many green
resembles an apple
animals have
a resistance to
this fraud
survival
demands
that some
still reach out
and taste.

# THE SUNSET BANK—JULY

Insubstantial moon gives way and sun
is all and peaks and burns us down to rest
clover grass seed heads make purple waves
that mock us wet with memories of river lake
pools slosh and shriek
washed cars' suds at driveways' ends
potholes tarred and rolled in a licorice rush
kids try to chew the melting leftovers at the edge
treated sewage flows under the bridge
jog over easy run back hard
light streaks to places west
gunpowder flashes red green gold through trees
drowns out the eerie noise of the travelling fair
its exaggerated antics unnatural pleasures
the band nasty amplified distorted strutting

Hawk soaring thermal day
we need to sink our feet in green wet
where arrowhead hangs pond scum floats
cattails open above our heads
tree-fringed clouds hover confirm weather's breaking
stillness bird punctuated
the whole world heavy growth heat aphrodisiac
yet a cool breeze is a welcome gift
full clouds lower wet air to swim through
the day melts desire to work or play even rest uncomfortable
heat lightning jars eyes in the dark

Not by layers peeled to the core a pellet
tears blown off a limestone shore
but bitter chicory blue coarse gravel scrunch
trees exhale soft gases strong yellow going
going darkening cornfields amazing complicated
cloud billows tufts puffs drag haze true heavens
sun-tinged one waits for the touch the reaching finger
cool smoky reverse pink glow
smooth white and wisp ruffle half moon by last daylight
field sparrows sing night

Soft grasses pasha's silver fly whisk horsetail hair
plucked cream yucca bells molluscs attached to
rock green spine woodchuck running streaks past
two clear white butterflies on lavender
sun butters the walls drowning in cloud
sends searchlight beams through blue marble
black butterfly and thumbnail frog oh perfect
how good to exhale words walk above ground
oh small wing shadow crest beak cry
and so evening comes on

Red-winged raspberry bushes cackle
unicorn expecting sky puffed bright open
afternoon air maple syrup sweet
orange day lilies stretch crow high
yellow birds claw lily stems
leaving they become flowers that fly
insect buzz
dry chopped hay dust on sweaty arms
sudden pine tree coolness
yellow studs in deep grass waves
underwater dandelions ride through shad
covered in green slow stained black
pale stippled sky

Sun in old stone wood brick concrete iron vee
people trickle in like weeds
outdoor concert smoke and dogs
guitarist laughs as he drops a chord
a love song to a child friend
motorcycle industrial machine screams
pigeons down cock heads as
seagulls spin white through blue
shadow eats white clover goldenrod
Queen Anne's lace weed maple bladder Campion
guitar words stop and we turn to look
two horse-drawn wagons
one driver hacks and spits
walk rhythm ca-tack ca-tack
girders hold wire for train's thrummed strings

a pink blue haze blown back

Grass lays down a something dead
dark moth alights the end of a dream
on cream hydrangea sweet heat white weak
the hollow tube that is a bird
hot orange tiger lily sun snuffed
as an expression of life a wonderful book
poisoned by humidity golden flies
sometimes water can be revelation
dream pink sky and crickets
such a warm night on which to freeze
overtaken by puffs of gray and white
circling bats the shining silver window edge

# THE KEY

The key must enter the eye many times.
If the eye blinks, the key cannot turn.

Hold steady.

**LOUISE CARSON** has recently published in *Carousel*, *EVENT*, and *The Literary Review of Canada*, with work upcoming in *Descant* and *The Antigonish Review*. One of her poems has been selected for *The Best Canadian Poetry 2013*. Her books include *Rope: A Tale Told in Prose and Verse* (Broken Rules Press, 2011) and *Mermaid Road* (BRP, 2013). She lives near Montreal.

MICHAEL E. CASTEELS

# PARTICLES

Subtract your elegy from my sonnet.
Extract the essence from the flora.
Impersonate the Prime Minister;
pretend you are a pig, or some other
kind of swine. Gargle the wine to appear
knowledgeable. Reiterate your thesis. Ease
the speed of snowfall. Bellow from your
diaphragm. This diagram will illustrate how.
Did I tell you about my atoms? They are
like Lego. You can build a pirate ship or
a robot or a castle equipped with lasers or glow-
in-the-dark ghosts. Grammar is of
importance. The coffee was imported.
When you cough, cover your mouth.
Germs are nasty. Germans brew tasty beer.
Have you seen my beard? It's here, on my face.
There is no excuse for your lack of insight.
Did you see it? It was here on my face.

# THE RED LIGHT

Already late and speeding,
praying the light doesn't change.
It does and I stop.
I tap my fingers against the wheel,
twist dials on the dash. In the rear-view mirror
I examine the spaces between my teeth.
The light hasn't changed.
I rummage through the glove box,
remembering the spearmint gum.
I count spare change in the ashtray.
Minutes pass. I consult the
owner's manual. I read it
cover to cover and still
the light remains. At sundown
I begin to worry. I take only
short sips from my water bottle.
I flick the high beams off and on,
signalling in Morse code. It's getting late.
Radio hosts abandon the airwaves.
I watch the moon drift overhead.

Night after night
the moon is whittled
until crescent, and then
into nothing. I've been
counting the days on my
fingers and toes. Seasons
shift and skew. I engage the
wipers when it rains, crank the
defrost when it snows.
On humid summer evenings
I roll down the window
and let my arm dangle.
A faint breeze stirs my thoughts
and I wonder about Goldie.

Would she be swimming in circles

or just floating in the archway
of that tiny plastic castle? I hope the water
is fresh, that her bowl is clean. I hope she wants
for nothing. And sitting there, bathed in the glow
of that godforsaken light, I wonder
if she'd even remember me.

**MICHAEL E. CASTEELS** has self-published over a dozen chapbooks of poetry and artwork. His poetry has also appeared in *529* (Proper Tales Press), *Sterling Magazine*, *In/Words*, and *That Not Forgotten* (Hidden Brook Press). He has work forthcoming in *The Rusty Toque*. He was nominated for the emerging artist award in the 2012 Premier's Awards for Excellence in the Arts. He lives in Kingston, Ontario, where he runs Puddles of Sky Press.

ANGELA HIBBS

# TRIPLETS IN THEIR BEDROOM, N.J. 1963

*—After Diane Arbus*

**1**

Made of shadow
Her shadow is a second attempt

One works in a grenade factory. The others
in the toy grenade factory.

Repetitive motion syndrome:
repeating their own motions, and each other's.

Filed under iconic photograph.

**2**

Some think they
favour one another
over other siblings.

**3**

Yes, the triplets have
dreamed in triplicate.

One wonders what it would be like if there were two.
Four. If only one, would it be her?
If it wasn't, she would know.

She can tell the girls who wish they had copies.

**ANGELA HIBBS**'s books are *Passport* (DC Books, 2006) and *Wanton* (Insomniac Press, 2009).

DEIRDRE MAULTSAID

# SHINE ON, YOU MOONS OF JUPITER

Bess, the landlord's daughter
should cover the begonia of blood on the musket,
put her hair up into a bun and descend;
walk out alone on the Little Mermaid's legs
still singing, whether on crag, tide, or sea foam with her sisters.

I walk, singing, too
knower, agent, doer, done.

It could kill me:
the brokenhearted sacrificing stars,
the silence of a wind-abraded
winter-shortened, virtueless
craggy human family, story.
a heritage of slights embedded in the sky.

All I have is sniper thinking;
I am calling out from between the rocks.

To solve the dilemma of my moral levy,
I accept innocence and faith;
more is required: doubt.

If reason is valuable then these are my reasons
and they belong to me.

If I practise ethics,
then mercy to women, those proud moons of Jupiter.
I will not shout at you, not a one
though your quandaries be more than war
though you are but rogues, off orbit, you are moral.

You don't need to petition me to find wonder.

Donny Osmond's smile on my bedroom wall
put me in a state of faith.

My girlfriend would run away
to the Osmonds's home,
their butterscotch eyes, their harmony:
why wouldn't they welcome her?

He was pious in Joseph's Dreamcoat
shrieking about a return to family,
but, Donny's teeth were pearls, sea foam, something of true wonder.

Whiter than a wedding cake, neo-gothic house
on the escarpment in Lévis
after I disembarked from the ferry—
the wind and waves in smithereens of heaven—
I alone, freewheeling, walking in the light.

Whiter than the San Jose Observatory
where Himalia and other moons were found
where I looked up at the pavilion of private stars.

Whiter than my incandescent inner voice,
which is my outer voice,
moral, divine because I say so.

**DEIRDRE MAULTSAID**'s essay, "The sun knows what it does" appeared in the anthology, *Double Lives* (McGill-Queens University Press). She has been published in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, *The Danforth Review*, *Other Voices*, *Pif*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Southern Cross Review*, and others. Her book of lyrical essays, *These Blessings, This Crisis: Essays*, is available from amazon.com; her e-book novel, *The Ashes of her Shelter* is available from smashwords. More writing is available at: www.deirdremaultsaid.com and @DeirdMaultsaid. She lives in Vancouver and has two grown children.

SIMON PERCHIK

# FIVE POEMS

*

For a split-second these steps
are at a loss, half thorns
half holding back just enough

in case you come too close
and your shadow no longer means
you still face the sun

the way this stairway will dissolve
as rainwater, would close your eyes
if there was time

—where you wade is already wood
smoothed by the same descent
streams are famous for

can tell from a single stone
on the bottom for years
following under footmarks then flowers

that stay open alongside the others
till suddenly you are ankle-deep
breathing out again, there.

*

You tell this ice the glass
is breaking up, to take
one breath more :a splash

starting out, half as shoreline
the other frozen underneath
so you don't drown the way each shadow

still has the scent from seawater
though the frost
is already holding your hand

face down, deeper and deeper
in pieces not yet apart
—you yell breathe in, let its cold

wash over you, in you, become
water again, a mouth again
and against your lips, alone.

*

You will hide, try
point to your forehead
almost remember where the mourners

put the dirt back
so even you won't know the difference
—you need more dirt :a sky

with one cloud then another
filled with stones and gasping for air
so you will think it's the grasses

that have forgotten where to go
have nothing left to do
the way funerals still come by

as if rain no longer mattered at night
and the kiss someone once gave you
—you won't eat anymore :the breeze

will step back, go slack, cover you
though there's not enough room
with distances and longing.

*

You sprinkle the dead, closer than usual
as if something inside this rock
is just now learning to survive

without roots, already talks
about lying awake, afraid your fingers
will crack it open for the mouth

to cover the one that's started
the way night over night your hands
spread out as the distance

that empties only into river water
so it comes up each morning
held in place, not yet breathing.

*

And though the dirt never dries
a simple circle makes it easy
—your fingertip begins to warm

then later the emptiness
it's used to—by heart
curves in as if the grass

knows nothing about the tiny waves
leaving shore alone and the old life
already around your shoulders

—the dead never expected your lips
so close, on the bottom
will never know what they wanted.

**SIMON PERCHIK** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled, "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

MAME EKBLOM CUDD

# PERHAPS A FEW MOMENTS IN EDWARD HOPPER'S CHILDHOOD

The Hopper boy stands tall
Now four p.m. in his side yard
Waiting for the sun, its light to hit and break
Upon his childhood house, casting, finally, a gift
A shadow boxed on the grass

He plants his feet on the bright dark line
No middle ground, shoes off every day
To feel that edge, his centre
Heat on one side, cool on the other
He uses the push mower to cut an
Outline, a comfort, a green rectangle

His mother watches from the porch
She's tall, gangly in a cotton dress
She walks over and stands with her son
They watch the insects fly in and out of the light
She says, in the shadow, *They look all gone, Ed*
After dinner, his father places three kitchen chairs on the lawn
They want to sit and watch the summer sun cut into the scrub oaks

# SEPARATE BEDROOMS

My brothers—two action dirt boys
Live in rooms at the back of the house
They own large desks on sawhorses
Worktables covered in model glue and
Model paint splashed on toy cars and hammers
Stuck to blocks and nails used to transport the glue
Now stuck to drawings of war with planes and ships firing
Rockets at soldiers in uniforms splattered with limbs-gone-missing-shattered-red

And the dirt boys
They have special clothing

Piles of it serviceable
Durable military Cub Scout-Boy Scout
Forward-moving charted by rank
And sticky cardboard tanks

Go—my room is for you
At the top of the stairs
I survive like the carpeting
Durable pristine well-scrubbed
Good as swirling gold
For flow for martinis to be sipped
While dolls from Germany or Switzerland are admired
By smiling red-eyed adults
Enjoying my horizon
The entire box set of me
My exhibit of crisp white eyelet
I will be crisp eyelet

**MAME EKBLOM CUDD** has a BA in Economics from Wells College and a Master's in Social Work from Columbia University. She was a psychotherapist for a number of years before turning instead to her great love: writing short stories, memoir and poetry. She has attended many workshops and conferences, including Squaw Valley Community of Writers in 2009 and 2011. She is currently living in Pennsylvania with her husband, Jim. He remains her great support, as do her children, Robert, Erin and William.

MEG JOHNSON

# AMERICAN WOMAN;
# Or, If the Three Original *American Girl* Heroines Were Grown-Ass Women in 2013

**1. Kirsten**

She wasn't suicidal, but
she didn't mind thinking about death.
When she was a child
it seemed everyone was dying,
even children her age.
She wasn't ungrateful.
She knew she should
treasure her three healthy sons,
her loyal husband.
There was just always so much
work to do. At the office
she did her own work
and often stayed late,
fixing co-workers' projects.
At home there were mountains
of socks that needed to be washed.
When she would mix up
the boys' underwear,
putting the Batman boxers
in the wrong dresser, her sons
were greatly offended. Even
as a small girl, chore after chore.
She liked to think of herself
one day nestled in the ground,
unable to awake, unable to work.

**2. Samantha**

She should have remembered
what her grandmother taught her:
actions speak louder than words.

Maybe then she wouldn't have married
the wrong man. Twice. Oh, Ms.
Parkington. People often forget
she's a double divorcee. Her girlish
looks and bandage dresses distract
from what didn't go as planned.
*She's not just gorgeous*, married
friends say to bachelors when trying
to set her up on dates. *She's smart
and talented and does a ton
of charity work*. Sam's best friend
Nellie gives it to her straight
over martinis. *The clock is ticking.*

**3. Molly**

She knew when she was a little girl.
She wanted to cradle Emily Bennett
when Emily was afraid of the war. Kiss
her under her desk. She wanted
to be the perfect military daughter,
her father's love her proudest possession.

She has reconciled with her father
after years of estrangement.
Mr. McIntire wanted to meet
his grandchild. He was kind
to Molly's wife when he finally met her,
years after the rest of the family.

I will always love you, Molly, he said.
Molly knew he was telling the truth.
She also knew he would continue to vote
conservative, remain in awe of his motorized
tie rack, and refer to his sickly pet puggle
as *the lady seducer.*

**MEG JOHNSON**'s first full-length poetry collection is forthcoming from The National Poetry Review Press. Her poems have appeared in *Hobart*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Slipstream Magazine*, *Stone Highway Review*, *Word Riot*, and others. Meg started dancing at a young age and worked professionally in the performing arts for many years. She currently lives in Akron, Ohio and is the editor of *Dressing Room Poetry Journal*. Her website is: www.megjohnson.org.

# "HORA ZERO: REJECTING THE ELITISTS, BRINGING POETRY TO THE PERUVIAN PUBLIC:"

## An Interview with Jorge Pimentel and Tulio Mora

BY ROBERT SWEREDA

**JORGE PIMENTEL** *(born in Lima, December 11, 1944) is a Peruvian poet, founder of the Zero Hour Movement (Hora Zero) with Juan Ramírez Ruiz in 1970, and leader of the movement throughout all its stages of development.* **TULIO MORA** *(born in Huancayo, Peru, in 1948) is also Peruvian poet, of the most representative of the so-called Generation of '70, and, along with Pimentel, one of the most important writers and theorists of the Zero Hour Movement.*

*Emerging in the 1970s, Hora Zero sought to oppose the dominant powers of Peruvian poetry, questioning the national poetic canon—with the exception of César Vallejo—to advocate a new poetry, one closer to daily life, the underclass, and to the reality of contemporary Peru. It is considered the most important literary movement in the 20th-century in Peru. Poets Jorge Pimentel, Tulio Mora, Juan Ramírez Ruiz, Enrique Verástegui, Jorge Nájar, José Carlos Rodríguez, and Carmen Ollé are considered its most principle figures.*

*In a planned preface to a re-release of Jorge Pimentel's* Bird Song*, published posthumously after his death in 2003, Roberto Bolaño wrote that in the early 1970s, "young Peruvian poetry was by far the best being written" in Latin America, and that much of the groundwork of his own infrarrealismo (Infrarealism)—in part fictionalized in* The Savage Detectives*—was based on the principles of Hora Zero.*

The following interview was conducted via e-mail while the author was living in Lima, Peru in 2011.

**Robert Swereda:** *From what I have read about Hora Zero, you wanted to question the national poetry of Peru and advocate a new poetry that revealed lives of the working and lower classes, the reality of Peru at that time. What sort of writing was happening in Peru and Latin America then? Why was it necessary to develop a change in writing?*

**Jorge Pimentel:** The prevailing model at the time was very Spanish, very British, and very French. It could not identify with Peruvian daily life. It was very pompous, full of rhetoric and "sugar." For example, the poet walking down the street in Lima, on Quilca street for example, would say: "I am walking down Bayard Street." They were not identifying with their own city, their own country, their

own people. They were ashamed of calling things by their actual names. They wanted to be universal from European cities, when they should be universal from your own province in Lima, Peru.

**Tulio Mora:** What was being questioned was the poetic subject of the self. If you take a tour through Peruvian poetry, you will find mostly lyric poems that never dared to incorporate popular expressions because it sees poetry as "pure," and "enlightened;" it is a transcendent vision that subordinates or hides day-to-day experiences under a symbolic collage. There are exceptions, of course, such as Gamaliel Churata, or the whole Orkopata Group from Puno in general, and César Vallejo, the indigenous poets, and poetic groups from the '40s and '50s, especially the working class poet Leoncio Bueno, or Carlos Germán Belli, even though he starts with surrealism and then builds his poetic diction imitating classical forms and adding some popular idioms. Later on, during the '60s, we find poets such as Hernández, Hinostroza, or Cisneros, who incorporate daily and domestic experiences without abandoning the vision that poetry must be written with words of "literary prestige." Another recurrent characteristic of Peruvian poetry is its Eurocentric re-creation. In fact, anything coming from Europe or the great Western cultural centres is still considered better than what we have here. It's a way to reproduce the centre-periphery relationship on a national level: the centre is Lima or the coast, anything else is peripheral. And even though the best Peruvian poetry comes from the periphery, it is not mentioned when building the canon.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that when Hora Zero was created, the country's political context was very favourable toward popular expression: rural migration toward big coastal cities (represented by one of Jose María Arguedas's fundamental poems: "To our creator father Tupac Amar"), especially to Lima; the military government of General Velasco; and on an international level, the youth liberation movements (May '68, the Tlatelolco massacre, Prague Spring); the hippie movement, the Vietnam war, etc. And let's not forget that in such a context, we had an important poetic reference in the Beat Generation (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti). A lot of Anglo-American poetry was being read in Peru at the time, from Whitman to the Beats. Pound and Eliot had a cult following, but we were also reading E. E. Cummings, Williams, MacLeish, Lowell, etc., even though we would read the translations instead of the original English versions. But yes, my generation was formed basically with Anglo-American and Latin American poetry rather than with Spanish or French works, which were dominating Peruvian poetry up to the '50s.

I have already written elsewhere that when we went to the streets looking for hippies, in the Beat fashion, we found Andean immigrants instead. What were we supposed to write about with such people? That's why Hora Zero contaminated poetry with the popular expressions that were already used by Vallejo in *The Black Messengers* (*Los Heraldos Negros*) and *Trilce*, by Churata, and by the '50s Generation (mostly by Mario Vargas Llosa, Oswaldo Reynoso, and Miguel Gutiérrez). Because, as the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky would say: poetry is passed down not from father to son but from uncle to nephew. And then, Miguel Gutiérrez already warned that contemporary literature descends from Hora Zero's poetry.

**RS:** *What effect did the writing of César Vallejo have on Hora Zero? How did he stand out from other Peruvian writers?*

**JP:** Vocabulary wise, no influence. Vallejo's influence for us was his life and his risky, ground-breaking work.

Vallejo was completely different. There is a Before Vallejo and an After Vallejo. And there's also a before Hora Zero and an after Hora Zero, from the '70s onward.

**RS:** *Was there any influence from previous writing and art movements such as Dada, or the Beat Generation, and how did you differ from these?*

**TM:** To highlight what I mentioned in the first question: besides the Beats, we were influenced by Latin American poets, such as Nicanor Parra, Ernesto Cardenal, José Coronel Urtecho, Carlos Drumond de Andrade, Juan Gelman, and by the Latin American and European avant-garde, since we did not believe poetry should be only popular, but experimental as well.

**JP:** First, we placed our conviction in making a new kind of poetry that would reflect what we are in this country, in Peru, Latin America. We had a high regard for all avant-garde movements; we admired them but did not copy them. We considered ourselves a very different avant-garde movement.

There is a quotation by the poet Rodolf Hinostroza, along the lines of: "I'd rather watch the Rimac than the Thames." And another one: "a naked cholo is superior to a Greek nude." These are his statements in Leonidas Cevallos's anthology, *Los Nuevos*. This was the breaking point for Hora Zero in the '70s, which prefers to watch the Rímac rather than the Thames, and would rather have a naked cholo than a Greek nude. Here we thrust another spear into Peruvian poetry, dividing it between *before* and *after* Hora Zero. We were reflecting the Other, not the Ego. We were reflecting the inner migrations of people from the Andes, who would come down to the coast, to Chimbote, and we were betting on the naked cholo, to make him universal through his mythology, his poverty, his customs, the way he sees the world, the way he walks, laughs, lives, survives … his poverty, his melancholy or his frustrations … Starting from there, we thought of making our poetry universal.

**RS:** *After the movement of Hora Zero had started a following and had branched out, writers from Callao, Chiclayo, Chimbote, and Iquitos had joined, and not only poets, but visual artists as well. The idea was to break from the conservative, elitist literary circle of Lima. What was the reception from readers and other writers who were more conservative? How did you deal with their response to this?*

**TM:** The truth is, HZ was born from students from both the inner provinces and from Lima, from Federico Villarreal University. So the provinces were present from its inception, which was the "Palabras Urgentes" (1970) manifesto. And yes, at one point HZ wanted to be an artistic movement, not just a poetic one. That is why it has painters, novelists, filmmakers, photographers. We weren't able to achieve that, but many of these artists were always with us, as you can see in the *Hora Zero, los broches mayores del sonido* anthology.

The reception from conservative writers was ferocious. They didn't like the fact that some youngsters, who had not yet been published, were criticizing them for imitating European poetry, for being centralists, for not revealing their life experiences in a direct way. And ever since, the battle has been ferocious. Even writers from our own generation, such as Abelardo Sánchez León and Patrick Rosas, are against us. HZ divided Peruvian poetry 40 years ago, and today's young poets know that. They are less passionate, so they read us with a different, more objective point of view, and they confess we made fundamental contributions to the new aesthetic that came out of Peru after the migrations, the internal conflict, and the Fujimori regime. We belong to a group of movements that, back in the '70s, were building a plural, multi-ethnic, hybridized culture, as the

great poet Gamaliel Churata wanted since the '30s, or Arguedas, who spoke of "all the bloods," or even some philosophers or poets from the '20s, like Vallejo, Mariátegui and Basadre, who called for an "Integral Perú." It is from these principles that the "integral poem" was born.

**JP:** The elite tried to exclude us from everything, including recitals, and they would close the door in our faces when we looked for jobs. The Peruvian elites are very closed, and they influence too many arenas, especially the cultural ones. A lot of poets in the Hora Zero movement had to travel abroad in order to survive, and we had a lot of divorces; families were lost and were hit by a powerful apparatus that tried to discredit them. Hora Zero was making them lose their lyrical poetry, their alienated and francophilic world. They were a snobbish, mannerist elite. This is why we took refuge in our unity, and we made sure that each one of our poets had their bus fare, a little bit of rum, some cigarettes, and some spare change for a payphone in case of an emergency. And also, a plate of cebiche, which was our best therapist—we discovered that key limes, with fish and salt, could break any depression.

**RS:** *After some time, people began to get jealous of the reception, freedom and independence that the following had created. A lot of poetry recitals in national universities were actually violently sabotaged. What exactly happened? Were there ever thoughts of ending Hora Zero after incidents like these?*

**JP:** Number one: we were not following the poetic guidelines given by leftist political parties, which endorsed a situational poetry.

Number two: we were not following the proposal made by Soviet social realism, endorsed by the Communist party and by the Shining Path. They wanted a poetry made up of "long live the workers!"—full of slogans to put on a pamphlet. This caused us problems not only with the right-wing parties, but also with the left.

Number three: this is why we proposed the "integral poem." We wanted to see life in its integrity and express it through an integral poetic language that would drift apart from mere lyricism. The integral poem incorporates mythology, history, day-to-day life, stage, cinema, every possible register, but always in verse. We wanted poetry to stop being a sad lament; we wanted to empower it, to develop it as whole as life itself, while looking intently at the street, through words.

**TM:** Our relationship with mainstream Peruvian poetry was harsh, as I already told you. At universities, literature professors (who were usually poets criticized by HZ) went to great lengths to discredit us. This is why, during the '80s and '90s, the poets that came out after us did so with great violence that we could not understand, but it was because they were repeating the lessons taught by their professors.

In other cases, we had a fascist reaction. For example, at Villarreal University, the HZ recitals were sabotaged by the APRA party thugs up until they were expelled from that university. Some of them never went back to university, others transferred to the Teaching Academy (La Cantuta), ruled by the historian Juan José Vega. Incidents have not only been literary (like not inviting us to festivals, recitals, or not including us in anthologies, with the exceptions of Alberto Escobar and Ricardo Gonzáles Vigil) or political, but they have also tried to stop us from working and being able to make a decent living. And despite all that, we kept going, because we had something very clear: if we had challenged everybody, then we had to stick around to prove we were right. I believe the reason HZ is still being talked about is because among its members, we always had a strong writing discipline.

**RS:** *In 1973, Hora Zero had deteriorated, and both of you had spent some time in Europe. When you returned to Lima in 1977, you got together to re-launch Hora Zero for its second stage. How was your time in Europe an influence on your ideas for the movement, and your own writing?*

**JP:** Influence? There wasn't one. What I realized was that we were following the right path, as Peruvians, Latin Americans, and members of Hora Zero. Your official birth certificate may be given to you by the church or the State, but our other birth certificate was "Palabras Urgentes," the big manifesto that I wrote with Juan Ramírez Ruiz, that breaks apart from all previous Peruvian poetry.

**TM:** One observation: I was not a part of the HZ that was born in 1970, but of what we called the "second stage" (1977). But I was close friends with all of them, and I went to their recitals, and participated in one of their congresses (1972). Actually, in 1973, as a result of that congress, HZ went into a crisis. Jorge was fighting with the other founder, Juan Ramírez Ruiz. Jorge took off to Europe, and by the time he came back, the movement no longer had an active, organic life. The second stage came out of the popular movements that were fighting to overturn the right-wing

military dictatorship of Morales Bermúdez. This is where I came in, alongside poets such as Dalmacia Ruiz-Rosas and Roger Santivañez, who were younger than the rest of us. And on an external level, we incorporated the Chilean-Mexican Infrarrealists and HZ International, which was founded in Paris by Enrique Verástegui and José Carlos Rodríguez, who founded the first HZ.

I don't think Europe had such a big influence on me; I was there for a short time. Also, European poetry was no longer part of my poetic canon. I continue reading it and I prefer it to Anglo-American works that are too spent/wasted already. Poets such as Miłosz, Symborska, Brodsky, and Enzensberger are fundamental for me; I read them almost daily.

**RS:** *In 1978, Tulio had travelled to Mexico; meanwhile, Carmen Ollé and José Carlos Rodríguez were in Paris, befriending writers from Greece (Dimitri Analis), Morroco (Tahar Ben Jellon), as well as French writers (Tristan Cabral & André Laude) and publishing manifestos and leaflets. This was known as the Hora Zero International stage. How was it decided to make the movement international, instead of exclusively Peruvian or Latin American? How did it benefit from getting out of Peru?*

**JP:** The International Hora Zero movement was organized by the Iquitos poet, my brother Jose Carlos Rodríguez.

And we received no benefit from it. It was all about expanding the movement, which finally became a liberation movement for universal humans because alienation and oppression happen not only in Peru—they happen worldwide. The big novelist and poet Roberto Bolaño understood this and joined Hora Zero with the Mexican Infrarrealists—that happened because of Hora Zero.

**TM:** From its first stage, HZ already had contacts with the Infrarrealists, who formed as a group in 1975. If you read Roberto Bolaño or Mario Santiago, they both state that they are an extension of HZ. As for HZ International, it was a dark foreshadow of what would soon be happening in Europe: the fall of the Berlin wall, of bureaucratic communism, the warnings of the damage the planet was suffering because of capitalism, and on a poetic level, criticism from academic poets and linguistic poets. You know, that kind of poetry exists everywhere. It's what we call the completely uncommitted poetry.

**RS:** *From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Hora Zero was seen as a grassroots movement that sought to collect multiple cultures and classes to decentralize and democratize poetry and the arts. Recitals, marches, and statements took place in shantytowns, parking lots, universities, and bars in downtown Lima. What was the reaction of the general public to your bringing poetry to the common person?*

**TM:** That is an excellent question. Certainly, our true objective was to incorporate popular language and lower class characters, with a dramatic edge, following Pound and Eliot, when they establish the difference of the three poetic voices regarding the function of the poetic subject: the Self (lyrical), the Other (dramatic), and Us (epic). What we really wanted, deep down, was to invite readers to write their own poetry. This was the French-Uruguayan poet Lautremont's dream back in the 19th-century. This was our utopia, the one we tried to create at those recitals you mention not just in Lima, but in Huancayo, Pucallpa, Chimbote, Cerro de Pasco. The identification of the "common person," as you call him or her, with our poetry is so tight that many non-specialized readers know us, at least by name, or they have only heard of Peruvian poetry through HZ. This was the most accurate demonstration of our democratic spirit, which nobody can argue against today.

**JP:** It was excellent. We had massive recitals of 700 or 800 people in parking lots that we would rent when they were empty on Saturday nights. We would put on poetry, salsa music, Andean music, and sell ham sandwiches and cold beer. We would sell tickets and end up with a big party, but with poetry. From Versailles-esque chamber recitals, we took poetry out to the streets, to parking lots, to "canchones" (big empty spaces that served as dance halls for Andean immigrants in Lima's downtown area). We would rent these venues and have our recitals there. This was done by Hora Zero back then, and we continue doing it. Our recitals never have less than 200 people. This is why, 40 years later, we are still out there, ahead of the curve, and we still publish. Each one of Hora Zero's members has around four or five unpublished works, and that keeps us current.

**RS:** *How do you feel about contemporary poets, Peruvian, Latin American, and throughout the world? What changes have you seen in poetics over the years?*

**JP:** We are concerned by the works of the Hora Zero movement, and the Mexican Infrarrealists.

On a personal level, I keep myself updated with what is being produced around the world, from Derek Walcott up, and down, everywhere. But I believe our poetry to be as important as any major poetry around the world. And I'm telling you this with great confidence and honesty. For example, "Cementerio General" by Tulio Mora, my own "Tromba de Agosto," "Ética" by Enrique Verástegui, and Juan Ramírez Ruiz, with "Las Armas Molidas."

**TM:** Starting around the year 2000, we began to find some very interesting poets in Peru: Irigoyen, the author of a very good book; Jerónimo Pimentel, who is making very consistent steps in each of his books; there is Victoria Guerrero; Giancarlo Huapaya, a great re-creator of experimental poetry with a popular language. I love them. I think they are the offspring of the fusion between the Eurocentric, academic tradition of Peruvian poetry, and the one HZ represents: peripheral poetry, with Cesar Vallejo in the middle, and far superior to everybody else, of course, because he is among the three or four great Spanish-language poets of all times. What I see right now is that we are finally able to speak of a Peruvian poetic tradition, as Eliot would describe it: a canon of works that are recreated, prolonged or transferred to different contexts. Today, a young poet may be reading foreign works, but he can just read Peruvian poetry in order to build his own voice. This is what we wanted in HZ: to give a space to all existing poetry in the country. We still have a long way to go before reaching that goal; ideally, poetry would be written in every existing language.

On a Latin American level, what I perceive is a dangerous step back, a product of the cultural crisis of Fukuyama's so-called "end of history" and the globalization of the neo-liberal model that has dramatically broken the European Union and put the U.S. on the verge of decadence. The U.S. is like Imperial Rome in disgrace, but like any empire trying to ferociously defend its ideology, it has endangered the planet, entering a decompensation process that may be irreversible after 500 years of capitalism, which mistakenly took the goal of humankind as pillaging and draining the planet, rather than being part of it. It has not corrected this mistake, and now all that genetic, biochemical, and environmental development that took billions of years to accumulate has been put on the verge of extinction in just 500 years.

Poetically speaking, this step back is reproduced in the so-called linguistic literature, in the ideological and environmental lack of commitment. But I think the more this crisis deepens, world poetry will return to what it's always been: a collective critical creation.

**RS:** *Tell me of your favourite memory from your experience with the movement of Hora Zero, and what was the most important lesson you learned?*

**JP:** As any avant-garde movement, Hora Zero is an ethic, a moral life discipline, a brotherhood, a brotherly solidarity. And let me tell you one thing: for us, poetry is also philosophy, and the biggest source of knowledge and authenticity. In an Hora Zero poem you can fit 500 pages from a novel, an essay, a play, music or movies. This is what an integral poem is all about, and we write them in huge books, many of them still unpublished. History, geography, culture, mythology, street-life, magic, achoramiento, and aputamadramiento (ghetto aesthetic)—our response toward cultural mannerisms that is all contained in an integral poem.

Anecdotes: we have a million of those. We were living in a community. In several houses. All the poets came from the inner provinces. We had a food storage, with cans of tuna, cooking oil, coffee, sugar, and rice that were given to us. One day a can of tuna got lost. So we put the poet and painter José Diez on trial—he now lives in the Netherlands—and we asked, "Who stole the can of tuna?" So, Diez raised his hand, and crying, said, "I stole it, but I won't do it again." And we hugged him, and he was forgiven. That is one in a million.

The lesson: we bet on something with our blood, risking our own lives in this undeveloped country, and we won. We didn't win any money, but we won our freedom and humanity. We were right. And you have no idea what we went through for it. But we don't complain; our poetry is alive and out there in the world.

**TM:** For me, it was time we went, in 1977, to a protest in Plaza San Martín, with thousands of people from different labour organizations, unions, political and religious groups, after a long Undetermined National Strike that only ended when the Moralez Bermúdez dictatorship announced they were leaving power. I remember we had gathered early at my house (the one in Jr. Torres Paz, where the second stage of HZ was started, with the "Contragolpe al viento" manifesto) and then we went to Bar Queirolo with a big bed sheet, some paint, a paintbrush, some nails and a big plank of wood, and while we drank rum, ate, and listened to Héctor Lavoe songs, we made a flag that had as

a slogan "Power to poetry." With that banner we marched that night, to the astonishment of all the other protesters, who were carrying banners with anti-dictatorship slogans.

**RS:** *If you could have done anything differently, what would that have been?*

**TM:** Is that even possible? It's not. HZ was what it had to be, and its influence, 40 years later, has only just started. As far as I'm concerned, I should say HZ saved my life.

**JP:** I wouldn't change a thing. We are still as honest and radical as we were 40 years ago. Especially because we turned out to be right. Peruvian and Latin American poetry changed after the Hora Zero Movement.

**RS:** *What advice would you give to new and young writers?*

**JP:** I'd tell them not to believe in crap. And to be free. And to try new ways of expression. Poetry is power; it is infinite and insatiable. To stay away from political parties that enslave the mind and turn poets into clapping monkeys, and especially to fight for democracy and freedom. The solution is not in economics—it is in culture, in poetry. It is possible for everybody to have something to eat, but it is much harder for everybody to be a poet. And that is total revolution.

**TM:** I would tell them to be intransigent, rebellious, self-demanding, to avoid lying to themselves, and to take any feedback with disbelief, especially if they start receiving praise. Those who care about the comments and reviews that appear in newspapers are not poets. A poet is the one who transcribes how the world shivers at our survival.

Author of *re: verbs* (Bareback Press) and a chapbook *ionlylikeitwhenitrhymes*, **ROBERT SWEREDA** is a member of the *filling Station* collective. He studied creative writing at Capilano University in Vancouver. Other work has been published by *The Puritan*, *ditch*,, *West Coast Line*, *The Incongruous Quarterly*, *steel bananas*, *The Capilano Review*, *Enpipe Line* and *Poetry Is Dead*.

# "EXHIBITS OF INDUSTRY:"
## An Interview with Rachel Lebowitz

BY MICHAEL LAKE

**RACHEL LEBOWITZ** *is the author of* Cottonopolis *(Pedlar Press, 2013), a sequence of prose and found poems about the Industrial Revolution, and of* Hannus *(Pedlar Press, 2006), which was shortlisted for the 2007 Roderick Haig-Brown Regional BC Book Prize and the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction. She is also the co-author, with Zachariah Wells, of the children's picture book* Anything But Hank! *(Biblioasis, 2008, illustrated by Eric Orchard). She lives in Halifax.*

The following interview was conducted via e-mail in April 2013.

**ML:** *First of all, I should say I'm having a bit of a hard time classifying your new book,* Cottonopolis. *It's a collection of poems, yet each piece is a part of a broader story, that of the cotton industry during the Industrial Revolution. The back cover of the book identifies it as a long poem, yet it is structured as a museum exhibit of sorts, and even has what one might call characters. How would you describe the book? How did you discover the form with which you wanted to tell this story?*

**RL:** That you have a hard time classifying *Cottonopolis* actually makes me really happy. One of my favourite writers, Geoff Dyer, writes books that are very hard to classify: there's his fiction (my least favourite of his, generally), and then there are his books about jazz and D.H. Lawrence (in part) and travel and photography and WWI—really you just kind of want a Geoff Dyer section in the bookstore. Sometimes I feel frustrated that I can't adequately categorize my writing either, but then I love it when I can't figure out where other people's books will be shelved in bookstores. I find mixed genre (W.G. Sebald, Uwe Timm) really exciting and it's great to feel that other people can't pin down my work, either.

That said, I don't think I've consciously set out to write something uncategorizable. This is just how I write; it's what comes most naturally to me. I used to write short lyric poems but they felt too thin to me—there's always something more I want to say (I'm reminded here of an interview with Alice

Munro in which she talks about how in her stories the details need to be there, too—I'm really not a minimalist). I can write short, lineated poems in the context of a larger work, but they don't stand on their own; they are informed by what comes before and they inform what comes next. My work is definitely stronger in context and I see the work as a whole; I don't see them as separate pieces at all. A friend of mine recently commented that *Cottonopolis* is like a novel, and while I'm not sure I agree, it wouldn't be entirely surprising, as I'm drawn more to reading novels and short stories than I am to poetry. Even the poems I get excited about are often ones with stories—ballads, for instance.

So whatever it is I write, no, it's not a collection of poems, which would suggest that they can be taken on their own. Certainly you can excerpt pieces from this book more easily than you could with my first book, *Hannus*, but still they aren't separate poems, as you'd find in a "collection." "Long poem" feels more accurate and really was the best way I could figure out how to describe it, but that's not it either, as I have a couple pieces in here that are dramatic monologues and others that feel like essays. Can we go with just "literature?" That would be lovely.

As for the museum structure, it started with my writing "Exhibit 1: Photograph, Boy" after staring at a photograph. Calling it an exhibit seemed natural to me—I ended up using the "exhibit" material far more loosely for other pieces (in some I really describe the object, in others I don't) but it seemed to work, so I just kept going with it.

**ML:** Cottonopolis *contains many found poems whose texts originate from letters and journals as well as* The Slave Narratives *from the W.P.A. Could you speak to your process of working with these found texts?*

**RL:** There are 10 found poems in the book. I'd arranged other ones but ultimately didn't think they were saying anything that hadn't already been said elsewhere. I loved doing these. There's so much poetry in these already—especially in *The Slave Narratives*, which are taken from Depression-era interviews of ex-slaves. For all of the found texts, I simply found them in the course of my research, mainly in history books. Usually there would be a line or two that would grab me—the slave who'd escaped in the dark night with no moon and nothing "to see but god" or the repetition of "dear Wife" in a letter that a Luddite sent to his wife while on a penal ship to Australia. Partly, of course, I've included found poems because I think it's vital that the voices of real people be there. But mostly it's that the language is just so damn good—how can you not use it?

After I found something exciting, I'd take out what seemed extraneous and fine tune it a bit (ie: changing "Long Tripeish Breasts wch ye Spaniards mortally hate" to just "Tripeish Breasts"). But often it didn't require much work. For example, the original excerpt of the letter describing which defects to avoid when buying slaves (which I found in Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship*) has 15 things listed whereas mine has 11, but I didn't change the order of any of the ones I used, and the natural rhyme at the end of "Lunaticks/Idiots/Lethargicks" is just the same as the original.

**ML:** *In the acknowledgments section of the book, you cite dozens of writers as influences, ranging from Alexis de Tocqueville and Frederick Douglass to Jean Rhys and Dr. Seuss. I'm curious about how some of these particular writers have "crept into [the] poems," as you put it. Moreover, how aware are you of these influences while you are writing, or is it something you see after the fact, hence the "creeping?" Do you do anything to embrace or curb outside influences during your creative process?*

**RL:** A lot of the writers I list used images that I loved and borrowed. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, wrote about how in Manchester the sun is seen through the darkness as "a disc without rays" and in "Exhibit A: Photograph, Boy" I write, "The sun's a rayless disc." Frederick Douglass spoke about how we'd filled our land "with the mere stumps of men," and so in my poem about the American Civil War, "Exhibit 36: Nursery Rhyme II," I wrote that "we walk upon the stumps of men." I thought it would get pretty tedious to list every specific instance when I borrowed a couple of words, so I contented myself with mostly listing their names instead, unless it was a longer excerpt.

The authors I list in my acknowledgments were different. Those ones really did creep in more—Jean Rhys has a sentence or two in *Voyage in the Dark* about how everything in Dominica is green, including the road, and when I was writing about slave ship sailors in the West Indies, that image just appeared. Dr. Seuss has some rhymes that I echo in one of my poems. I was aware of both of these at the time but it wasn't part of my "research" work—I wasn't putting them in my notes and then finding them later as I was with de Tocqueville or Douglass. It just came from other things I was reading or in some cases had read years ago (like kids' books).

When I'm working on a book, I tend to avoid other creative takes on the same material. For instance, when I was writing my first book about the life of my great-grandmother, I deliberately avoided any works on family memoir or on Vancouver during the same period. Obviously, in the very early stages I was initially influenced by other writers' family histories—but when I'm really immersed in my writing, I don't want to see how others do it. Partly it's that I'd be concerned that my writing would seem derivative in some way. But non-fiction or books that don't seem to have much to do with the subject (like *Hop on Pop*) are fair game. I'm constantly surprised by what makes its way in.

**ML**: *Could you talk a bit about your research process for this book?*

**RL:** Pretty simple, really. I read lots of history books, wrote notes on post-it notes, eventually transferred the notes onto my computer, and did more research online. I highlighted the images or quotes that were the most appealing and often copied them onto a new document when I was writing a new poem—so if, for instance, I was writing a poem about slavery, I might first copy various notes about slavery onto the page and then start writing. That said, most of the notes I'd copied out for the poem often just ended up stuck at the bottom of the page, unused.

Sometimes I'd read something in a history book that would spur on a poem. For instance, in E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, he wrote that while it is true that child labour happened before the Industrial Revolution, the proliferation of children's rhymes and games during the pre-Industrial period suggested that children still had time to play. That led me to do research on children's rhymes and that spurred me to write the poem, "Lyrics, Children's Game." I just let the connections flow—it's a pretty associative style. I found a description of Dhaka, Bangladesh (then Dacca, India) being overgrown by jungle and that made me think of Birnam Wood, which made me quote *Macbeth* (and a bit of *Hamlet*). So it's not all history books. I really don't understand it when writers just list contemporaries—often acquaintances or friends—as being their major influences. To me, it's all necessary and you have no idea when Shakespeare might need to come in, or Joseph Conrad or Christina Rossetti.

**ML:** *In "Exhibit 22: Sheet" you write: "All history is story and so much of it connects." And later, in "Exhibit 35: Cane:" "History's a croaking caw: over here, here! We are here, we here, hear!" As a poet, it would seem you*

*have a predilection for writing about history. I'm also thinking, here, of your first collection,* Hannus*, a poetic biography of your great-grandmother. What is it that draws you to history, particularly a poetic rendering of it? How do you reconcile your own poetic voice with the voice of those whose stories you tell?*

**RL:** I'm glad you point out both of those exhibits, which are what I consider companion essays in the book (in my editing process, under editor Stephanie Bolster's advice, I highlighted this connection by having the same sentence in both pieces). These are stories but they are also essays about history—and unlike other pieces in the book where the voices are often not "mine" (i.e., poems by the point of view of a handloom weaver or a slave ship sailor), these feel like mine, as a modern-day writer, someone who is interested in history and what history is. There are so many books of historiography and many historians might argue with my take on it, but really, to me history is story.

That's what is so fascinating about it. I love stories. That they are true just gives them more resonance for me. It's not that I don't see a value in "making things up"—there is definitely a truth in fiction, which is another huge discussion, probably for another day—but it was in this case important for me to use real stories as much as I could. I'm not sure how exactly I "reconcile" my voice with the voices of the people whose stories I tell. I do know that it was vital to me to end with someone else's words, which is why I end the book with a found poem, by ex-slave William Colbert.

I'm not a historian. I'm a writer. There's all this careful analysis going on and I ignore most of that and just get at the stories, the images of toddlers running near the factories, etc. The stories are what grab me. I get really emotional reading some of these stories, and I want readers to be moved by my work, too. On rare occasions, I was lucky enough to read some really gripping, well-written history books. But to be honest, most of them felt like work and reading them was my job, something I needed to do before getting to the exciting part of creation. The challenge was to find the stories amongst the sometimes dull writing and take them into this genre of no genre so they could be read again, or by different people. I think that a lot of wonderful stories are buried. But by taking them into the extremely popular genre of poetry they will now be read by millions!

Seriously, I'm not sure what draws me to history. Certainly there's a lot of "history"—certain periods or places that I have no interest in, and I think part of my interest in 19th-century England

has to do with my love of some of the literature of that period (my fascination with Industrial Revolution-era Manchester was started in fact by reading Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*). But I am also drawn to stories people don't know and that I don't know. I knew very little about my great-grandmother before starting to work in earnest on *Hannus* and what I did know was tantalizing. I suppose that although I am a very different writer than Geoff Dyer, we are similar in that we both write about things we want to know more about. For him, it's been jazz and D.H. Lawrence. For me, it's my family history, the Industrial Revolution, and lately, passenger pigeons. Keeping stories from the past alive is very important to me. It's not that by knowing history we will no longer be doomed to repeat it—I think we repeat it, regardless of how well we know it—it's that they are stories and, in the words of Thomas King, "The truth about stories is that is all we are."

**ML:** *What was it about Gaskell's* Mary Barton *that piqued your interest in Industrial Revolution-era Manchester? Have you ever been to Manchester?*

**RL:** Before I read it, I was already really interested in social history in general, and accounts of how regular people lived, so Gaskell's descriptions of the slums—down to the flowers on the windowsills of the workers' houses—fascinated me. I first read the book as part of an undergraduate English class, maybe 16 or so years ago. The Victorian melodrama cracks me up and the plot is pretty strained at times, but the descriptions of Manchester and her use of Lancashire dialect are excellent. Gaskell lived in the city and her descriptions of it have an authority, a realism that many visitors' descriptions don't, really. And there are some great lines:

> They'n screwed us down to th' lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?

It was enough to make me decide to go to Manchester when I was travelling in the U.K. in 2000 (seems my decisions on where to travel are often influenced by literature—I went to Orkney on that same trip because of another book). While I was there, I went to a couple of museums, including the fabulous Museum of Science and Industry, where there was a great exhibit about sanitation (or lack thereof) in Manchester through the years. There was info there about the cholera epidemic, night-soil men (men who would cart away the "nightsoil" in the wee hours), etc. My mother (who was

with me) said later she never saw anyone get so excited about an exhibit on shit. What can I say? How could I resist the night-soil men? (I'm bewildered anyone can.) I found out later that the Mancunian term at the time was "muck-miser," which is maybe even more awesome.

About five or so years after reading *Mary Barton*, I took a Directed Studies in grad school where I read wonderfully vivid passages about the slums of Manchester in Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the English Working Class* and that piqued my interest further. And then I learned more and more, like that the worst slum was called "Angel Meadow." I guess it was a combination of the history and also the language ("Muck-misers" and "Angel Meadow," even the name of one of the rivers, "Irk") that drew me in.

**ML:** *In the second-to-last piece in the book, you write:*

> We need something else. Blood would be more honest, something that spreads. Or a mouse's nest, made up of oh so many things. Or entrails, that you look through for answers and the afterward, the not-ever-knowing what it was you'd held in your hand.

*And a few lines later: "We are sorry to inform you there is no end." The stories you tell in* Cottonopolis *certainly don't have clear beginnings or endings; they are stories whose effects are still being lived. Are there any particular stories that didn't make it into the book that you wish had? How did you know when the book was finished?*

**RL:** There's something pretty false about the writing of history, or in my case, the writing of tidy "exhibits" taken from history. You take all this information and you construct a narrative. You act as if things are clear, like there's a clear cause and effect, which isn't always so. Or you simplify things: you write about the triangle trade (English manufactured goods sent to Africa to trade for slaves, slaves sent to the Americas, money from the sales used to buy raw goods from the Americas, then sent to be manufactured in England again) as if it was always that tidy, as if there weren't some places (like the States) that avoided the triangle trade entirely. Or you act like there was this petition and then that didn't work so then came machine breaking when the truth is, different things (both machine breaking and petitions) were happening simultaneously much of the time. At one point during the very early stages, I tried to get at the cacophony and mess by moving all the poems around so there was no sustained narrative thread, but it didn't work artistically.

But there is some mess still. The second exhibit in the book is about the Peterloo Massacre, which seems like an odd thing to put in there, right at the beginning. You think you'd want to work up to the workers' resistance, show more horrors first. And I had my doubts about it being there, but I think it is in some ways more honest, to show the resistance as being there all along. "Exhibit 2: Bonnet, Peterloo" also has a line about "railway ties" which you wouldn't even have seen until at least post-1830, but then the very next sentence talks about "this field," (St. Peter's Field) being strewn with bonnets and "several mounds of human beings," which happened in 1819. So there's a lot of that kind of messiness in the book, which isn't really that evident to someone who doesn't know the period well. But I needed that mess to be explicit by the end. In the end, all we're doing is holding entrails and not knowing what any of it means.

In a new piece I just wrote for my next book, I say, "I question wisdom. I question all of it." And I do. I am very leery of the "wisdom" one finds in so much poetry. I don't stand in as some sort of authority telling you how to think. I'm not some big philosopher. I don't have any answers. And so, yes, entrails …

… and no real end either. As the recent collapse of the textile factory in Bangladesh shows us, the story of *Cottonopolis* didn't end. It just changed venues and we (in the West) are still complicit.

As for how I knew the book was finished, that also wasn't a tidy process. I knew for years that I'd be ending with the U.S. Civil War (a natural ending point, for now, for this story of slavery and cotton) and those pieces were some of the very last I wrote. I have two endings, really—it seems to end with Exhibit 37 about Lancashire during the American Civil War, but then we get this untitled piece where the first line is "And is this the end?" and the answer is no. And then we really end with a found poem (and I knew when I read William Colbert's interview about post-civil war that the book had to end with his powerful words). But after I'd done all that, I ended up writing a few more pieces in the middle, and I think the very last thing I wrote might have been the introduction.

This book really could have gone on forever (a problem of having exhibits made up of infinite numbers—I initially started with "Exhibit A" but I couldn't confine it to 26 exhibits). I tried to limit myself by mostly focusing on the cotton industry, so a lot of harrowing stories on sugar plantations

didn't make their way in. I never ended up writing anything about The Great Dismal Swamp, an actual place in Virginia. At one point, I started working on a piece about factory accidents and then I realized that really, there's not much more to say about them than "Factory hands have arms and we have cut his off" which I'd already written. I tried to be conscious of making sure two poems weren't doing the same work. Sometimes what I needed to say could just be said in a found poem or the notes.

**ML:** *In "Exhibit 7: Clod, Earth," you write: "There is a generation whose teeth are swords. And their jaw teeth are as knives to devour the poor." There is a sense that many of the voices in* Cottonopolis *are telling their stories as a form of retribution, a recompense of some kind; the book seems concerned with justice. Do you find this to be true? Did you feel compelled to give voice to people whose stories might otherwise be unheard?*

**RL:** That's a quote from the Bible. I can't find the reference now but I believe I found it being used contextually in quotations by protesters. Are the people in the book telling their stories as a form of retribution? I'm not sure I'd use that word. It's not revenge. But recompense? A sense of redressing? Yes. Certainly that was part of the pull for me. There's a line from Psalm 94 right near the end of the book: *Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? Who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?* This psalm was actually selected by trade unionists to read to new initiates—that doesn't make it into the poem or the notes, and of course, being a psalm, it ends with how God will save all: *And he shall bring upon them their own iniquity, and shall cut them off in their own wickedness; yea, the Lord our God shall cut them off.* I find the psalms to be so fascinating—their cries of despair are so moving and subversive and real and their conclusions about God smiting all feel so unconvincing. And who does rise up for the people? It's not God. It's the workers themselves. And me. There's a lot of complicity in what I do, in what clothes I wear, etc., but I did feel, in writing this, that I was standing up—at least for the people of this past.

I am concerned with justice, and as a writer, how I concern myself with justice is by telling the stories:

> Kids don't have a little brother working in the coal mine, they don't have a little sister coughing her lungs out in the looms of the big mill towns of the Northeast. Why? Because we organized; we broke the back of the sweatshops in this

> country; we have child labor laws. Those were not benevolent gifts from enlightened management. They were fought for, they were bled for, they were died for by working people, by people like us. Kids ought to know that. That's why I sing these songs. That's why I tell these stories, dammit. No root, no fruit!
>
> —Folksinger Utah Phillips

So many stories will never be known and so many stories don't come until later or can never truly be told. One of the most powerful found poems for me was by Mary Reynolds, an ex-slave who was interviewed during the Depression. She said:

> Slavery was the worst days ever seed
> in this world. They was things past tellin,
> but I got the scars on my body
> to show to this day.
>
> The niggers better not stop in the fields
> when they hear them yellin.
> Niggers mourns now, but in them days
> they wasn't no time for mournin.

It was just so matter-of-fact—there was no time to mourn then. But now there is. And time to tell the stories, as best as we can.

**ML:** *In "Exhibit 14: Spoon," a poem about the boycott of slave-grown sugar, you write: "Sometimes we forget beauty." I also recall during your book launch you mentioned searching for instances of beauty in the fraught stories found in* Cottonopolis. *How important was it that you imbue beauty of language and image into these stories? Did you ever feel there was a danger of romanticizing this difficult past?*

**RL:** Beauty is extremely important to me. I don't shy away from the ugliness in this history—as much as it might pain me to read about it and write about it, these stories need to be told. Sometimes I might cry after or during the writing of it, but so what? That doesn't mean I shouldn't do it. I just wipe the tears away or go for a long walk after and keep writing.

But beauty is just as important. It still exists (in nature and in people) and we need to hold onto it. People who were living tough lives then were still on the lookout for it (by putting flowers in their sills, for instance, or by taking walks to nearby moorland when they could). There's a line that I borrowed from geologist Hugh Miller where he talks about "all these forms and shades of beauty which once filled all nature, but of which only a few fragments, or faded tints, survive." In "Exhibit 23: Photograph, Coral," I wrote, "It could be that in this world now only a few fragments or faded tints of beauty survive. It could be that that's enough." In my first draft of this poem, I actually ended it with, "It could be that's not enough." I soon changed it though because while focusing on beauty can be to the detriment of combating the horrors it's also true that this beauty does still exist and that sometimes, it *is* enough. In "Exhibit 16: Bandage," there's a description of a slave woman:

> That nigra's baby was born dead, from a fall she took whilst carrying water. Look at her curled there, sand flies on her neck. Her three weeks are almost up. Near the swamp, the cherry blossoms bloom.

It's a political statement, to go from this grieving/catatonic woman, whose "confinement" is almost up and who will need to go back to the fields soon, to the cherry blossoms near the swamp. It suggests someone who cares more about the blossoms than the woman—and that's there of course. But there's also the fact that cherry blossoms are still beautiful. So it works both ways and this is found throughout. It's important that the story behind this beauty be interrogated. But it's also true that the image of burlap sacks against the purple sky ("Leaf") is damn beautiful. And I think that's okay to notice that. It's okay to see the play of light and shadow on someone's face and notice that beauty, even if it comes after horrors ("Axe"). I think it's human of us. I think it's vital.

I don't think I felt I was in any danger of romanticizing the difficult past. I think there's a danger of my making everything feel monochromatic in its misery and so I had to make a conscious effort to also write poems where there was hope and beauty—whether that comes from flowers or children or political protest. I didn't feel up to writing happy slave poems—that's just something that as a white woman, I didn't feel I could do in any believable way that wouldn't somehow feel like I was excusing slavery—but I did make a conscious effort to show the joy, where I could.

As for "beauty of language," well, quite frankly, if you don't have that, then none of this amounts to much as art. The craft of it—the image, the right words, the rhythm—is vital.

**ML:** *Could you also tell me a bit more about these passenger pigeons you mentioned earlier? Is it possible this will be the subject of your next book?*

**RL:** It will be part of it, yes. It's all early days yet, but I'm slowly moving toward writing a collection of essays/poems about, among other things, the year of no summer of 1816 (no summer in the Northern hemisphere as a result of the quantities of ash in the atmosphere after the massive eruption of Mount Tambora the year before), WWI, possibly Australia's history as a penal colony, and yes, passenger pigeons. I'm not sure yet if all these things I'm interested in will end up needing to be in different books, but right now I'm just letting these odd connections come together as they will.

**ML:** *And lastly, because I want to ask this of every person I meet, what are you reading these days?*

**RL:** For my new book, I'm reading Richard Fortey's *The Earth*, which is a geology book for lay readers, and I'm re-reading Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme*, about the remembrance of WWI. Both are great. I'm also immersing myself in fairytales more, especially George MacDonald's. I just finished reading David Thomson's *The People of the Sea* (legends of the seal/selchies), which was wonderful. He was an incredible writer.

I'm also reading a new Ian Rankin which will probably not end up appearing in any of my writing, but who knows? And it's fun.

**MICHAEL LAKE** is a writer currently living in Halifax. His poetry and reviews have appeared in *The Capilano Review*, *Rover*, and *Matrix*, among others.

# "WHAT A DARK, BLACK WORLD WE LIVE IN, AND HOW FUNNY IS THAT?"

## An Interview with Louise Carson

BY E MARTIN NOLAN

**LOUISE CARSON** *has recently published in* Carousel, EVENT, *and* The Literary Review of Canada, *with work upcoming in* Descant *and* The Antigonish Review. *One of her poems has been selected for* The Best Canadian Poetry 2013. *Her books include* Rope: A Tale Told in Prose and Verse *(Broken Rules Press, 2011) and* Mermaid Road *(BRP, 2013). She lives near Montreal.*

**Interviewer's Note:** In the spring of 2013, I attended a livewords reading in Toronto's Danforth. After the set break, an unassuming woman in a sundress got on the stage. For better or worse, her appearance and demeanor suggested a pleasant, but not all that surprising, reading was to follow. Then she stole the show. I can only describe her reading as bizarrely homey. It was comforting, funny, but also rich and dark—in the way "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is, but with the surprise of something new. She read from the opening of her book *Rope*, the opening lines of which immediately captured the audience: "His mother was poor, unknown and a thief. She was pregnant but they hanged her anyway." This is the mother of *Rope*'s protagonist, Deasil Widdy. "As she twisted, she moaned and jerked, as some do: it took time to choke, the fresh withy wrapped round her neck. Poor man's rope, the widdy," Carson writes. Then, "the child slipped out."

The hangman wonders why she didn't "plead her belly," because that would have pardoned her. "Maybe she thought it was kinder to take it with her," someone form the crowd replies. But the child is fine, or as fine as it can be: "the hangman wrapped the child in its mother's shawl and walked it three times around the hanging body. Three times sunwise to wish away the darkness of it's birth." "Deasil" means "turn to the right," or "following the apparent direction of the sun.", So the opening concludes: "they called the boy Deasil Widdy, as he had been carried clockwise around the hangman's noose."

This short book, subtitled "A Tale Told in Prose and Verse," follows Deasil through his childhood and into adulthood. He eventually becomes the hangman himself, as well as a master rope maker. *Rope* vaguely reminded me of Anne Carson's narrative work, and that's why I've paired the two Carsons in this issue. One is, you might say, too well known, while the other is hardly known at all. Yet both have produced engrossing, historically based narratives featuring sympathetic, oddball lead characters and a strange mix of charm, tragedy and an uncanny connection between the distant past and the present.

At Livewords, as Carson read the book's second poem, "His Mother Wakes between the Lime Pit and Heaven," she sung the chorus:

> You asked me if I loved you,
> You said you didn't care,
> I said love's there above you,
> The blue dust in your hair,
> The blue dust in your hair.

Her voice was striking, and the effect was haunting (turns out she's a trained singer). The person with whom I attended the reading was watching *Twin Peaks* at the time and was reminded of that show. It was, indeed, straight out of a David Lynch film—heavily nostalgic, but creepy as hell, and complete with a red curtain behind the stage. I was hooked. It took some time to track down Louise Carson, and *Rope*, but I eventually did. The interview below is the result.

But before the interview began, Ms. Carson and I were chatting, and we got into some interesting territory. This conversation was not recorded. She mentioned that she tried to avoid prosiness in both her reading and writing. I asked her, given that she mixes poetry and prose, what makes poetry poetry, and she said rhythm. "It's like a horse," she said, before imitating the sound of a horse trotting, nodding her head to the rhythm, then switching to a cantor and asking, "have you ridden horses?" I told her cantering on a horse was one of the greatest feelings I've had—because it's like flying—and she continued by explaining the link between the rhythm of a horse's gait and the rhythm we crave in poetry. At this point I had to stop her from shedding these jewels before the interview began, and I turned on the recorder.

**E Martin Nolan**: *Based on what I could find on the Internet, you started writing later in life. Can you tell me about how you started, and what led to that?*

**Louise Carson**: Sure. I used to write when I was young. Then I decided to pick, and asked myself, "what am I going to be?" I picked music, so I focused all of my intelligence on that and put writing aside. When I lived in Toronto, I got a little bit of writing work here or there. There was an old magazine called *This Magazine*.

**EMN**: *It's still around.*

**LC**: Great. I worked for *This* when it was just starting. I wrote things like concert reviews. Not classical—which is part of my training—but Cowboy Junkies and Blue Rodeo when they were just starting out. Those kinds of groups. That was fun, but they didn't pay me anything, so I went back to another love of mine, which is horticulture. I did landscape architecture at Ryerson, night school, just to change out of music. There's always the life, to starve at something, but then you go, "gee, I'd like to make like two hundred dollars a week. Is that asking too much? Just so I can (kind of) live in Toronto?"

Then when I turned forty, I had my daughter, and I moved back to Hudson [Quebec], or St. Lazare (right next to it), and did the music teacher thing, which I still do. And all along: keeping journals and writing fragments of poems, but never really forming anything, never completing something.

**EMN**: *So it was always there.*

**LC**: It's always there. It's like, "oh, that looks like a poem," and I'd write a few lines and it would go in the journal. Then it's onwards, with real life, so to speak—practical life. Then when I turned fifty, my mother died. And I don't know about you, but when your significant elders die, you're left going, "Oh, it's me next. I'm now the generation that—I'm now going to age and my child will see me die." And you go, "If not now, when?"—in terms of creating something, leaving something behind. So that's what happened: when I turned fifty, it just—it switched on. It wasn't an ambition thing that switched on, it was just that poetry started to come. About six months after my mother's death, I had my grief-stricken period. Then poetry started to come. It's a cliché, but it was like a gift, this outpouring of energy. I had read enough, practiced writing enough in my life that I could crank it out. So finally I was able to finish things. Then I said, "I know there's lots of literary magazines in Canada, so why don't I start sending stuff out?" I did that, and now six years later I've got a poem coming out in the *Best Canadian Poetry 2013*. I just found out.

**EMN**: *Congratulations.*

**LC**: I'm very chuffed about that. That's a little, teensy-tiny piece of literary immortality. I'm pleased.

**EMN**: *What poem?*

**LC**: It's called "Plastic Bucket." It's from *Prairie Fire*'s "Boreality" issue.

**EMN**: *So your early poems: were they eulogizing your mother, or related, or were they unrelated?*

**LC**: The first poems to come out were A: juvenile and B: joyous. It was a reaction—a reaction to death. She died in fall, and in the spring I started to write poems. I won't say they were spring poems, but they were springing out of me, and they were joyous and they were … playing with language. All that summer that was happening, an uplifting kind of a thing. Then there's a change: they got darker. I guess it's psychology starting to work. You start to record, and things come up. I've written about that in an essay called "In Solitude," which is about how writers, especially poets, need solitude. It's great to write in a community of writers, but I'm so grateful that my daughter is out from 7–3, at school, and I have no other distractions. I have that time to spend a whole day thinking or writing, getting ready to write—doing any of those things a writer has to do that take *so* much time. The metaphor I use is winter, because I write way more and better in the winter. In the summer, because I live in the country, I have to really turn off from all the beautiful stuff happening outside. But in the winter I can lock in for months to a really good regime of writing. Where I live, you can cross-country ski, but that's it. The Canadian winter is conducive for writers.

**EMN**: *Turning to music, did you say you were classically trained?*

**LC**: Yes, and in jazz piano.

**EMN**: *How much have you performed?*

**LC**: When I moved here, to Toronto, I tried to be a classical singer. I got church jobs—I sang at the Church of the Redeemer, at Bloor and Avenue Road, for four years as the soloist, and at other churches, for odd jobs. Or armature choirs, when they'd hire professional singers to lead a section. So I did that, and I peaked when I was hired to sing in the extra chorus of the Canadian Opera Company. We're talking the late 1980s, and again, I couldn't live on what I was making on classical singing—and I was single; I didn't have any financial support. I had to do something else.

**EMN**: *I'm interested in [the music] because when I saw you read at livewords, you sung part of* Rope. *Given that you got into poetry later on, did your musical training play into that? How does it affect your writing?*

**LC**: We talked already [before the recorder was on] about rhythm, and musicality, and *sound*ing the vowel. As a singer, you have to love the vowels. If I'm gonna sing the words I'm speaking, I'm not going to pronounce the words the way I'm doing it right here. If I'm singing—[Louise sings the previous sentence, and it indeed sounds different, especially the vowels]—I'm going to shape my mouth differently; I'm going to—*umm*—love those vowels in my mouth and then push those out. That's what singers do. When I read, I'm trying to do that too, and I'm also trying to do that when I write. I'll read aloud what I've written, and I'll go, "does this have some rhythm, does this have some beauty of tone to me?" Sometimes I'll go through a draft of a poem and I'll circle all the vowels that seem to be repeating.

My very old dog—I had to have her put to sleep a week or two ago, so a few days after that I started to write an elegy for her. It's not a great poem—I won't bore you with it—but once I looked at it and read it out loud, I went "oh look, I'm saying, 'ou-oh-ou-oh' all the way through the poem." I use the word "you" about ten times because it's addressed to the poor old dead dog, and then after "ou" there comes an open vowel: "oh," like in "yellow." So basically, I'm crooning. I self-analyzed my poem afterwards, which is a useful exercise even for a not-great poem. You see other poems—like a poem where I'm really pissed off, a feminist poem or a poem where I'm angry at one of my relatives, which happens—and there's a lot 'r's' in there. In fact I have one poem just called "rrrrrrrrrrrrrr" because I noticed that almost every word has an 'r' in it. I'm growling all the way through this poem. So the sound is important. That's not something that I put on—that just comes out.

The other point where music is very important comes from the idea of daily practice. As a musician, and certainly as a music student, if you don't practice, you sink, because they're expecting a very huge improvement from the time you enroll until you graduate. They expect you to go from wherever you are to concert level—if you're in the right program. That means practicing nine hours a day. That's three hours in the morning—not voice, of course, or you'd shred it—but piano: I'd practise in the morning, afternoon, and after supper, apart from regular school work. You get good really fast when you do that, so I used that: when I started doing poetry I went, "Okay, you're fifty, you're gonna do this really hard for the next five years and see what happens." So I took that kind of

approach: get up, grab coffee, sit on the sofa, pick up paper, pen, and stare out the window. And not move unless I had to, until around lunch time. Put everything else on hold—and you'd be amazed by what kind of good subconscious stuff is in there. When you're just looking out the window at the leaves, or whatever, a lot will come out.

**EMN**: *Music must affect the way you prepare for a reading as well.*

**LC**: I read what I'm gonna read. I practice it, which I think a lot of poets don't do, and it's unfortunate, because they get up there and they're "um-ing" and "ah-ing" and—I hate that: when a poet gets up and the first thing I hear out of their mouth is "ahhh, ummmm." It's like: "no, it's a *performance*, it's a *performance*. Don't just think your words have some intrinsic value. You have to sell them. It's a commercial world, and even in primitive tribes the storytellers were the storytellers because they were the ones who were the best at telling a story. It wasn't necessarily because they had all the stories. They were good at it, and they made them come alive, so everyone else could get that "ohh" cathartic thing happening. So it's like: work, for god's sake, when you're up there as a poet reading—give something. That's from being a musician, the idea that if you're too laid back, it doesn't go out, it just stays right here. You've gotta push it out there, whether it's your voice coming from your body, or instrument, or your words.

The inverse of that is: if you lean really close to the mic, [whispering] *and speak in a really quite voice*, you can get their attention, too. But then you have to change it up a little bit. There are all sorts of little stage tricks for getting the attention of the audience. Just waiting, too, is good, just waiting.

[pause]

**EMN**: *Silence?*

**LC**: Yes. If they're chattering, just wait. Look around the room and just wait—imposing your personality on the room is the fun part of reading or performing. That's the ego-boost the performer gets.

**EMN**: *You've also written about how joining a community allowed you to take that step from casual to serious writing. Can you tell us a little about Twigs and Leaves and also the Greenwood poets?*

**LC**: I'll start in chronological order. Greenwood came to pass because there's something called Storyfest, in Hudson, which is a fundraiser for the Greenwood house, now called the Greenwood Centre for the Living History. It's a nice old house, about 300 years old, right on the Lake of Two Mountains. It's great place to have poetry events, or any kind of event. Storyfest is a literature festival, and most of the people who come through are big name people, like Margaret Trudeau, who came through last year and read from her book. Jane Urquhart came through—a poet but much better known as a novelist. It's very Canadian in content. We just had Nancy Richler. At one of these events someone had the bright idea that they'd have an open poetry event. Just an invitation: if there were any poets who lived in the area, they could come. This was the very first year I'd been writing. I'd been writing for about eight months and I went, "Right, there are *other* poets." So I went to that, and met the other people, and we so enjoyed the afternoon that we decided to meet again, at the Greenwood house, and they let us meet there, and they still let us meet there. That's where I met Jon [Torell]. He turned me on to all the American poets, the current ones. Franz Wright, but so many more—like W.S. Merwin. If I could every write something like that, like "For a Coming Extinction"—amazing. He has so many poems that make me think, if I'd only written one like that I'd be happy.

So, that's the Greenwood Poets. One of the poets who was in that group, Sandra Stephenson, administers the site *Poets Against War*.

**EMN**: *I've read your poem there.*

**LC**: That was written in the first couple months that I was writing—a very simple poem, very prosy, with shorty lines. Sandra was one of the first people to ask for a poem, and she knew of these people at The Twigs Café, in St. Anne de Bellevue (about half-way between where I live and Montreal). Once a month they have a spoken word event there called Twigs and Leaves. You can do whatever you want. It's not as rigid as some other events.

**EMN**: *Is this one of those small towns, like Woodstock-type places, where there's a lot of creative people away from the city?*

**LC:** In St. Anne de Bellevue? I'd say there's a lot of that there. There's also a core English community that's been there for a long time, like certain villages and towns in Quebec that are more English than French—Hudson is one—and St. Anne's is another.

But Twigs is an awesome little place. That's where I found my publishers. Erika White, one of the owners of this little publishing group, Broken Rules Press, she's the MC at Twigs and Leaves' spoken word events.

**EMN**: *I could find very little about Broken Rules Press. They don't even have a Blogspot site or anything.*

**LC**: I try to get them to do more of that. But they are very clear that they do not want to be a distributor at all. They put the books in a few bookstores in Montreal, to a book fair twice a year or so in Ottawa, and one in Montreal, and that's about it. It's up to the authors to get their work out there.

**EMN**: *Tell me about how* Rope *came along. Did Broken Rules approach you or did you approach them?*

**LC**: I wrote it in 2010 and sent it out to a couple of publishers. A couple didn't answer at all and a couple said, "no thank you," and one said, "I think it's good, but it's not the type of thing we publish." I was a newbie. I had only been writing for, say, three years, and had no feel for the publishing industry. I would google publishers that publish poetry and see what there was. I was moaning to Erika about that, because I had read *Rope* in its entirety over that winter. People had been looking forward to it, had been interested in how it [would] turn out. It was fun, like some old-fashioned Victorian thing. I told Erika, I thought it was just this weird little hybrid piece that no one would want to publish, and she said, "We'd be interested in publishing it." It came out that September.

**EMN**: *How many did they make?*

**LC**: They make about twenty at a time. I think we're up to about a hundred, hundred and ten now. And that's from me buying them and selling them.

**EMN**: *I had to email you to get a copy, because they don't have an email address.*

**LC**: I'm not bothered by the small circulation. I'm thinking that when the next one comes out, because I'm not technologically savvy, I'll ask my teenage daughter to make me a cheap site, so at least if you google my name, or "poet Louise Carson," something comes up with my email in it so that I can get *Rope* or *Mermaid's Road* to people. I tried to follow your path—how did he find me?—and it was quite difficult.

**EMN**: *I don't know what blog I found it on. Looked like maybe it was translated from French or something—the writing was very strange. Then at the bottom, it said, "If you want a copy of* Rope*, here's the email."*

**LC**: That was me, again, going to that paper to suggest a story about *Rope*. It's okay. It's fun.

**EMN**: *Let's talk about how* Rope *came along. In* Montreal Serai*, you say that it came from looking up the etymology of "deasil" and "widdy." Why were you looking those words up?*

**LC**: There's a story in my family. My mother's mother used to sit in the kitchen after supper and read the dictionary. I always loved that story. She was a visual artist—although as a mother in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, she didn't ever paint or anything—but she had studied at L'Ecole des Beaux-Artes de Montreal. The idea of this artistic person reading the dictionary—I thought it was amazing and stultifying at the same time. I always hoped she was also doing little sketches and hiding them in drawers, that she got some outlet.

So I like to read the dictionary in her honour, if you will. And if I have to look up a word, I get distracted. I'll look up "anteater" to see if it's one word, hyphenated, whatever, and I'll see "antimony," then I'll read on—I love the etymology of words. I find that doing this opens a whole other pathway into the word. Everyone knows that "cancer" is named after Cancer the crab. As soon as you start thinking about "cancer," the disease, as a crab, it *nips you, nips you, nips you*. I've written a cancer poem, using the ancient Greek—Roman?—"chanker," which comes from that old,

old word we use for canker sores. It's the same root. Then you think, "for thousands of years, people have thought of this disease as this little insect creature who lives in the sea and will pinch you if step on it or if you catch it."

So one day, I see "deasil" at the top of the page. It's not spelled like "diesel," the oil. It comes from the German word for "sun." That's beautiful, because we think of "diesel" as black; it's oil and it comes from the Earth, but the sun—just change the spelling a little. Then "widdy," I don't know—I knew [the main character] was going to be a hangman. I had the *huge* dictionary in the library, the monster, and I was looking up the withies, because I wanted his halters, or whatever he uses, to be homemade. It's just the train of thought: he's using homemade rope, which he makes from withies, which is an English word for "willow," a corruption of "willow," which leads to "withy," which led to "widdy," which is a low-Scots version of "withy," and I thought, "that's gonna be his last name." He's named for the tool of his trade, his adopted father's trade.

**EMN**: *So the concept for the book did come before the words.*

**LC**: Somehow.

**EMN**: *Were you already interested in that general area of history?*

**LC**: I love history, especially northern European—because of my Scottish, English and Irish background. It's interesting: it's much more fluid than we think. We're taught, "this is the history of Scotland, and this is the history of Norway," and we're not taught that plenty of times in history they've totally intersected, and blended, because of the use of ships. There was no history of Norway or Scotland; it was all just people on ships. And not just warriors. Other people could get on a ship and move, too. And the Norwegians all spoke this fractured tongue—what we think of as Old Norse—but the people in Scotland could probably understand that pretty well because of the frequent contact. And it wasn't all war; there was a lot of trade, too. There's a whole other way to look at the history of that area. As soon as you have islands and ships it becomes much more fluid.

So, in the next book [*Rope*'s sequel], it's going to be the in-between part. Or, after [Deasil Widdy] leaves Sithford and moves on, there's twenty years in there that I have to address. That's why I'm

going to Scotland this summer: I've written about these places, but now I have to make them more real to myself, and understand the geography. Because he has to follow where the rope is [at the end of *Rope*], so I think he might be pressed into the British Navy for a time.

**EMN**: *I was wondering about that, because we leave Deasil Widdy and he's still there, in Sithford, but he's dreaming. So do we get more of him in* Mermaid Road*? Because there is a mermaid in* Rope.

**LC**: No, it's got nothing to do with that. *Mermaid* came out of a different inspiration for a story idea. There was a little girl who had Sirenomelia, which is the technical name for a very rare birth defect where your legs don't form. They're either there but fused together, or they're not formed and you have a stump. She was on *Oprah* a couple of years ago, and I didn't watch it, but I saw the news when that little girl died. She was on *Oprah* when she was about ten, then at about twelve she died. But she looked like a healthy, tough little girl, apart from her legs—there was nothing wrong with her brain. So I thought I'd like to write something about her, but I never did, then the idea came later: what if a perfect mermaid was born to human parents? You're not gonna find that in fairy tales—I researched this—you'll never find that. I think that a lot of fairy tales come out of birth defects, like Gigantism. Cyclopism is also a known birth defect—not usually in the centre of the forehead—that's some artist taking it to the next degree, as it's much more dramatic than just having one eye and an empty socket. And Sirenomelia is a real birth defect. Most people who have it die. There's only like two people who have it left alive in the world, who are living with it. She was the third. It's a terrible and awful thing. I thought: let's turn it on its head and let's say, "it's a normal, healthy girl. She's just got a tail."

She's the ultimate outsider: she's a monster, but she's really just a healthy creature that we're not understanding. What that would do to her family life, and if her family would support her, and what would happen to her as she became an adolescent and a young woman. It's a metaphor, of course, [laughs] for any woman's travel through the world. Everyone feels that he or she's different, or an outsider. Few of us feel like we're 100% the same, or accepted. You always have that feeling of separateness, or maybe that's just me.

**EMN**: *She shares some characteristics with Deasil, then.*

**LC**: She's someone special, in the true meaning of the word: *different*.

**EMN**: *But unexpectedly so. Deasil is a hangman, but he's very nice, sensitive.*

**LC**: It's about obsession, too. He's got a rope fetish—or is it a hair fetish? We're not quite sure. How is that going to pan out as he gets older? Does he get a hold of it? I don't know; I'll have to write it out. (It gets worse before it gets better.)

**EMN**: *To return to* Rope*: did you do a lot of research for this book?*

**LC**: Once I got his name, the research became easy. I had to find my cutoff point for hangings. I wanted it to be historically accurate, within a certain timeframe at least, about hangings—of witches specifically because I knew he would be involved in that. The year 1722 was the last that they hanged witches or burned witches at the stake in Scotland. So that was my cutoff point. That gave me my entrance point for the history; I knew I had to look at the first 25 years of the 18th-century. He's young, so I had him born around 1700. Now for the next one, I have to look into the Royal Navy. I'm going to a place where they had a big base in the 1700s; I'm going to Dundee to see if there's anything left there. I have to get a feel for the estuary and the geography of the land. If he's going to be there, then he's probably going to have to escape the Navy and hide somewhere. I could do it with the Internet; I could fake it a little bit, but I've always wanted to go to Scotland.

**EMN**: *I'm interested in the way time is working here, especially with Anne Carson in mind, who messes with anachronism a lot. Were you trying to write this in the way he would think about it? Because it does seem that way sometimes, but then at others it's a more modern voice. What was your strategy with his voice, or the witches' and others?*

**LC**: I wasn't gonna try to fake any type of vernacular or accent from early 1700s Scots. I wasn't going to try to do a Robbie Burns kind of thing. I had to write in my own voice.

I guess I had my agendas. My main agenda is honesty, and it's feminism. I'm trying to be honest about how people react and act toward each other, but I also have that feminist axe to grind: what a pity, what a pity that we couldn't have opened up our minds a few centuries earlier than we have.

And still there are places where they're still doing terrible things to women. If you're different, or you want to be different, or you express a different view, we're going to execute you, one way or another. If you want to get an education, we'll put a bomb in your school. Not naming any specific countries, but you know what I'm talking about. I'm not "anti-" any country or religion, but I'm "anti-" a mindset that says some of us are more equal than others because of what's in our pants.

So I let the washerwoman [Deasil's de-facto mother figure] be the pivotal figure who moves the drama to the conclusion for him, at least in a dream—whether that's a dream or reality, I let the reader decide. But she is his touchstone. The first poem is the story of his mother's death, so you can see right away that she didn't feel like she belonged, like she could make the right deal in her society that would get her somewhere. She was one of those victims who got used, someone got her to steal or—she just seems like the victim type, and that was the end of her. Gone, and she was probably 16 or something, she was just a young woman.

**EMN**: *These public hangings were entertainment.*

**LC**: That's where Hackle and Scutch come in. They get off on it. It's TV and it's hockey and all those good things.

**EMN**: *But they're also nice to Deasil.*

**LC**: You think they're nice to him? I'm [not sure.] They're even less [respected] than him. He has a function. They're just ditch diggers.

**EMN**: *They're a kind of outcast band.*

**LC**: I see them as comic relief.

**EMN**: *And at least somewhat sympathetic. But coming back, it's totally in there when you mention it, but it's almost like you assume the oppression of women from this era.*

**LC**: Of course.

**EMN**: *What is Deasil's role in all that? I guess he doesn't put any morality on what he does, or if there is morality it's that he wants to do his job well.*

**LC**: Exactly.

**EMN**: *Which is better for the condemned [Deasil has little patience for hangmen who fail to instantly kill their subjects, allowing them to suffer more than necessary, or to escape: "Sloppy work I call it. I am good at my job./ It's the turn that does it. The twist."*

**LC**: He ties it to his own survival. If he does his job well, he'll probably survive. That's what his little brain is probably thinking. He doesn't drink like the guy before him [his adopted father]. He's pretty straight and sober and does his job and makes his rope.

**EMN**: *He's got an interesting set of replacement parents. The banshee woman, if she is a banshee, and the hangman who hanged his mother. Both are nice enough to him, but not very caring. They're outcasts themselves.*

**LC**: Even to be suspected to be a banshee—is she really one, or just a washerwoman who happened to be washing some bloody sheets [which is why she is suspected]—we don't know. But she has the power, if she is a banshee, to make that person die. But as a woman in those days, even if she's just suspected of being a banshee, it was really bad. She's managed to survive by staying away from everybody else in the village. She's hoping they don't appear in the middle of the night with torches to drag her off after they decide she *is* a witch.

**EMN**: *How did the form of the book come about—the mix of formal poems, some more modern lyrics, some prose.*

**LC**: When I was writing it, it just seemed they would fit at certain points. Some I wrote for the book, like "Deasil Widdy," in which I describe the methodology of how to make the rope in a poem. I could do it efficiently in a short little poem, by breaking it down into these little steps.

["willows by the river
cut

and stripped
pounded

        on rocks
split
soaked in the river
        till soft
dried by the fire
then plaited for the hangman's noose."]

It seemed pretty straight forward, like people could use that poem to make their own rope.

**EMN**: *And in his rope making, Deasil is an artist.*

**LC**: A craftsman, anyway. His rope was used for other things, not just for his own use. People back then, those poor people, they didn't have metal. If they wanted to latch a door, they would use a piece of rope. Maybe if you had a castle or an inn and you needed to lock something, but these people had nothing, anyway.

**EMN**: *What does his rope-making craft do for him? Does it give him solace, or does it outcast him more because he treats it as this private practice?*

**LC**: It sets him aside, it gives him an existence apart from the hangings, which I don't think he really likes.

**EMN**: *He tries to make the hangings into artistic things.*

*["As the stool is pulled away it's turned deasil so the body swings to the right first. Things must be done to the right. The sun says so and the shadows agree."]*

**LC**: And he expresses that he really doesn't like to dispatch women, because he knows that his mother was hanged. That twists him. He could get super twisted from this. I couldn't see that I

could make an ending if I let him become super twisted. I had to get him out of there. He's proud—and when I get him into the Navy, he's going to know about rope, he's gonna understand how to maintain it, he's gonna be good to them. He knows about knots. They'll take him, and they'll be surprised. He's not some yokel. He knows about rope, which is what runs the Navy. With no rope, there's no Navy. It's gonna be fun.

**EMN**: *Who knew rope could be such a fruitful vehicle?*

**LC**: There's one ropeyard left, in England. One actual functioning ropeyard, where they make rope by hand. It's made in these really long sheds because they have to twist the strands one way, then they have to take those and twist them back the other way, so to make a long piece of rope by hand, you need a really long building. It's called a ropewalk, and I may put that in [the next book]. Rope is very interesting.

**EMN**: *We were discussing before the difference between prose and poetry. For you what makes something either or, if a verse can be prosy and prose can be lyrical?*

**LC**: I think you have to go to music, and you have to talk about rhythm and beauty of language. Here's an example: [LC's] "Plastic Bucket." What a horrible, awful title. But it's a beautiful poem, if I can say so myself. So: Plas-tic Buck-et. Nothing beautiful in those two words. Nothing I can do with that. But behind my house in the woods, where I walk often, there's a great big plastic bucket left by the owner, who drives through on his tractor when he cuts his wood for the winter for his wood stove. I hardly ever meet him. The poem is about why you would leave that ugly plastic bucket in your beautiful woods. So that's an example of using two ugly words as the title, but in the poem I'm describing the beauty of the woods, and how I get to go into his woods. I steal from him everyday. I steal blue jay cries, coyote hunger, poetic things. It's not my land but I go in there.

My goal, aside from writing good poems, is to write a poetic novel. Through composed, beautiful language all the way through. I think I'm getting there. This next Deasil book, I think, will be closer to fiction, to a novel. *Mermaid Road* is getting close to that, because as I work more in prose, I notice that it's not that different than the little poem I've stuck at the end of the sections in *Rope*. Someone

once said that poetry fine-tunes a language. Puts an edge on it. If you can become a good poet, it helps you write good prose because you get rid of all the extra stuff you don't need.

**EMN**: *On rhythm: you were discussing before the interview how that links up with horses.*

**LC**: Yes, the rhythm of the gait. As a musician—do you have a music background yourself?

**EMN**: *Kind of. I love music, and it affects my writing. I went to school with a bunch of music students—jazz studies. I saw the way that they practiced everyday, how important shedding was.*

**LC**: When I teach kids piano, I teach them the difference between 2/4 and 3/4. For example, I'll get them up and I'll say, "I'm going to play this piece in 2/4 and I want you to walk around the room in time to the music." And they do it. Then I switch to 3/4 and say, "now walk around the room in 3/4." They can't do it, because 3/4 is a dance rhythm. [LC counts off a 3/4 rhythm]. That's when you start to get into the gaits. It doesn't have to be horse gaits—it can be human gaits. Everyone can trot, or jog-trot—*tot-tot-tot*—those are eighth notes. You can do that with words. You can do it with silences between words, too. I'm always conscious of the beat in between, say, a phrase and the next phrase. To use silence is really important. Again, this comes back to the discipline of being a musician, not being sloppy. It's like, "I'm being very clear: I'm going to read this way, or I'll read it this way [beat, beat]," and I'll count those two beats in between before I finish the sentence. Being mindful of that is useful.

**EMN**: *On that note, I've always wondered: is it just an attention to those elements, an attention to language as a physical thing, and not just as a way of getting an idea across?*

**LC**: An attention, yes. And I don't want to go into any extremes—I don't want to be a sound POET-T-T-T-T-T, and start doing *THEEES*, and accompanying it with strange gestures; I'm not going there—but I want to marry the content to really good presentation, so that hopefully the readers, when they read something silently to themselves in their heads, some of that comes through—if I've been clever about how I put it down on the page. I'm talking line breaks, or pushing margins over. That should be extremely purposeful. That's something I've worked on with Jon [Torell] for a long time: how it looks on the page. Franz Wright doesn't bother with that; Jean

Valentine says it's *all* about that, all about where she's putting the words: this much space between those two words, then jog that line there and—if you account for her use of space when you read her stuff you get an insight. She's a fairly oblique poet, fairly difficult. But it's not random. Do you know Kay Ryan's work?

**EMN**: *A bit.*

**LC**: Excellent poet, and she's the queen of the short, two-or-three-word line, and it seems like it's a sentence broken down—in that fake way you were talking about?

**EMN**: *People say that about Anne Carson.*

**LC**: And I'm sure some poets are guilty of that. They're not thinking. But in Kay Ryan's case, it gives you the rhythm of the poem. You read the poem and you understand why she put those two words there, or those three syllables (it's more of a syllabic thing).

**EMN**: *Do you understand that as like breath in music?*

**LC**: In a poem, a breath is either the end of a long line, or a double stanza break.

**EMN**: *But on a short line, would you breath? Or what does that line break do, rhythmically?*

**LC**: If I haven't read it before, I don't like to read a poem out loud. If it's someone else's poem, I'm going to practice and see where it takes me. If it's by a good poet, that should give me some clues: how they laid the poem out on the page. But there's plenty of so-called good poets who are not mindful of how it looks on the page, or the rhythm. Then you have to guess, and it's not consistent. That's a hard thing. It's like, "how can you put a comma here, and not a comma here?" And if I read through that, and it doesn't sound right—it's like they implied a comma here. Being careful, like you said: bringing your attention to it.

**EMN**: *So it becomes an intuitive thing, as opposed to "every line break is like this." Moving on,* Mermaid Road *is going to lean more toward poetic prose.*

**LC**: Yes, and most of the poems in it—one of them is a sonnet that I made into a paragraph, so the poetic reader will go, "I'm getting the rhythm of a sonnet from this." If they check, and count their syllables, they'll see that it is a sonnet. What I'm trying to do is trick the reader into reading poetry whether they know it or not. A lot of the people I know say they don't like poetry, or they say, "Why are you writing poetry?" They don't get it, and they'll say to you: "Poetry's wonderful, but I don't get it." And they look away. So I'll sneak it into my next book. I think we'll put a list at the end that says, "The poems in this book can be found on …" and then the pages and the names of the poems.

**EMN**: *You're going for something subversive.*

**LC**: It's me taking this format [from *Rope*], and trying to be subtler.

**EMN**: *Mermaid Road* is set in the modern day?

**LC**: Yes. Maybe a tiny bit retro. Maybe the '60s or '70s, but I haven't really pinned that down. Basically, the little girl grows up, and the parents are told she has to go to school. The parents say, "We're teaching her at home," and they say, "She has to go to school." And the parents say, "Well, she can't speak, so how's she gonna do at school? She'll have to go to a special school, and we don't want [that] because she's fine as she is." They're always struggling with the bureaucracy, and at some point they just go, "Let's just get out of here," and they sell the house and they take her in a trailer and disappear from their town.

Then the rest of her life starts. There's a lot of pressure from the medical community to alter her, and they're like, "But she works. She can swim, that's all. She's better in the water than she is on land. There's nothing wrong with her." Whereas, most people with that birth defect have faulty digestive systems … there are problems with the spine … but this mermaid's great. She's got a perfect spine that perfectly joins to her fishtail and so the parents say, "No, she's healthy and well and we're not going to have her altered, just so she can go to your damn school and not speak." That's another thing, not with Sirenomelia, but with Mermaidism: usually mermaids can't speak. They can sing, but they don't speak. So she sings.

**EMN**: *I really think you would like* Autobiography of Red. *I think Geryon and Deasil would get along.*

**LC**: I'll get a hold of it.

**EMN**: *But* Mermaid Road *is based on a germ of truth.*

**LC**: Yes, in that there's a true birth defect. And: is this the base for the myths about mermaids? I also get into seal-people, too, people who change into seals, because she manages to swim across the Atlantic Ocean to Scotland, and then she drifts down into the Mediterranean, and she runs into the lost Atlantis, and is disappointed, because it's just ruins, like Greece is. I try to debunk some myths. I have her bring up the dead body of Ulysses, as if the myth had gone terribly wrong and he was still tied to the mast, as though that didn't work for him. The sirens are in there, too. They use [the mermaid] to get Ulysses; then they rip him to shreds.

**EMN**: *One more question about* Rope*: was the story of Deasil's mother giving birth while being hanged based on anything, like the historical record?*

**LC**: After I wrote that, somebody told me they had seen that in a movie. Gross. But no. I was looking at the etiquette, and laws, of being hanged in the 16th and 17th centuries. If a woman said she was pregnant, you had to wait a few months and see if she had her period before you could hang her. So of course all the women scheduled to be hanged said, "I'm pregnant"—because maybe they could escape or something. But this girl was ignorant, and didn't know to do that. And didn't know that she was pregnant, didn't know she could say that. Just probably thought she was getting fat.

**EMN**: *His creation story, then, sets his tone: how could you not be someone like that [detached, strange, private], with that kind of start?*

**LC**: Yeah. How's he holding it together? He is.

**EMN**: *He's pretty Zen. Very observational, even-tempered.*

**LC**: He does his crafts at night. He's got his rope, his weaving, his therapy.

**EMN**: *There's weirdness here. I love the first lines—["His mother was poor, unknown and a thief. She was pregnant but they hanged her anyway."]—which is weird to say because it's really sad and dark. But it also draws you in. It disarms you somehow, because there's a sense of humour here, and a lyricism.*

**LC**: Everything I needed to learn [came from] *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. In 1967, I was ten, and they started to come on North American television, and I was like, "this is how I want to live my life. I want to be like these guys." They are so smart; they know so much about English literature and history. Those were two things that they knew about, because they were reading wherever they were (Oxford or Cambridge or something). That's where they get *Life of Brian*, or *History of the World: Part I*. All this ridiculous stuff that's all based on what they actually know about history and British culture. I love that—and it's so bent.

**EMN**: *And not incapable of darkness.*

**LC**: It's totally dark. That's my idea: what a dark, black world we live in, and how funny is that? But we aspire to beauty.

**EMN**: *Finally, I want to ask about the poems in this issue of* The Puritan. *Compared to those in* Rope*, they're more fluid, more associative. Is this a recent change?*

**LC**: "The Gift" is a few years old. I was trying to write an associative poem, that's for sure. I wouldn't say it was an exercise, but I was trying to free associate. The starting off point was pulling carrots out of the ground; then thinking about that. Then it turned into this whole biographical poem. I guess I found the right space to let that come in. Each section is a section of life: childhood, adolescence, marriage, divorce, childbirth, then where I am now, which is back where I was: pulling the carrots out of the ground.

"The Sunset Bank" is part of a huge project that I wrote. I have a poem for every month. I really like the July one though. The January and February ones came out shorter, colder. I wasn't able to associate as well in the winter. You're colder, and tighter. But in July, all the images came, and with the heat, and the birds and the foliage—it just worked. There's something about the seasons that

affects how loose or tight my mind is. In a perfect world, I'd sit in my house all winter and write novels, but from May to October, I'd write my poetry.

"The Key" was from an image that happened in a dream. And it was my eye. And it didn't hurt. But I realized what it's about. It's obvious if you have a sense of metaphor. I like "Strange," too, because it's about—everything. It's about everything.

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# "CARSON'S LAST TAPE:"
## *Red Doc>* and the Influence of Samuel Beckett

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REVIEW BY CHRIS GILMORE

The evolution of Anne Carson has taken peculiar turns. From the poetic scholarship of *Eros the Bittersweet* to the surreal landscape of *Red Doc>*, Carson has assembled a remarkably eclectic body of work. Her first full-length book of poetry, *Glass, Irony and God*, moves from heartbreak in "The Glass Essay" to theological speculation and satire in "The Truth About God" and "The Book of Isaiah," on to gender commentaries, both classical and modern, in "TV Men" and the book's only essay, "The Gender of Sound." Such diversity is not unusual for Carson, whose subsequent collections—*Plainwater*, *Men in the Off Hours*, and *Decreation*—contain everything from poems and dialogues to essays and opera. She has also produced two full-length books of scholarship, as well as translations of Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Sappho. Her most popular books, however, are her narrative-driven poems: *Autobiography of Red*, *The Beauty of the Husband*, *Nox*, and, most recently, *Red Doc>*, which serves as a kind of sequel to *Autobiography of Red*.

If readers buy *Red Doc>* expecting a simple continuation of its predecessor, they will be disappointed. As I wrote in my short review for *The Rusty Toque*:

> One of the joys of reading a new Anne Carson book is savouring its ground-breaking originality, and *Red Doc>* is no exception. Written mainly in narrow columns of sporadically punctuated verse, it continues the tragicomic, mythology-inspired romance of Geryon and Herakles, now named 'G' and 'Sad But Great.' Like *Autobiography of Red*, the plot of *Red Doc>* is fairly episodic, driven by elliptical waves of language rather than dramatic incident, but the overall tone has changed. Emotion has been largely traded for thought, immersion for detachment, realism for absurdism, mythology for modernity. Whereas *Autobiography of Red* was a

> heartbreaking portrait of the artist as a young red man with wings, *Red Doc>* is an equally painful (yet surprisingly funny) snapshot of the disillusioned artist as a not-so-young man, who has come to prefer Proust to philosophy, comfort to adventure, irony to grief.

On the whole, readers may find *Red Doc>* less accessible (and less inspiring) than *Autobiography of Red*, which balanced its pathos with flickers of hope. *Red Doc>* is a darker, denser, and more difficult book, despite its occasional playfulness.

As a classicist, Carson typically draws inspiration from such usual suspects as Homer and Sappho, and lesser-known poets like Simonides and Stesichoros. However, her primary influence in *Red Doc>* is not an ancient Greek, but a modern Irishman: Samuel Beckett. As I noted in *The Rusty Toque*:

> Carson's epigraph from Samuel Beckett ("Try again. Fail again. Fail better.") not only foreshadows the central characters' hopeless attempt to rekindle their relationship, but also sets the stage for the world of the novel as a whole. The barren landscapes, the absurd interactions, the surreal characters—everything seems to have wandered out of a Beckett play.

Whereas *Autobiography of Red* was about thriving, *Red Doc>* is about surviving. In fact, an alternate Beckett epigraph for *Red Doc>* could be the last lines of *The Unnamable*: "I can't go on. I'll go on." Stoic endurance in the face of absurdity is G's new motto, having relinquished his earlier dreams. Like Sad, G has not become stronger with experience, but damaged, possibly beyond repair; he has been forced to retreat into a protective shell of irony in order to bear the burdens of existence.

G's progression from hopeful young artist to embittered adult mirrors the devolution of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. However, Carson does not provide a Leo Bloom to save the spirit of her book; *Red Doc>* is populated only by lost souls, various kinds of Stephens. This gradual shift from Joycean aspiration to Beckettian disintegration signals a sea change in Carson's perspective, not only in relation to the world but also to the possibilities of representation as such. Some might argue that, after Joyce and Beckett, literature (especially fiction) has nowhere left to go. Joyce had pushed language to its limits in the maximalism of *Finnegans Wake*, and Beckett had done the same (albeit from the opposite end) in the minimalism of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. Even Beckett's theatre eventually moved from the full-length, two-act

structure of *Waiting For Godot* to the minute-long, micro-play "Breath." Perhaps *Red Doc>*'s epigraph ("Try again. Fail again. Fail better.") is not simply a commentary on the narrative to come, but also on the perpetual struggle of the artist trying to express the inexpressible, trying to celebrate the potential of language while painfully aware of its limitations. Or perhaps Carson simply views *Autobiography of Red* (despite its popularity) as a kind of failure, and *Red Doc>* is her attempt to fail better.

Beckett's influence has become increasingly transparent in Carson's work. Her earlier books were shaped mostly by the ancient Greeks, but occasionally poets such as Paul Celan, John Keats, and Emily Brontë snuck onto the page. In her more recent work, however, Beckett's fingerprints are everywhere. In *Decreation*, she includes a series of poems related to Beckett and an essay on his teleplay, "Quad." In *Antigonick*, the first lines reference Beckett directly, and the overall tone and rhythm of her dialogue sounds more like *Endgame* than *Antigone*. Although inspired by Herodotus and Catullus, *Nox* reads like Carson's version of *Krapp's Last Tape*, addressed to her recently deceased brother. Aside from Joyce, Beckett's main influence is arguably Marcel Proust, whose search for lost time dominates *Krapp's Last Tape* and drives Beckett's recurring obsessions with memory and repetition, mortality and decay. In *Red Doc>*, Carson shares Beckett's fascination; Proust becomes G's new favorite author and consequently the book's most noticeable allusion.

If Beckett forms the intellectual core of *Red Doc>*, Proust forms the emotional. If *Autobiography of Red* is about looking forward, *Red Doc>* is about looking back. Throughout the novel, G oscillates between his desire to remember (or, ideally, relive) his relationship with Sad and his need to forget it. Like all meaningful pain, Sad has become an inescapable part of G's past, and thus, for better or worse, a part of his psyche. As G admits to himself, "whether you keep this man in your life or put him out equal trouble." Forgetting is impossible, remembering is torturous, and reliving is problematic at best. G knows that Sad has "outlived his myth," that whatever they shared in the past could not be reproduced in the future, and even if it could, it would only lead to more heartbreak. However, like Krapp, G has become fixated, trapped in his bittersweet memories, unable to recover and connect with others, despite his best efforts. "Fail better" is the most G can hope for; success is no longer an option.

Sad, however, is not the only object of G's affection, nor the only source of his regret. G's mother frames the narrative and reminds readers of *Autobiography of Red* that G was once Geryon, an innocent boy with wings. The most devastating moments in *Red Doc>* arrive near the end when G abandons his aimless road trip and visits his dying mother in the hospital: "*No one should see me like*

*this* is her main worry […] a handful of twigs under the sheet […] Her voice thin enough to see through." A few pages later, they have their final, touching conversation ("*I look awful don't I*. No you look like my Ma."), followed by her funeral: "his mother is lying out there in her little soaked Chanel suit. The weeping has been arriving about every seven minutes. In the days to come it will grow less." Such emotional passages in *Red Doc>* are the exception, not the rule, and Proust's influence becomes peripheral when compared to Beckett's pervasive presence.

In *Red Doc>*, Carson's characters are little more than tramps and lunatics, solipsistic wanderers and chronic sufferers. They embody the most bizarre and pathetic aspects of human nature, at once pitiful and amusing, like the outrageous characters in Beckett's earlier works, *Murphy* and *More Pricks Than Kicks*. They are frequently assigned letters and symbols instead of proper names (G, Sad, 4HO, CMO), reducing their humanity to its most basic, nihilistic components, akin to Beckett's later dramatic figures. In general, however, Carson's characters resemble the inhabitants of Beckett's mid-career plays, *Endgame* and *Waiting For Godot*. They talk in circles and argue. They hate to be alone yet despise company. They wander and wait, without ever achieving their goals. They are disgusted by life but afraid of death. They are doomed, in other words, to keep living. At one point, Sad asks, "Whatever happened to your autobiography […] I gave it up says G. Nothing was happening in my life. They look at one another and start to laugh." G and Sad have finally chosen to trade their idealism for cynicism, to laugh at their misery instead of cry. Those who cry mourn the life they have lost or the life they should be leading; those who laugh know that such lives are unobtainable. By laughing, they mourn the part of themselves that used to be able to cry.

Carson may emulate Beckett's style, but she never imitates. Her quick staccato dialogue is separated by slashes without reference to settings or speakers, as though the characters were talking in a Beckettian void: "Goodlooking boy wasn't he/ yes/ blond/ yes/ I do vaguely/ you never liked him/ bit of a rebel/ so you said." Likewise, Carson's meditation on time—"Time passes time does not pass. Time all but passes. Time usually passes"—echoes the beginning and ending of *The Unnamable*, as well as Clov's opening lines in *Endgame*: "Finished. Nearly finished. It must be nearly finished." Even Carson's minimalistic punctuation resembles Beckett's. Her use of periods and line breaks seems almost haphazard at times, as though she is trying to undermine her poetic authority by deconstructing her own language, piece by piece. Before a recent public reading of *Antigonick*, Carson quoted a letter from Beckett, on his aspirations toward language: "I want to bore hole after hole in it until what cowers behind it seeps through." In *Red Doc>*, she comes closer than ever to achieving this goal.

Even Carson's landscapes, both literal and philosophical, recall Beckett's strange universe. From deserted volcanoes to mental hospitals, Carson's settings are emptied-out wastelands, drained of meaning. Sad not only recognizes this world for what it is, but even seems to relish its hollowness: "He loves driving into this emptiness. Place that is nothing else but what it is he says." Landscapes are thus reduced to their bare bones, stripped of beauty, exposed to the elements:

> Another town slapped silly by wind it doesn't matter where. Towns are all the same. [...] No tree no bush no barrier no edges or scale just a huge flat hand that sweeps where it will and wrecks what it wrecks. Why didn't I bring Proust. G lays his head on the table it sinks into the table.

This brief passage captures the essence of the book: bleak, sad, and strangely funny. Carson's world (like Beckett's) is lifeless, purposeless, and miserable, but it retains an absurd form of dignity. Its inhabitants huddle together for spiritual warmth—quietly, desperately, hopelessly seeking transcendence. At best, they find small doses of pleasure; at worst, they suffer immeasurable pain. Usually they settle for boredom.

Although Beckett's voice creeps more and more into Carson's work, it never dominates the text. Their unique imaginations blend so seamlessly, in fact, that his influence is always complementary. However, if Carson continues to move from affirmation to negation—from the pathos of *Autobiography of Red* to the tragicomedy of *Red Doc>*—her work may collapse (like Beckett's) under its own philosophical weight. Where, for instance, can Carson go from here? How does one locate redemption in her recent work? Or is she no longer concerned with such things? Is redemption illusory to begin with? Could this be Carson's final point?

"Not every day can be a masterpiece," claims the final lines of *Red Doc>*. "This one sails out and out and out." Where it sails, however, and to what purpose, remains to be seen.

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# "ANNE CARSON'S MISSTEP:"

## A Review of Anne Carson's *Red Doc>*

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REVIEW BY E MARTIN NOLAN

Anne Carson is a cold matador of a poet. At her best. As in "Epitaph: Zion:"

> Murderous little world once our objects had gazes. Our lives
> Were fragile, the wind
> Could dash them away. Here lies the refugee breather
> Who drank a bowl of elsewhere.

This is the first poem from *Men in the Off Hours*. Before it, she readies the reader like a bull. As is her habit, she prefaces the book with a finely crafted essay that ranges widely and reads proactively. This pushes the already proactive reader—why else come to Carson?—into full proactive-reader mode. Then she delivers a poem like this right off the bat. The language and music are precise, elegant and clean, completely under her control. Notice the subtle music: "OB-jects" = "GA-zes," the proliferations of w's, the way the 'e' and 'a' sounds surround the 'o' sounds in the last sentence. The first two sentences make a nicely phrased, but not remarkable, set of propositions: murder begins with the ability to perceive the perception of others, and within that murderous world we move like cracked glass. The last sentence, though, is jabbed in the reader's back like a sword as the poet slides one step from the red cape. The "our" of this poem is as huge as can be: it is humanity. The "refugee breather," then, stands in for the same, and is to blame. We may be fragile, Carson suggests, but we're not innocent, for it was we who "drank the bowl of elsewhere" and condemned ourselves to this fate.

This is vintage Anne Carson: understated and subtle but with both eyes on the grandest themes. This is a precarious balance, and she does not always pull it off in her shorter poems. When she does—as in "Hopper: *Confessions*," or most of *Decreation* and *Glass Irony and God*—the results are fantastic. At these times, she retains her cold, distant voice, yet she somehow wrangles depth, warmth, and even humour into that vise.

While obviously different in many ways, her best narratives do the same thing. "The Glass Essay" finds the speaker visiting her mother and contemplating the Brontë sisters. Sounds boring and scholarly, but it is only the latter, because as Roger Gilbert has written, Carson "deploys her scholarly voice as a dramatic instrument whose expressive power lies partly in its fragility." Likewise, in *Autobiography of Red* and *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson is a scholar, poet, dramatist and novelist—often simultaneously. And as in her non-narrative collections, the mixture usually works.

Still, it can be difficult to know what to do with the scholarly aspects of Carson's work. *The Beauty of the Husband,* for instance, is interspersed with fragments from John Keats; they bear no obvious connection to the main plot of the book, which follows a dissolving marriage. Gilbert (in the same essay) has an explanation for them, but even if one skips over these fragments, the main narrative is compelling enough on its own. The same could be said of the introductory material to *Autobiography of Red*. Compared to that of *Husband*, it is much easier to grasp. It is also an interesting example of creative scholarship, and in a roundabout way it gives the reader just enough background information to prepare for the main thrust of the book: the novel in verse. Again, it is this main narrative that makes the book worth reading, with the scholarly framing material acting as a take-it-or-leave-it bonus.

Unlike *Husband*, *Autobiography* carries the scholarly/poet split through the main narrative. It is easy to forget Geryon and Herakles's mythic roots due to the depth Carson injects into her modern day characters and narrative, but that narrative is still built on the classical tradition she specializes in as a scholar. And the fact that she simultaneously builds and dissolves the tension between the classical and modern is a key element in her success.

It is not, however, the reason the book succeeds. Instead, its value lies for the most part in the quality of its narrative and the portrayal of its characters. Geryon may have red wings, but we care about him because he is a sensitive and shy little boy with a mean older brother and a caring and open, if a bit distracted, mother. I was reminded of those early scenes—Geryon making his collages while his mom half watches TV and smokes cigarettes—by the early scenes in the film version of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Both are vaguely otherworldly yet touching portraits of

innocence on the verge of potential ruin. With that innocence so well established, Carson can then take Geryon out into the world, where he fights to keep it alive despite Herakles's cold love and the world's disinterest. Geryon makes it in the end, kind of. At least he flies, giving some sense that his bildungsroman is complete. That matters to us because we have been made to care about him.

Notice that I have not mentioned style or form. That is because Carson's "novel in verse" is more novel than verse. It is written with a lyrical tilt, allows itself more associative leaps and relies more on imagery than your typical novel, but as Eliot claimed of all free verse, it must in the end be judged by the standards of prose. As such, it holds up, for all the reasons I've described above. That said, an in-depth examination of *Autobiography*'s prose-verse style—including a look into exactly what the line breaks are doing there, or anywhere in her work—would be welcome, but there is not time for that now. Suffice it to say that Carson's prosodic success in the narrative pieces is similar to that described in the short lyric discussed at the top. That said, it is against all the strengths of her previous work that the much anticipated *Red Doc>* would inevitably be compared.

Based on the early reviews, the comparison has not flattered the new book. Not that all the reviews have been negative, but it is telling that the negative reviews have tended to be more specific than those praising the book. Vague praise is not trustworthy and, as is the case here, it is often unearned. As much as it disappoints me to write this, *Red Doc>* does not approach the success of its predecessor. Its narrative structure is haphazard, its characters are undeveloped and its style is stark in a bad way: not crisp and devastating like Beckett, but plain and dull.

This is all the more disappointing because the concept and intent of the book are so promising. Geryon, now just G, is older. The romance of life has worn off, leaving G to fend off malaise. Herakles, now Sad but Great, or just Sad, has been to war, which has left him mentally scarred. Before Sad shows up, G is tending his herd of red cattle near an overpass, while his mom's grown old, adding to G's mid-life crisis.

Then someone named Ida comes along and ultimately sparks a journey. Ida is unconvincing. She appears in the story when she knocks G out with a 2X4 under his overpass. For no apparent reason. Then afterwards she sticks around, again for no apparent reason. Of Ida and G, Carson writes, "she puzzles him he/ puzzles himself." Neither puzzle becomes remotely solvable throughout the book. The lines that follow—"her old/ plaid sportscoat his/ tendency to befriend/ catastrophe. She is/ innocent and filled with/ mood like a very tough baby"—are quick to befriend abstraction, and typical of the book's unsatisfying characterizations. We already know of G's

"tendency to befriend catastrophe" from *Autobiography*, and all this tells us of Ida is that she's one tough lady. We don't get much beyond these simple descriptions throughout *Red Doc>*.

Very soon after Ida arrives, Sad's "BIG GOLD LION head/ comes loping along." Sad bumps past Ida, causing her to ride Io, the white-haired heart of G's red Oxen herd, in a typical moment of *Red Doc>*-ian silliness that fails to move the plot forward and carries little meaning aside from silliness itself. With Ida gone, G is alone with Sad. "The man had been his/ oxygen once. When he left/ there was no oxygen," Carson writes, again applying a thin critical gloss on *Autobiography*. We are also told, in reference to a cut on Sad's hand, that "we all make good use of/ separate digits in our life/ but then (so Proust) catch/ sight of an old glove and/ burst into tears. G weeps/ thinking of Proust." Really? He's thinking of Proust? That name lands like a dead fish on the ground, being wiggled via string to convince us it is alive and caught fresh from the sea. Almost needless to say, it would be more convincing if he were thinking of Sad, although Sad would then have to be portrayed with depth enough for us care about him. In any case, Carson is lazily letting Proust stand in for G's emotional state. Carson does somewhat save this scene, however, when she ends the poem with one of *Red Doc>*'s rare moments of grace, as "the/ oxen arrive softly round/ him." That typically Carson-esque final line leaves an indelible image in the reader's mind. It is direct to its point, and spare, yet depicts a convincing sensitivity.

Then Ida meets Sad in a hospital, after she sees Sad knock a medical tray out of a nurse's hands (think the way people meet in *Saved by the Bell* episodes). Turns out they both know G (who would've thought?), and they share a bit of background information. Sad's been in the army, where he got his new name, while Ida's name means "Idea," or, as a "Greek guy" told her, "the way/ you see inside your mind." The former information is largely wasted, as we get scant additional insight into Sad's condition, while the latter comes off as an admission that these characters, and Ida in particular, are not fully realized characters, but ideas for characters.

Not that Carson cannot make ideas interesting. The idea of G's herd, for example, and what G gets from his contact with it, is nicely drawn out. For instance:

> TYPICAL NIGHT- HERDING SONGS gallop their rhythms and tell of love. G doesn't usually sing to the herd at night. He may talk to them listen stand in the herd. Listen.

> That Community. A low purple listening but with a height to the sound.

This turns into an extended meditation on the herd, which G understands: he can "balance the topheaviness of/ their bodies by plaiting/ their feet as they walk." Carson contrasts that to human wisdom, such as Sad's notion of "warplay," which he says, "had me pumped those years." He goes on to tell the story of a woman who "hit the ground/ 75 saw the white bag 75/ bullets tore her head off." This has left him to conclude "so much/ human cruelty is simply/ incidental is simply/ brainless," which leads to another of the handful of classic Carson endings in the book: that "you could/ take the entirety of the/ common sense of humans/ and put it in the palm of/ your hand and *still/ have room for your dick*." This is followed by a poem from Io's perspective, which adds depth, without overtly trying to, to Carson's idea of animals' indifferent wisdom: "Rackety/ every day to hear the every/ day forgets … The heavens are perfect./ Perfection sounds round./ Good morning good Io."

The book's central journey begins after Io's meditation, with a call from Lieutenant M'hek, Sad's one-man "warrior transition team." When G asks about Sad's condition, M'hek responds with one of the few interesting passages referring to Sad's trauma: "if a man is ruined/ like a ditch don't keep/ washing your hands in/ him." In the next poem, G's suddenly fighting a winter storm, and we eventually figure out they're now on the road. G is upset he brought a Daniil Khrams book instead of Proust. "Why didn't I bring Proust?" he asks. It is unclear why this matters, but it is also emblematic of the journey section of the book, which is where the uneven beginning needs to be justified, but instead is where the book falls apart. G and Sad share a largely dull road trip. G idly thinks about Proust and Khrams some more and notices his reflection has lost its "beauty impact." Sad, meanwhile, remains grumpy and remote, and at one point tells a boring story about Spam and his dad. Finally, they enter a glacier. Behind an "ice fault" they approach is a "humanlike form" that "shimmers faintly/ and pauses." There is also the smell of laundry. Turns out to be a psychiatric clinic. Lacking descriptive detail, the reader might imagine Superman's Fortress of Solitude. Before they can be admitted, G panics and flies, but this flight does not carry significance like that at the end of *Autobiography*. Instead, this one involves "ice bats," which arrive and help him to his destination, an auto-garage behind the clinic. There he meets the clinic's CMO, who's also a car

mechanic. This allows us to know as much about the CMO as it does about any car mechanic in the world. As in, not much.

While at the ice-clinic, which the book's chorus (so Carson) tells us is "beside a glacial lake run," some more stuff happens. A mystic-ish veteran named 4NO is added to the ragtag cast. He claims to "see Seeing Coming," which is like seeing "all white all the time." This is not explained; it is hardly developed at all. Instead it just sits there on the page: a metaphor's empty vehicle. This is a veteran's clinic, and thus most patients suffer from something like PTSD. This would seem perfectly suited to Carson, given the detached and scientific, yet forgiving and generous, character treatments that have made her name so widely known. But these wounded vets come and go from Carson's screen without leaving much more than a first impression. There are a few conversations over meals. They involve mundane topics like battlefield food, or "those pesky traumatic/ memories," in the CMO's words. In the end, these do not add depth to the characters or move the plot forward, but instead come off as typical cafeteria talk among a mix of strangers and old friends, with a few dropped hints at larger themes that fail to develop into much.

Meanwhile, 4NO is putting on a play in which he plays Prometheus. In one scene he practices this while Sad sits in the room in a traumatic trance: "What things/ are like for him physical/ things this blacker and/ blacker spiral down it goes." Eventually 4NO turns his speech, ostensibly addressed to the universe, to his old army buddy, Sad, saying "get your head out of your butt." Finally, "they waltz." This scene gestures toward a more meaningful examination of their pasts, and the recovery they seek, but the moment is not built upon. It is instead interrupted when Ida appears out of the blue again, in a cab (the normality of which, one supposes, is meant to stand out against the book's general surrealism). Later, more references are made to the specific memory Sad is trying to get over—involving a dead woman and a white plastic bag—but this is mostly lost amid Ida's intrusion.

Immediately upon arrival at the clinic, Ida is thrust into the middle of the action. She is in conversation with the CMO about her stealing habit, which he claims she has because it is "the opposite of feeling." Like the CMO's mechanic hobby, this detail of Ida's personality is not returned to. Then she begins having sex with Sad, while G mopes nearby over his Daniil Khrams book (he's also witnessed "THINKING ABOUT/ PROUST to pass the time"). Ida also draws a picture of Sad, among other things. Ida draws throughout, but unlike Geryon's collages and photographs in *Autobiography*, Ida's drawing never takes on any meaning beyond itself. "Drawings of Sad so far are/ minimal," we're told, while at another point Ida "brought/ her drawing book but/ found it hard to

do/ anything in the dark." Her drawing is never detailed more than in such passing references. This could be a metaphor for *Red Doc>*'s characters as a whole, and one that Carson, oddly, seems aware of, as when she writes, "you/ could never learn enough/ about Ida." Well, I could stand to learn more than is given here.

Finally, as the time for 4NO's play arrives, Ida instigates a riot that is caught on TV. 4NO and the CMO, we are told, have been conducting interviews about the former's prophecies, and now the cameras are there to film his play. Ida arrives at the performance holding a plastic bag 4NO gave her earlier to carry props. The plastic bag ignites Sad's repressed war memories, which 4NO had hoped to avoid. Sad snaps into a rage as his repression lifts; he attacks Ida and is rebuffed by another clinic inmate. A riot ensues, during which Ida leads the room in a song. Later, we're told the event has gone viral, and the video shows Ida leading the song, but when Sad attacks her again, "She kickboxed/ him flat and kept singing."

This is the height of *Red Doc>*'s action, but it is also one of its weakest moments. Not only is this very roughly sketched musical-riot lacking believability—it is but one tack in a series of tack-ons in the plot—but it also undercuts the serious examination of war-related trauma that Carson had just scratched the surface of. Just as Sad's trauma is given some tangible form, Ida arrives in her clown car to dropkick the book back into the light-random-goofiness zone. It is as if Carson is mocking Sad's trauma, and in the process her own book. And while humility and self-mockery can be useful, this book cannot withstand the assault it mounts on itself.

After the riot, G, Ida, 4NO and Sad, now in a straightjacket, escape the clinic with the same frivolousness with which most things happen in the book. They just suddenly "ESCAPE [the] SAME/ night" as a new poem begins. On they way they see Hermes, who's been lurking about for a while in his silver tux, and pick him up. This ensures they "are headed for death." The five head down the road until they reach a volcano; or, as the chorus sarcastically announces (again the book is mocking itself): "don't say you weren't/ expecting a volcano."

All the while, M'hek has been watching the herd. This at first angers G, but it doesn't cause any serious plot tension (which the reader is desperately looking for throughout the book's middle section). M'hek is one of the only characters here with anything approaching the charisma of Carson's past successes. Sadly, he has only a few poems, and one gem, on p. 124, in which he sits in a field with Io. As night falls, Io "leans her/ horn against M'hek's knee. A hush carries itself up/ her sigh. Late stars watch them." Despite his vividness as a character, his role in the plot highlights the book's narrative deficiencies. Aside from his vague role as a kind of post-war therapist for Sad,

M'hek has turned out to be a decent substitute shepherd, making G's earlier fight with Ida about leaving the herd with M'hek completely pointless. But then again, there are a lot of pointless scenes here, and in a pretty short book, too.

The escape from the clinic brings G back to his M'hek-led herd, as both somehow converge on the aforementioned volcano. Io has eaten a hallucinogen and attempts to fly just as the car passes below. The Ox instead falls and is caught by G, with help form the ice bats, but not before she "Lets loose a/ great fart and poops/ gloriously just missing his/ head." No one can accuse this book of lacking goofiness. One may wonder, however, at the point. On a related note, they are now inexplicably back at the clinic, in the shadow of the volcano, where a note informing G of his mother's deteriorating condition is waiting for him. So they go to her.

As others have pointed out, the scenes including G's mother stand out among the rest of the book, and her glow sheds some additional light on Sad and G (though Ida, the CMO, M'hek and 4NO remain, for the most part, closed books). The mother sections begin and end the book, and both play on a wistfulness for *Autobiography*. At *Red Doc>*'s open, Mom is asking G about Sad, and at the end Sad and Ida join G at her bedside for some touching moments between mother and son that close out the narrative. When his mother insists she looks terrible, and G responds, "No you look/ like my Ma," a glimmer of the old Carson magic emerges. The poem goes on: "now she/ winces. In later years this/ is the one memory he/ wishes would go away and/ not come back" because "dying puts the two of/ them (now) into this/ nakedness together that is/ *unforgivable*." But it is far too late in the game for G's mother to save *Red Doc>* by giving it the heft its other characters lack.

That's because between the mother sections lies a haphazard journey, thinly told and with an over-reliance on allusions. Carson has always thrown around classical and literary references like Nerf footballs, but in *Red Doc>* her characters are so thin that her depictions are forced to rely on these allusions all the more. But evoking the mythical Hermes or Prometheus—or Proust or Daniil Kharms—without investing anything particular into the allusion does not make up for a lack of character depth. In fact, because the reader is forced to look to these haphazard allusions for meaning, and finds little, the lack of real character development is more depressingly exposed. Even were I a Proust expert, would the mere mention of his name, or of a scene in his work, make any significant contribution to my understanding of Carson's character?

Then there is the fact that this haphazard journey is told in mostly unremarkable prose scrunched into arbitrary forms. Here's a short and incomplete summary of Carson's prosodic history up to this point, written in the dominant form of *Red Doc>*:

> Anne was once a matador goading she was we were the bull sometimes we knew we had her and again the knife in our back but now her poems are just like this loping sentence written on a thin  column that is just very direct and not deceptive.

This form is not without potential. As you write, the spaces adjust as you tempt the automatic line break. It does this when reading, too. It makes you think in small chunks, even if the semantics are in bigger chunks. At its basic function, that's what the line break does: it disrupts semantic flow. Or it enjambs it, not with a specific semantic reason in mind, but usually for musical or visual or rhythmical reasons. Carson's line breaks, however, are arbitrary, so they serve no such purpose. They are so random and accidental that they cease to really matter. Even the visual effect is cancelled due to the consistency of the form (the book is dedicated to "the randomizor," a reference to Carson's husband, but surely also to the gods of randomness themselves).

Random and accidental can be the work of matador poets, if those characteristics prove to be a ploy. If, for instance, Carson was filling her skinny descriptive columns, slash-separated dialogues and middle-justified chorus texts with eloquent descriptions of dynamic characters, the arbitrariness of the formal choices (some of which Carson claims to have resulted from computer errors), could be forgiven, along with her lightly tossed-in and meaningless allusions. But they're not.

Carson has never been the most ear-catching lyricist, but even the deadpan *Beauty of the Husband* uses silence, pacing and sound more deliberately than *Red Doc>*, which despite the skinniness of the text, is the prosiest of her extended narrative works. Here are two typical examples of *Red Doc>*'s ultra-deadpan:

> YOU SPELL IT number 4 letter *N* letter *O* no space all caps: 4NO / is it a nickname / no babycakes it's functional the fucking

> army being a fucking fulcrum of fucking functionality / they called you 4NO in the army / are
>
> you going to repeat everything I say / sorry / pass the sugar / so you knew Sad in the army / indeed I did /
>
> …
>
> TWELVE FOIL PACKETS arranged on each tray in three rows of four. *Ration* is a beautiful word or so the CMO thinks. Key to a disciplined life. Latin *ratio* "reason." Rationality. Principle of order.

This is minimalist to be sure, but it is also incredibly dry and everyday. Carson is avoiding lyricism here. Thus, in *Red Doc>* Carson has crossed over (significantly) from novel in verse to verse novel in prose: the associative leaps and minimalism are there, but the language is plain, and the accidental enjambment that rules *Red Doc>* inevitably comes to feel like a shallow speed bump around which you easily learn to maneuver. Thus, we judge the book by the merits of prose, by which, again, it fails.

To return to the opening metaphor, if the reader is a bull, *Red Doc>* is a non-deceptive matador. Jason Guriel certainly took a charge at it, and aside from a few oversteps, he seems to have hit his mark. As he claims, the voice here is unmistakably Carson, but it is like she is badly imitating her previous work. The attempt is there, but lacks follow-through. For instance, *Red Doc>* is surreal, as many have pointed out, but it is not surprisingly so; weird things happen, but Carson does not inject her strangeness with enough detail to make it convincing. It remains an outline of the surreal, not its actualization.

The same lack is found in her poem "Wildly Constant," which appeared in the *London Review of Books*, was included in *The Best American Poetry 2010* and reads like an imitation of "The Glass

Essay." Like *Red Doc>*, "Wildly Consonant" is curt but dull, where its predecessor was slow but patient enough to develop complexity.

*Red Doc>* and "Wildly Consonant" may make one wonder if Carson is mailing it in, needs a better editor or a more critical fan base, or has simply lost her touch. And her admission to *New York Times Magazine* that the computer glitch that gave her the centre column form also sprung her loose from a bad bout of writing block could be taken to mean that she never really had anything to go on when writing *Red Doc>*—and it shows in the reading. The book feels thrown together, as if it were built on its plot points rather than its plot points emerging from its characters' conflicts or interests. The characters' motivation comes off as externally driven and internally random. It's one thing to use randomness, but it's another to rely on it. *Red Doc>* not only relies on randomness, but it relies on its reader making sense of that randomness, which is simply too much to ask, especially because the language itself is not nearly capable of carrying a substandard plot and thin characters.

I wouldn't count Carson out just yet. This could just be one failed experiment, or it could be genius beyond my current comprehension (I doubt it, but would be happy to be proven wrong on that count). But some of her recent magazine poems are well worth reading. "The Eras of Yves Klein" and "Epitaph for Ben Sonnenberg" in particular are intriguing and add new elements to Carson's body of work. It's not too late for a successful comeback. But even barring that, there's plenty of other poetry out there to read (like Louise Carson's), and anyway, Anne Carson's already given us far more great work than we could ever have expected. And no one's perfect. Even Gretzky had his off games.

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