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How else are we supposed to learn anything, unless we keep talking?
An irresponsible act of imaginative license #1: kevin mcpherson eckhoff’s *Rhapsodomancy*.

Building upon my “Pulled from my Shelves” series which I recently completed for Sina Queyras’s *Lemon Hound* site (indexed here) this “an irresponsible act of imaginative license” series will explore concrete and conceptual literary projects. These occasional columns will be a place for discussion (and I encourage comments), reviews and interviews around books that I think deserve increased attention.

§


The traditional poetic impulse is a refutation of language’s inherent failures. It is the attempt to make language perform the impossible; to lucidly reconnoiter the ineffable. Metaphorical language is an acknowledgement of language’s inherent downfall. Language is too tied to *thingness*, to objects and gestures (as Robbe-Grillet argues) to plumb the depths of the “human soul.” This is not to say that metaphorical language does not have moments of beauty and grace, but those moments are the result of a larger failure. As poets, we attempt to bend language to our lyrical will. What results is inevitably a failure, but the poem lies in the degree to which the poem fails.

kevin mcpherson eckhoff’s *Rhapsodomancy* [link: http://www.chbooks.com/catalogue/rhapsodomancy] (Toronto: Coach House, 2010) explores language’s inherent failures and surveys how those failures become poetic. Through the use of two abandoned languages—*Shorthand* (created by Sir Isaac Pitman in 1837) and *Unifon* (created by John Malone in the 1950s)—*Rhapsodomancy* visually ties concrete poetry (a ostracized poetic form) to other marginalized spaces: slight-of-hand, comic strips, optical illusions and apantomancy (the divination of the future through scattered objects).

*Rhapsodomancy*’s “Disavowals: Optical Allusions” recreate traditional optical illusions with *Unifon* characters. Each of the fourteen visual poems playful challenge the reader to define their own poetic foreground/background relationship; the pillar of “I” warps, one of the arms of “E” falls into emptiness, the “O” is a linguistic Gordian knot. The “optical allusions” in “Disavowals” belie the illusion of poetry; strain your eyes as much as you’d like, vertigo is inevitable.
As hopeful as apantomancy may be (the divination of the future from astrology, palm-reading, tea-leaf reading revealing more about the reader than the read), poetry is just as naïvely optimistic. Poets have become literary palm-readers, not because they can divine or influence the future (gone are the days when poets were members of the court or endowed by the ruling classes to celebrate and immortalize their accomplishments), but because they are the literary equivalent of tarot-reader in a secluded tent at a creative anachronist fair. Poetry has become *Shorthand* and *Unifon*, a language largely abandoned to specialist and anachronists who pine for a return to an imagined poetic heyday.

*Rhapsodomancy* [link: http://kevinmephersoneckhoff.wordpress.com] revels in the exuberant, playful poetics of failure. The meaning we have “stamped on [the] lifeless things” of poetry is merely an illusion, a “now you see it, now you don’t.” No longer is poetry the beautiful expression of an emotive truth; it has become the archæological re-arrangement of the remains of an ancient civilization. Faced with the “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” of *Shorthand* and *Unifon* (and by extension of poetry itself), mcpherson eckhoff realizes that “[r]ound the decay / of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away” and sits down to make sandcastles in the rubble.
‘An irresponsible act of imaginative license’ #2: Bob Cobbing’s _GLOUP and WOUP_.


I plan on returning to Cobbing’s work with some frequency as part of this ‘an irresponsible act of imaginative license’ series, but for the time being, I want to turn my attention to a _GLOUP and WOUP_, a 1974 collection that Cobbing edited (Kent, UK: Arc Publications, 1974). A extremely difficult collection to find in the 21st-century, _GLOUP and WOUP_ documents the efforts by two geographically distinct groups of visual poets in the UK in the late 1960s/early 1970s: the GLOUcestershire group—as represented by Dom Sylvester Houédard (1924–1992), John Furnival (1933–) and Kenelm Cox (1927–1968) and the Westminster group—as represented by Tom Edmonds (1944–1971) and Cobbing himself.

Much visual poetry from the 1960s and 1970s retains a whiff of hippie-like optimism and faith in universal, liberatory, language. Most collections of concrete poetry from this period have not dated well (a problem common to much poetry: it doesn’t date well), and there is often a great deal of repetition between the major anthologies of the time (the best of which can now most easily be found, of course, on ubuweb [link: www.ubu.com]). _GLOUP and WOUP_ is not immune to these charges, but none-the-less does include some vital, rarely seen, work.
Published in a printed pink gate-fold wrapper, *GLOUP and WOUF* is a gathering of single-fold poetic statements and introductions along-side a series of roughly 7 ½” square broadsides printed black and white on lovely matte-finish cardstock.

The collection opens with Cobbing’s own 5-poem selection, each of which represents a disparate facet of his varied concrete *oeuvre*. Typical of his work are dense black overprinted pieces that combine repeated texts, crumpled and distorted page fields and collaged advertising lettering. It’s certainly unreasonable to sum up Cobbing’s work in 5 pieces and I know of at least one visual poet who has found that as he’s explored his own practice he was confronted with the fact that Cobbing had covered most bases, exhaustively, more than 50-year prior. Cobbing’s “tyger 1” (1971) is pictured at left.

Kenelm Cox is new to me, and his work is machine-centred and focused on the “process of becoming, existing, disintegrating and thereby becoming something else” but wanted to “exorcize some of the machine’s terrifying aspects—and give it some charm.” My work (especially in *fractal economies*) has been more focused on those ‘terrifying aspects’ of mechanistic poetry—especially in light of increased automation and mechanization in correspondence and communication. Cox argues that he is open to his work being “funny, that is part of being friendly, but [... ] would like it to have some elegance too” and thus his contributions to *GLOUP and WOUF* are primarily photographs of letter-based mobiles and simple clock-like machines. Approachable, audience-friendly, Italian Futurism (which is an oxymoron if there ever was one).

Tom Edmonds was also a new addition to my reading, and his contribution to *GLOUP and WOUF* are, like Cox, are sculptural in tone though Edmunds display a greater debt to Ian Hamilton Finlay’s glass and text-based work. Edmunds constructs cool shadow-boxes with ordered sheets of glass, each inscribed with textual fragments. The resultant pieces have an intriguing engagement with depth, moving for the page as 2-dimensional space to a 3D conceptualization of poetry. (See Edmunds’s “compromise poem box” (1969) on the right…)

John Furnival is the most problematic inclusion in the collection. His work—which exuberantly overwhelms the reader with panels of hand-lettering arranged in architectural structures—sadly typifies
many concrete poetry clichés. The panels, which the author admits are “still very confused, which [he] take[s] to be an artist’s privilege” centre on two overly enticing images for visual poets—the Tower of Babel and John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God...”). Placing both of these images as ejaculate from a huge textual phallus, however, quickly negates any astonishment the viewer may have towards the process of erecting these structures in the first place.

Dom Sylvester Houédard (who I also plan to write on in future columns) is, like Cobbing, also a sadly under-discussed and under-appreciated master of concrete poetry. His inclusion in *GLOUP and WOUP* is the high point. His typewriter abstracts—typescracts—are the most technically complex exemplars of clean concrete. Sadly, his work is rarely reproduced in colour (and this is no exception), as often worked with multi-coloured typewriter ribbons. As concise as Houedard’s work is, the realization that each piece was created on a manual typewriter (see “typestract the five buddhas” (1967) on right...).

*GLOUP and WOUP* closes with a “Bibliography and Sources of Comments” leaflet which provides yet more openings for future research. I’ve searching out more than a few titles. Compared to the major anthologies of the 1960s/70’s (Mary Ellen Solt’s, Stephen Bann’s, Emmett Williams’s, etc.) *GLOUP and WOUP* has a very focused editorial mandate, but the 5 poets included make this collection an admirable model, exemplifying both the triumphs and pratfalls of historical concrete poetry.

Despite being a celebrated contributor to Canadian art from the 1960s through 1990’s, Greg Curnoe’s reputation among the literary community is limited to the generation of writers who knew him personally or who were active within his community (see, for instance, George Bowering’s *The Moustache: Memories of Greg Curnoe* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993) and the ‘We are not Greg Curnoe’ issue of *Open Letter* (11.5, Summer 2002)).

The majority of Curnoe’s visual work, highly celebrated in the 1960s and 1970s, has become a cultural artifact, a time capsule of the Centennial / Expo ’67 period in Canadian art. His work in little magazines *Region* and *20 Cents Magazine* has faded from view (although, the be fair, the *Forest City Gallery* and the *Nibilist Spasm Band*, both of which he co-founded, continue).

Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) was a constant advocate for celebrating the regional arts and literary communities in southwestern Ontario (especially around London). A pair of posthumously published books which link to his passion for the local deserve more attention and should be of interest to conceptual writers.


Initially begun as a means of settling a property-line dispute (a non-poetic issue retrofit to a poetic exploration), Curnoe’s *Deeds / Abstracts: The History of a London Lot* is a meticulous mining of the historical record for commentary on every person to have interacted with his property at 38 Weston Street, London, ON, or the surrounding community. Presented without editorial commentary or contextual remarks (beyond an introduction, as edited by Frank Davey), a typical entry reads:

April 9, 1894:

William Weatherhead [gardener 1829-1916] and Eliza Jane Weatherhead [1830-1905] to Ellen Knowles [married to Joseph Knowles {lithographer 1867-?}], sub-lot 6, Registered Plan #32 [30 Weston Street]. Bargain and sale #733. (Middlesex County Registry Office) [112]

Positioned between Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and an amateur genealogist’s recounting of a family history, *Deeds / Abstracts* is a curious anomaly in Canadian poetry. Many of the long poems that preceded *Deeds / Abstracts* similarly used archival documents and histories as found and manipulated objects, forming the backbone from which the poetic text grew. Kroetsch’s *The Ledger* (1975) and McKinnon’s *I Wanted To Say Something* (1975, 1990) both typify this long-poem trope. Curnoe has not poeticized his language or the material, in any way—he has simply gathered and transcribed the entries and reported them in chronological order.

*Deeds / Abstracts* attempts to trouble the Eurocentric sense of Canadian history by extending its scope to include a recording of every aboriginal and first-nations person who had interaction with the area around what would be come 38 Weston Street. Because of the nature of the documents that Curnoe draws upon for his cataloguing, *Deeds / Abstracts* lists only the aboriginal and first-nations people who had interaction with Europeans. Documenting a decidedly European perspective on presence, “personhood” is defined here, as *having interacted with Europeans*:

Nigigoonce [fl. 1843], Ojibwa Nation, possibly a relative of Ne~gig (1)?; lived on the Upper St.Clair reserve [Sarnia], January 20, 1843 (Canada 1847: no.20). [83]
Too often, to my eye, *Deeds / Nations* becomes a 238-page catalogue of names, and reading a European-Canadian listing of every Aboriginal person who interacted with a piece of land becomes an uncomfortable inventory. Curnoe was well-aware of this issue, and did attempt to mitigate this cultural lens by interviewing descendants of Surrender No.2 (1790) and Surrender No.6 (1796), and incorporated issues of voice into his “I am OUY” series of rubberstamp visual art.

Curnoe’s artistic practice was greatly influenced by collage, and the aestheticization of non-artistic and mundane items, and this aesthetic flows into his work on *Deeds / Abstracts* and *Deed / Nations*. Collage, as an art-form, includes both a non-discriminatory reach (anything can become art) and aesthetic of choice (but only those items chosen by an aesthetically-aware eye). With *Deeds / Nations* and *Deeds / Abstracts* Curnoe gathers as much information as he can about every person who had interaction with “his” property at 38 Weston Street—but the results carry with it the inherent problems of voice and historical appropriation.

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**Derek Beaulieu**  Author of five books of poetry (most recently the visual poem suite *silence*), three volumes of conceptual fiction (most recently the short fiction collection *How to Write*) and over 150 chapbooks, derek beaulieu’s work is consistently praised as some of the most radical and challenging contemporary Canadian writing. *Toro* magazine recently wrote “using techniques drawn from graphic design, fine art and experimental writing, [beaulieu] vigorously tests the restrictions, conventions, and denotations of the letters of the alphabet.” His next book, *Seen of the Crime* (Snare, 2011), is a collection of criticism on contemporary poetry and poetics. beaulieu has performed his work at festivals and universities across Canada, the United States and Europe. He can be found online at www.derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com.
Poets Against Authorship:
A 5 minute Manifesto in 20 parts, 15 seconds each

1. Look me in the eye and tell me that poets have authority in this culture. If a novel skids away from plot, we call it poetic, not authoritative. “Fictitious” is a synonym for poetic, and “sham” is a synonym for fictitious. Get real,

2. we say when somebody gets poetic. And this is because poets have claimed and conquered the realm of superfluousness. Poetry exists in the rich excess of language. People sigh when they encounter poetic triumphs, shocked and jealous at the enormous time spent outside meaning.

3. The idea of authorship, in contrast to the idea of poetry, is predicated on the idea of authority, of mastery, of precision. If we trace the word back to its Latin root, auctorem, it means to cause to grow or to lead society forward.

4. Consequently, many writers fall for the romance of leading society forward through writing. Confused poets thought this included them, but every would-be revolutionary poet has failed. Rimbaud sobered up and stopped writing when he realized.

5. The problem begins with the legal fact that authorship is inextricably bound up in the idea of ownership and the use of language as intellectual property. Language and ideas flow freely between people, however, despite the law.

6. The authority that enables authorship has nothing to do with leading society forward or changing society. The authority of authorship, in fact, comes from intellectual property laws that seek to limit the free flow of language and ideas.

7. This legal system contradicts the nature of language, and though it was a system put in place by the state purportedly to protect authors, ultimately it protects the state. In others words, authors work inside the existing legal system rather than seek to change it.

8. But doesn’t this legal framework protect poets as well? Not exactly. The legal framework surrounding writing came into existence after the invention of the printing press suddenly allowed writers wide distribution of their work and ideas.

9. McLuhan argues that the Gutenberg printing press dramatically altered the nature of identity from a collective consciousness to isolated individualism. The press allowed anybody to publish and disseminate radical ideas, thereby opening up a widespread competition of ideas.

10. The government and the church needed to control the dissemination of those radical ideas, and thus developed the beginnings of our copyright system. It was during this period that the word “author” began to be used in its modern sense.

11. The author was the person who had been authorized by the state to print their work. They were the ones to be held accountable for the ideas. The first laws on authorship were used to censor and persecute the writers who dared publish radical ideas.
12. The next wave of laws, from the Statute of Anne in 1710 and on, transformed authorship into a commercial venture by making words and ideas property. While this launched an enormous creative output, writing had been swallowed by the marketplace.

13. It also transformed the writer into just another worker inside the system. Authorship signifies a writer’s position within the system. The problem with the system is that it permits no dissent, and neutralizes any attempt at change.


15. But poetry only lives outside of the marketplace. How far outside? Consider that a good book takes at least a year to write and publish, a good contract gets $2 a book, a best-selling book of Canadian poetry sells 500 copies. That’s a thousand dollars for a year’s work.

16. The all-time best-selling book of Canadian poetry has sold roughly 25,000 copies. But that was over nine years, or roughly 2,500 copies a year. The previous Canadian poet to sell so well was Robert Service with his Yukon Klondike poems.

17. Authorship, with false claims of cultural authority, and with links to anti-intellectual oppression, is the wrong model for poets. Poetry is fundamentally different than authorship: legally, economically, and politically.

18. Poets against authorship insist that poetry is a space in which to test and rethink and to challenge the existing legal, economic, and political frameworks of our society. Poetry, by its irrelevance, has earned this radical freedom.

19. Consequently, the poetry of poets against authorship looks different too. We use plagiarism, appropriation, plunderverse, collage, cut-ups, and found poetry to challenge ourselves as much our worlds. There are other models of writing than authorship.

20. Poetry has the enormous privilege of existing outside the political, economic, and legal constraints of authorship. It is a space of radical freedom, radical for its rejection of easy to please consumer culture, radical for its lack of authority.

An Insight Toronto lecture delivered at the Drake Hotel, 3 September 2010.

Gregory Betts is a poet, editor, and professor at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. He is the author of four books of poetry and the editor of four books of experimental Canadian writing. He received the 2010 Jean-Michel Lacroix Award for the best essay on a Canadian subject by the International Journal of Canadian Studies and his book The Others Raised
in Me was a shortlisted finalist for the 2010 ReLit Award. He recently completed a history of early Canadian avant-gardism that will be published by the University of Toronto Press in 2011.
massifs
boundaries massifs names
numbers borders barriers
reefs
congege lyric visual aural
organic origin style form
sonnet stanza ode
oddment loose leaf
publish perish shrivel switch
moment field floss
flap flood one word
3rd word surd ab stance
real glance gesture
subterfuge
fugue galavant
dirge divulge personal
private public revenants
desire fire lyre fire
one word third heard
revise devise skies

subsidize demonize enterprise
disguise lies cannibalize

what moment is this?
does it fit?
is it heightened?
alive?
will it survive?
to what length
will death
go to
oppose an ego's beliefs?

11.2.10

Judith Copithorne

There is some of my visual poetry on Ditch, poetry that matters. From 1964 to 1974 I published several small books such as, Until Now, HeShe&It Works, Miss Tree's Pillow Book, Intermedia Press, Rain, Own Imprint, Returning, Own Imprint, Runes, Coach House Press and Arrangements, Intermedia Press. jwcurry published a small bibliography partially printed in four colors. It is issue 400 of 1 cent and it came out in March, 2009. Coach House published A Light Character which is a book of non-concrete poetry in 1987. Term, 2005, is a 11x17 sheet folded into 16 pages, 8 on each side. It is a multi-colored laser print of mixed media. Some of this material can be acquired from jwcurry at Room 302, Apartment 302, 880Somerset West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1K 6R7.
I have lived for most of my life in Vancouver.
Sessions from the Dream House Aria, an except.

8. At The Gate Of Melt

all struggles brush in decembers accumulated mess or halo blackened squalls of world lilies for lumina catacombs is a cat gut matter to bleach sedative with

feathered i la loo bone wave ritual and silent like a granular trap every thing touches then gowns in the evening plain after forests brace anatomy then you

a beige starch quarter anatomy in the air than place everything touched listless noise holy squall as delicate in the gate as in the story their nothing

drip of falcon there wing necks knight dirge of jelly lints listless fear eaten locks time to thorn anemone of stories this stiff and weather requiem into break

your in its winding upon into lumina compositions havoc how wintered through eye arrows brine of death and collapses the well of silhouettes

there leave halleluh contra your flat spine jangle in the silence of contra picket the dirge by sheet of evening dirges a ghost blanks ghost of absence

miss movements sheen into sepul chre in silent fairytale viewed me winter a death of metal them black blank and ruinous near fairytales that have
knights fever to leave your crystal
yourself landsliding is a sleet myth
ology bent to leave ice distant and
eternal a bedsheets wave is an anti

poetic scream of ice starpulsed to
have mechanical indentations of
havoc in the air of eyelids before
southbounding every collapse into

a dish into horizons feather for a
winter spin your spine of lace lacks
crocodile to sing clad in a walk of
milk bleach spectrum for movement viscous and southbound

sepulchre him a bedsheets refuge
has havoc in icy footfalls to heat in
dentations sparkled spectrum
ghosting the sheen of eyelids and

arms let clean swords compose
silence at the gate of melt and longing fever way for all symphonies to
cause a pale fall of the masses leaving

moments chunking granular eyes let
chunk fever crocodile knights sway
nucleus of limestone army killing
angle of what drifts to travel and

remember silence is thick with a
feathered fence is part southbound
snowglobe every fairytale mask
screens squall and pales spray for

days stumble into catacombs
near throats silhouettes sharp
ringing for pale brushing into dream
bowls of requiem seas in a melodious

way dishing angles to brush barren
open into arrows collapse as lost as
eternal or they are at catacombs swirl
of snowglobes open tip above tip to

open part rime as a brush of text
ure over jelly let their fall minus
graveside more kill after fissure
from breaking a tibia matte legend

december a dip of eyelids trap the
story of anemones brittle cresc
endo and glacial dirge bright sun
mourns picketed absence and

miss wing yourself ringing the
day into depth canticles of boreal
measured down lumina search for
weather as sheet barren or blind

pale indentation of sheet patterns
myth of bowl brace boreal ruins of
winter boreal at me you revolve a
border southbound are at neck bells

snowglobe no be as nothing drip arm
down arrow sad sea throats left as
well waxed day measures a pattern
for dish tipped time angels deep first

scream then decide to break into squall
what ring rituals pattern want a gate to
break distant noise build a rail depth
delicate southbound eyelids

mechanical there melt rail patterns
into brine rail melted chalk measured

17 seconds ( : a journal of poetry and poetics )
over brush for all catacombs fog part
deadth over then revolve weather

well swayed fog as fog stumbles a
throat over southbound death of a
day legend left to dream and build
over indented matte is sad wax all

there over less viscous before there
winter what viscous from all anatomy
for everything first your me for halleluh
matte eye in the wind of everything note

throat particle once snowglobe bucket
fogs wing from noise particle to dream
more winding wax symphonies kill bold
crescendos by swaying parts of dream

once out footfalls reach drips of flight
into drifted mute my kill has more
sea under every down south bounded
this catguts sad view of movement

viscous footfall no viewed eaten
eye sad weather of a well
9. My Bucket Bucket Drips Bucket

well viewed has once
more particled your
there matte over squall
measured eyelids southbound

with want and depth left to
be your pattern luminous
miss anemone a sleet their
tip as sea throat fairytale

remembered knight of
mass gates in the spectrum
his clad horizon mechanical
ice leaves metal miss contra

silhouette havoc into time
winging holy starched gown
i squall patterns of immovable
walks for bones along high

ways building blur's of havoc
in the dirge of contra ana
tomy is a stiff diorama under
holy berries picketed empty

with gibberish by lumina
tearing revolutions hither
through clean rails my win
ter precise and holy rime

of bleach clean told la loo
music into petrify how
my bucket bucket drips bucket
weathers sad kill of dream
dreams throat first before
indent throat over chalk
southbound catacomb pattern
of angels throat no me sheet

down absence story to break in
let open collapse a requiem near
every travel crocodile this fall
silent and sparkling sepulchre singing

dish has left fever for death of absence
silent and well composed requiem
locked there noise of beige then
feather black lint braces finger

breaks how footbridges smear
gates and highways heat moments
into lint of snow brush and bell
time the world stumbled snow

bedsheet tales of winterlight but
melody collapse wave of moan
into times requiem borders night
well as hypothermic falcons flight

into landslide viewed as skeleton
dreams feathered rime of day spins
and sloshes sad catgut my part
particle note everything viscous

over stumble of death melts delicate
angels ritual into times sea snowglobe
at indented measure picketed for a trap
from time jelly snowglobe to arrow

bowls into catacombs snowglobe drifts
fever pale and composed indent south
bound the collapse starpulsed bent
knight of winter ghost jangles collapse

17 seconds ( : a journal of poetry and poetics )
lumina weather eaten falcon listless you
everything sedative halo la loo
halleluh rail my wax touch there
sedative viking wave of ice
gibberish dies in the slow angels
melody of patterns granular no of
light bent many bones movement
slow over boreal struggle kill kill
first choir of angels against to clad
hypothermic against well shifted
bright beige revolution of tibia no
eye this mute sway noise of every
thing for less builds fog of part rail
of deaths mechanical ring tip sad
bell into boreal pale boreal mourns
eyelids fissure of skeleton texture
by swirling open dreams of stumble
southbound what chunks cause sword
to heat viscous crocodiles every ice
myth has me blank spines death into
fear and drips touch then traps
bleach or forest petrified ritual
of bone to build down noon
wind of dreams petrified by
death stumble of brittle film
jangles walk refugees viscous
overhead indiscriminate sepulchre
of particle to granular kinds bleach
hypothermic hypothermic into
snowglobe chiaroscuro sheen
opening movement to eye fear
my noon eaten against barren holy
particle glistening composition
eat southbound to drift crescendo
from wind anatomy over dream fog
fogs brine rail before what dish

arrows neck of winter blind as
canticles sun dips after chunking
brush catacombs barren to brush
the day part angle let symphony

clean footfall movement lack of
southbound scream sleet of fairy
tale viewed ghost flat as bring upon
stiff listless nothing everything anatomy

granular matter messes plain catacomb
canticles struggle of waving fear by
there canticle smear of plain brittle
measure to brace overhead jelly la

loose gate slide sheen haloing
boreal hither to miss wanting ghosts
kill reaching winter by footbridge
squall of music above apparition

told to the river of stiff legend
cottoning blank sea after highway
after brushviewed down flight
bold wing eyes all there left to
sway in the catacombs pattern
10. A Brittle Requiem

build your squall pattern down
at ruin or depth bright a kill into
rime at brush pale spray are kill eye
all let ice spectrum lace before anti

poetic is near fairytale dirge you
arrow winding this lint their place
braced silent as catgut accumulated
wave boreal gibberish world days

a minus horizon immovable and flat
vivisection lime chunk time to havoc
pattern flat evening mythology
evening leaves lily boreal as feathers

remember to glisten my anatomy lily
with note stories well throated blind
roll of falcons throat into music
mattering the smear of locked mask

beige no every drip kills fog matte
from all legend well all rail noise
requires breaks and measures of arms
boreal and barren days to dirge de
cember more the clean part they
angle for pale fences arm
granular ways arm havoc
bleached spines eyelids of waves

landsiding to ruin silent evenings
contra eyes its story jellied story
than forest ritual catacombing
decembers tibia of wax the
mass of traffic snows numb
as catgut blind i world after
weathered black gate lilies
building neck after glistening

more at what wants cloud
sliding anemone anemoning
at moons apparition night
is sad as catgut angels code

for berry to break falcon
seas footfall where crystal
melody canticles footfall
under reaches symphony to

bucket halleluh viscous and
wax days weather for melting
distant plains decide day drips
southbound bracing sheets of

rings glacial legend graveside
clad open or dish ringing squall
feathering limestone chunked
fever of eyelids having milk

spun air bedsheet yourself
blank sepulchre sheets halleluh
through anemone dirge of the
gated air after wave of lumina

brushes story fairytale night
composed of metal and slow
landslides of above will where
left silhouette saddening light

evacuated starch in the chalk
of sheets bend ghosts forested
light close remember to kill
decisions that cause footbridges
their falcon heat mouthing burn
my catgut nothings la loo near
wings first anemone fumbles
melody viscous sea footfall

waxes snowglobe for what sad
death revolution to brush there
break into ritual scream wax
nothing border bowl weather

yourself into crescendo matte
minus jelly tip eternal way of
sharp screened thick nucleus
moment longing sheen as

refugee walk winter havocs
eternal crystal black sheen
of dirge leaving winter your
thorn knight delicate

anatomy plain bone lily
struggle after skin plain antipoetic
but highway has screen killed
moment killed visible slide

missaccumulated matter hither
masked gown mechanically trapped
as told precise want to mess king of
black fall visible wave and fumble

of death overhead high into moon
before minus song cloud after place
indent is lost movement more
out of winding once my winter is

southbound then overmechanical
gated ring of first well as revolution
myth to search wings brittle tibia
fall on above lose melody of silhouette
mask silence sway left melt ghost bed
sheets are feathered indentations
distant from you their movement
picketed there how breaking to

neck squalls quarter in the evening
la loo world all over border minus
berrying burn through immovable
song a brittle requiem measured

world into boreal night stiff as
armour absent as ghosts weathered
milk falconed by whiteouts ghosted
by lumina clad as bucket fairytales

than leave well built sea than
falcon glistening la loo quarter
ice swan at the gate closed
highway story to fall footbridge
11. Canticle Melody Crystals

footbridge falls into stories
of highways closed gates
swans ice and quarters la
loo glistening of falcons

then sea building wells and
leaving then fairytales buckets
clad in lumina ghosts whiteouts
from falcons milk weathering

ghosts and absent armour stiff
as night borealed worlds measuring
requiems by brittle songs immovable
through burning berries minus

borders over all worlds la loo
evening quarters squalls by
neck to break
picketed movements they

distances indentations
feathered are bedsheets
ghosts melt to leave swaying
silent as masks in the silhouette

of melodies lost above fall over	
tibia brittle wings searching for
myth and revolution as well first
ringing gates mechanical and over

then southbound being winter
my once winding out more
movement lost indent of place
after cloud sings minus before
moon into high overhead death of fumble waves visible fall into black of kin mess to want precise tells mechanical gown masking

hither into matter accumulated and missing slide of the visible kill moment by killing screen has highwayed but antipoetic plain

skin after struggle of lily over bone plain anatomies delicate as knights thorns your winter leaves dirges sheen black crystal

eternally havocing winter walks of refugees sheen longing for moments nucleus as a thick screen sharpening ways eternal

tip of jelly minus matte cres cendos you weather bowls of borders by nothing waxed screams as a ritual to break there brush

revolution of death of sad what for snowglobe waxing footfall sea of viscous melody fumble anemones first wing near la loo

nothing but catgut my burned mouth heats falcons footbridge to cause decisions to kill memory close as light forests of ghosts bent

like sheets in the chalk starch excavation of light saddening silhouettes leaving where will above landslide for slow metal
compositions of nights fairytale stories brushing lumina waves after air to gate a dirge anemone in through halleluh sheets of sep
ulchre blank yourself bedsheets the air spun milk have eyelids fever chunked limestone feather of squall ringing dish or open clad graveside
legend for the glacial ring sheeting brace of southbound drip as day decides plain distant melt for weather daily wax viscous halleluh bucket of symphony to reach under footfall canticle melody crystals where footfall of sea falcons break into berry code of angels catgut sad
night apparition of the moon at anemone anemone slide clouding want what at more glistening after neck building lily at the gate of black weather after world i blind catgut numb in the snow of traffic mass the wax tibia december catacomb of forests stories of jelly stories its eye contra evening silence ruined by landslide of waves eyelids spine of bleach havoc armed way of granular arm to fence pale for angles they part clean more december dirges daying barren into boreal are arms measured by breaking require noise railing well legends from matte fog to kill the
drip of every no sleet beige mask
locks the smear of matter with music
at the throat of a falcon well storied
note with lily anatomy my glistening

remember feathered boreal lily left
evening of myth evening flattened
pattern of havoc time chunked by
limes vivisection of flat immovable

horizon minus a day world gibberish
of boreal wave accumulated catgut
silent to brace placing their lint on
this winding arrow you dirge fairy
tale near antipoetic before lacing
the spectrum of ice let all eyes kill
and spray pale brush at rime into
killing a bright depth or ruining
down patterns of squall your
building pattern
12. Snowglobe Jelly

catacomb sways left there
all eyes wing boldly flying
down views brush after highway
after sea blanks cotton legends

stiff into rivers told by apparitions
above music squalling footbridges
winter reach to kill ghosts want
miss hither boreal halos sheen

sliding gate to pose la loo jelly
overhead bracing measure into
brittle plains smear of canticle
there fear waves struggle canticle

catacomb plain mess to matter
granular anatomy everything is
nothing listless and stiff upon
brine flat ghost viewed as fairytale

sleet screaming southbound lack of
movement footfall clean and sym
phonies let angles part the day
with a brush barren catacomb

brushing chunk after dip for the
sun of canticles blinding winters
neck with an arrow of dishes
what before rail brines fog fog

dream of anatomy wind from
crescendo drifts southbound eat
en compose glistening particles
of holy and barren on against eating
noon my fear eyes movement
open sheening chiaroscuro snow
globe into hypothermic hypothermic
bleach king of the granular particle sep
ulchre and indiscriminate overhead
viscous refuge walks a jangle of film
brittling stumble to death to petrify
dream winds at noon down buildings
bone ritual to petrify forest or bleach
traps then touch drip fear and into
death spinning blank my myth of ice
every crocodile viscous heat swords
cause into chunks what southbound
stumble dreams open swirl texture skel
ton by fissure of eyelids mourns boreal
pale boreal bell sad in the tip of rings
mechanical death to rail part fog
and build less for everything noise
sways mute this eye no tibia drip
revolution beige and bright in the shift
well against hypothermic clad against
angels choir first kil kill struggle boreal
slow movement of bone many bent light
no granular pattern of melody angels
slow to die gibberish of ice waves viking
sedative there touch wax my rail halluh
la loo halo sedative everything you listless
falcon eaten weather lumina will collapse
into jangles ghosting winter knights bent star
pulse to collapse the southbound indent composition
pale fever drift snowglobe jelly by time from trapped
picketed measure to indent at snowglobe sea time
ritual of angels delicate melting death stumbling
over viscous everything note particle part my
catgut sad slosh spins day into rime feather
to dream skeleton viewed by landslide flight of
falcon hypothermic as well of night borders
requiem of time moaning to wave collapse
melody but winterlight tale bedsheets snow lint
moments of heat on the highway gated smears
a footbridge how break of finger braces lints
blackfeather then beige noise there lock requiem
composition into wells of silence absent death
fevers left dish song sepulchred sparkling silent
to fall crocodile travelling every near requiem
collapse into open let in broken stories absence
down sheet me no throat angels pattern to
catacomb southbound chalk over throat
indentation before first throat dream dream
kills sad weather bucket drips bucket bucket
me how petrified into music la loo to tell clean
leach of rime holy and precise winter my rail
clean through hither revolution tears lumina
gibberish empty and picketed berry holy under
diorama stiff is anatomy contra dirge havoc
blurred to build a highway of bones walking
immovable by pattern of squall i gown starched
holy wing of time into havocs silhouette contra
miss metal to leave ice mechanical on the
horizon clad his spectrum of gate mass knight
to remember fairytale throat in the sea as tip
their sleet an anemone miss lumina pattern
your being left to depth wants southbound

eyelids measure squallsed over matte
there your particle more once has viewed well

Afterword

In 1962 Jackson Mac Low created a series of poems called the Light Poems. He started with an alphabetized table of 208 words for light cross-referenced with the letters from his name and the name of his wife at the time, Iris Lezak. He also included the initials from playing cards, assigned numbers to the suits and shuffled the deck in order to determine the order of the words from the chart he would use to create his poems.

Later, he divided these styles into further categories, one being what he referred to as deterministic, part of his realizing that there’s always some intention or determinism in creation. For this he used a source text and a seed text and basically translated from the source. While he realized that neither method could really eliminate the individual ego, he still wanted to create that illusion.

His methods inspired me to create Sessions From The Dream House Aria and one poem in particular from the light poems inspired the title and was the chief inspiration for the poem I wanted to create: 59th Light Poem : for Lamonte Young and Marian Zazeela—6 November 1982. That poem makes reference to two artists who collaborated on a sound and light composition called the Dream House, a term which appears in the album title and which defines an artistic work that "would be played continuously and ultimately exist as a living organism with a life and tradition of its own."
An aria, aside from being a type of opera, is also a repeated pattern that can stand alone. This seems to go well with the idea of the poem I wanted to create, the Dream House composition and structure created by Young and Zazeela and the idea of the poem having its own voice, a pattern that can stand alone.

I began with a series of images that flowed through my mind about white and winter. I wrote *Session 1: Starched Afternoons and Sedative Evenings*. This session included a total of 548 words, 339 of which are unique; the 548 words are divided into 229 function words and 319 content words. A function word is a word with little lexical meaning or a primarily grammatical function. A content word is a word with a lexical meaning. Sometimes this is difficult and provocative to categorize, especially in the case of an invented word, such as *la loo* which I’ve used as a kind of sound marker in this poem. Or *emberwhite* and *luminadipped* which get counted as one word each. As Jack Spicer has said in his reference to the French poet René Char:

“There’s plenty of fudging that’s allowed in this kind of thing. But the old thing that René Char said, he said that the poet should have a sign on his wall saying, ‘CHEAT AT THIS GAME.’”

I like the idea of setting up constraints within a long poem and then figuring out what’s necessary to keep to the rules, to bend the rules and to break the rules. Sometimes it is by rebellion that inspiration occurs.

For the most part though, I tried to stay within my constraint of using the first session as a source text for the rest of the sessions of this poem, which were seed texts. I basically plundered the next session from session one (with a bit of cheating) and then rearranged by random order, cutting up the words and picking them out of a hat and putting them into a table of ten columns and one hundred rows, then entering the words in forwards horizontal, backwards horizontal, downwards vertical column by column, and upwards vertical order to create the remaining sessions.
Something I’m exploring through the poem’s repetition and unusual juxtapositions is to create a dream effect something that causes a hypnotic and mesmerizing state, which leads to images lie beneath the surface. I was inspired by the concept of the deep image, a term coined by the American post modernist, Jerome Rothenberg, who was influenced by surrealist poetry, particularly the poetry of Lorca, based on the Duende, a word that means ghosts and magic but can also be extrapolated to mean a deep knowledge as Rothenberg wrote to Robert Creely:

“So there are really two things here, conceivable as two realities: 1) the empirical world of the naïve realists, etc (what Buber and the hasidim call shell’ or ‘husk’), and 2) the hidden (floating) world, yet to be discovered or brought into being: the “kernel” or “sparks.” The first world both hides and leads into the second, so as Buber says: “one cannot reach the kernel of the fruit except through the shell”: i.e., the phenomenal world is to be read by us; the perceived image is the key to the buried image: and the deep image is at once husk and kernel, perception and vision, and the poem is the movement between them.”

Lorca, in an essay from 1933, defines the duende as follows:

“The dark and quivering duende that I am talking about is a descendant of the merry daemon of Socrates, all marble and salt, who angrily scratched his master on the day he drank hemlock; a descendant also of Descartes’ melancholy daemon, small as a green almond, who, tired of lines and circles, went out along the canals to hear the drunken sailors sing.

In this poem the dream figures are knights, vikings, angels, ghosts and skeletons, all characters that appear in stories, the kinds of stories that one tells on long winter nights. Stories get told and retold and something changes in the retelling. This story is told over and over again and as the words shift it distorts into other strange and unfamiliar irrational tales. In this poem there are stories, legends, tales, fairytales gibberish and dreams. All different ways to tell a story; all new and different methods to bring about the duende.

“The appearance of the duende always presupposes a radical change of all forms based on all structures. It gives a sensation of freshness wholly unknown, having the quality of a newly created rose, of miracle, and produces in the end an almost religious enthusiasm.”
There are highways, gates and footbridges as ways of moving between places, between states of being. There are buckets, swords, snowglobes, falcons, lilies, berries. There are fingers, wings, bones, eyes, skin, cuticles and tibia. Textures are jellied, smeared and blurred. And then there is winter, snow, ice, cold, heat. All of these things unintentional on my part except that I wanted to dream about white and winter and this is what came to me.

This poem had its beginnings in the notion of chance operations to do as John Cage has suggested “to find a way of writing which though coming from ideas is not about them, or is not about ideas but produces them.”

Connectives and transitional words were chosen to create an order and readability of the poem. To turn it into a type of story or narrative without being a story with a clear surface meaning, but rather a kind of fragmented dream. The order is arbitrarily imposed order. Is it safe to say that right now societal conventions are imposing an odd and arbitrary order leading to chaos and nonsense of a kind? This poem imposes its own order and creates a pattern that feels just as random as the so-called order created in society. There is violence here and dreams and impossible collaborations and relationships between words, between people, between words.

What I’d like is for readers to construct their own dreams and images from these odd and repetitive juxtapositions.

In his essay “Semblance” from Contents Dream: Essays 1975-1984, 1986” Charles Bernstein tells us that the order of words creates possibilities. This is one of the things I wanted to explore in this poem, using the same words but reordering them to see how the images and the possibilities change.

“To help us seek the duende there is neither map nor discipline. All one knows is that it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, that it rejects all the sweet geometry one has learned, that it breaks with all styles, that it compels Goya, master of greys, silvers and of those pinks in the best English paintings to paint with his knees and with his fists horrible bitumen
blacks; or that it leaves Mossen Cinto Verdaguer naked in the cold air of the Pyrenees; or that it takes Jorge Manrique to wait for death in the wilderness of Ocana; or that it dresses the delicate body of Rimbaud in an acrobat’s green suit; or that it puts the eyes of a dead fish on Count Lautreamont in the early morning Boulevard.”

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2 The Theater of Eternal Music, featuring La Monte Young and Marian Zazaala Dream House, 78’ 17” sleeve notes, Shandar 83.510
6 Ibid. p. 95

Amanda Earl’s poems appear most recently in Ottawater 7.0, Peter F. Yacht Club, #15, the anthologies Pith & Wry (Your Scrivener Press) and Rogue Stimulus (Mansfield Press). Amanda is the managing editor of Bywords.ca and the Bywords Quarterly Journal, the curator of Experiment-O.com, an annual PDF magazine that celebrates the art of risk, and the angel of AngelHousePress. Sessions from the Dream House Aria was shortlisted for the Robert Kroetsch Innovative Poetry Award in 2009. For more about her shenanigans and hijinx, please visit http://www.amandaearl.com

Photo by Charles Earl: http://www.charlesearl.com
A Second Time Around: a conversation between rob mclennan and Stephanie Bolster

This interview was conducted over email from December 2008 to July 2010

This interview, in part, is a continuation of an earlier interview, “rob mclennan & Stephanie Bolster in conversation: between two bowls of milk, or downstream from the richard brautigan ahhhhhhhhhhhh” conducted from April 30, 2000 to June 15, 2001 and published online in the first issue of Poetics.ca. Born in Ottawa, Canada’s glorious capital city, rob mclennan currently lives in Ottawa. The author of more than twenty trade books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, his most recent titles are the poetry collections Glengarry (2011), wild horses (2010) and kate street (2010) and a second novel, missing persons (2009). An editor and publisher, he runs above/ground press, Chaudiere Books (with Jennifer Mulligan), The Garneau Review (ottwater.com/garneau), seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics (ottawater.com/seventeenseconds) and the Ottawa poetry pdf annual ottawater (ottawater.com). He spent the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and expects to spend much of the next year in Toronto. He regularly posts reviews, essays, interviews and other notices at robmclennan.blogspot.com. Stephanie Bolster grew up in Burnaby, BC and has lived in Québec, Ottawa, and (since 2000) Montréal. She has published three collections of poetry, including White Stone: The Alice Poems (1998), which won the Governor General’s Award and the Gerald Lampert Award in 1998 and appeared in French translation in 2007. Her fourth book, A Page from The Wonders of Life on Earth, will appear with Brick in fall 2011. Bolster is the editor of The Ishtar Gate: Last and Selected Poems (2004) by the late Ottawa poet Diana Brebner and The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2008, and co-editor of Penned: Zoo Poems (2009). She teaches creative writing at Concordia University.

rob mclennan: After a decade since our previous cross-interview, how does one begin? It becomes very easy to ask if you are anywhere you expected to be now, when we last wrote like this, but a better question might be, how do you think your relationship to writing in general, and poetry specifically (or even “the poem”) has shifted over the past ten years?

Stephanie Bolster: Following on your resistance to asking the easy question, I’ve so far resisted the impulse to re-read our previous interview, as I’d like to respond as openly and honestly as possible, without the temptation to make myself appear so much wiser than I was a decade ago. When I think of how my relationship to writing has changed in the past decade, the most obvious confession (which should not be a source of shame, though at the moment is a source of frustration) is that I spend more time critiquing students’ work than I do writing my own. A decade ago, I was working at the National Gallery as a contract writer/editor, teaching workshops one evening a week, and spending a few weeks a year doing poetry sessions in schools. When I wasn’t doing any of those things, I was writing and attending to the business of being a writer.

Since being hired at Concordia in 2000, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about writing, though not necessarily – between September and April, in any case – about my own. I’ve learned an enormous amount from my students, some of whom have been writers of remarkable originality, talent, and confidence. A number of them, especially the graduate students, have gone on to publish first books that have gained attention; others are publishing in journals; others are moving in other directions, to performance, the visual arts, law school. I feel part of a web of writing and writers in a far greater and more selfless way than I did a decade ago, when I was more interested (another confession) in "career."

17 seconds ( : a journal of poetry and poetics)
I've had to spend a lot of time thinking about what makes a poem, what makes a good poem. This is especially true when teaching intro-level classes, in which some of the students have never written poetry before and have read very little. Editing The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2008 anthology has clarified (for the moment) my responses to these issues. I won't reiterate my introduction to that book here, but suffice it to say that I'm interested – as I always was, I think, though more consciously so now – in poetry that balances intellect and emotion, in poems that possess a sense of mystery, in poems that deepen upon rereading. I'm also interested – and this is new, I think – in poems that push boundaries, that do (to resort to that overused Pound dictum) "make it new." I used to be skeptical of such remarks, figuring that a well-made poem was enough. And it was, then, for me. But the more poems I read, the more startling each has to be to conjure up the kind of attentiveness that makes me think, "Yes, this is poetry!" I used to be more interested in impeccability. Lately I've been thinking about a remark that a former grad student, Kate Hall (whose first book is due out with Coach House, this year I believe) made a number of years ago, in which she expressed a preference for poems that were like a handmade sweater rather than like blown glass. I used to be a blown glass poet. I still marvel at poems like Mark Doty's "Favrile," the opening poem in Sweet Machine, which attends with great delicacy to the process of glass-blowing and to the surfaces that result. The poem becomes the thing that it describes. I'm still a sucker for beauty. But lately I'm more interested in the broken edges, in the loose weave, in the made thing that reveals itself as such. And yet I revise as much as ever, just with different goals. I suppose I'm less interested in language, more interested in syntax.

All of which is to say that my sense of what's possible in poetry has broadened. Or perhaps that's not true. Perhaps it's just that my interest in what is possible in poetry has broadened. My first university poetry class (a literature class, not a workshop) was taught by Jenny Penberthy at SFU; she's now the editor of The Capilano Review, a development that excites me and feels, given what she was doing then, absolutely right. She introduced us to poems by Lorine Niedecker; she read Hopkins' "The Windhover" aloud and transfixed me; she invited George Bowering and Gerry Gilbert to visit our class. I still recall a quote from the latter – "Is that a slug or a map of California?" Hilarious, I thought, and not at all what I had presumed poetry to be about. At some point between then and, say, a decade ago, my vision of poetry narrowed again. I found a comfortable niche – the first-person lyric – and because so many people around me inhabited the same niche, it started to feel like the world. When I started to teach at Concordia, I was baffled by the poems that some of my students were writing. I don't recall being baffled by many of the poems that my peers were writing when I did my M.F.A. at U.B.C. (To speculate on the reasons for this difference would be too great a digression, though perhaps we'll get there eventually.) The quality of the work being written in both programs was equally good, I'd say; it was just different in nature.

Now, I'm at a point at which I'm not particularly interested in genre. I'm interested in good writing. I'm not sure whether my next writing project will be poetry or prose or – more likely – a hybrid. Perhaps I'm being too cynical, but I think of genres as of greater interest to publishers, publicists, booksellers, than to writers.

I'll again resist the first impulse, which is to ask you just what you asked me; instead, you can take off from where I left off. You've published a towering stack of books since our last interview (you can remind me how many!), and not all have been poetry. How do you approach genre these days? Do you think primarily about the needs of the project at hand, or do concerns of audience ever enter into your decisions? That is, do you find that you can reach more people with fiction or non-fiction?

rm: That's a lot to take in. First off, if I was interested in reaching the largest range of that imaginary audience, I'd be composing video games, or even writing opinion pieces in The Globe and Mail and not, at least by the end of 2009, be the author of sixteen published collections of poetry. Originally I think I saw genre as being divided, like food on a plate that wasn't allowed to touch. It didn't occur to me, I don't
think, to alter or revisit this consideration until I started interacting with the work of Montreal writers in the mid to late 1990s such as Anne Stone, Catherine Kidd and Corey Frost who were actively blurring the lines between poetry, prose and performance. I was fascinated by such, and have always had an interest in more lyric prose (Ondaatje, Smart, Marlatt, Watson, etcetera), so my interest in the blurring of these genres was an almost obvious leap.

When I was in my late teens and into my early twenties, I remember wanting to do everything: publish a novel, have an art show, an album of original music and a poetry collection. When Kate was born at the beginning of 1991, I realized I couldn’t do everything all at once, and decided to focus on one genre at a time, starting with poetry. Once I got a handle on that, I told myself, I would move out into other forms. As far as reaching more people, I was certainly thrilled when Bev Daurio at The Mercury Press published my first little novel, thrilled when people responded favourably to it, but it hadn’t even occurred to me that it would get any more attention than the poetry books. I suppose I’m just used to throwing books of a cliff when it comes to larger sales or critical attention, so a review at all, let alone a positive one in *The Globe and Mail*, came as a bit of a shock, as did the July 2008 royalty statement that paid a month’s rent. I usually owe a few hundred dollars to publishers for books I’ve purchased, re-sold and lived off, so I haven’t seen too many large cheques when it comes to royalties, despite many of my books doing healthy enough sales.

I move where my interest takes me. I have a novel I’ve been seven years working to finish [since published as *missing persons*], not to mention three others started and a further few abandoned over the past decade or more. I’ve had my little prose memoir writing from old family Polaroids from the 1970s, *house: a (tiny) memoir*, that I started in early 2008 while in Alberta. What I’ve been finding far more compelling over the past year has been creative non-fiction, finally giving name to something I’d been floundering over and through for more than half a decade. Around 2000 or so, I started a book on Glengarry County meant as half essay/half memoir but, after fifty pages, set the project aside for a while. The biggest hurdle, I realized, was needing to find the project’s proper form, which I haven’t yet managed. The research, finding poems written on the area and/or by area writers, including Gary Geddes, Don McKay, George Bowering, Roy Kiyooka, Henry Beissel, Margaret Christakos, Jan Zwicky, Jesse Patrick Ferguson, Clare Latremouille, David McFadden and Nicholas Lea, was the easy part. I have a few other larger projects to finish before I can properly revisit it.

During the summer of 2007, before I headed west for my Edmonton year, I immersed myself in the work of Myrna Kostash, to ostensibly get a sense of Alberta before I got there, and into my first few western weeks reading and rereading various non-fiction works by Robert Kroetsch, Stan Dragland, Elizabeth Hay, Guy Maddin, Brian Fawcett, Sarah de Leeuw and Ted Bishop to prepare myself to attempt my own version of the same. Discovering the work of Myrna Kostash and being able to spend time with her was easily one of the high points of my Edmonton year, and she taught me a great deal about what it was I was already accidentally floundering around.

My reviews have turned into essays and are turning into book-length explorations, as one thing naturally flowing and following another. I’m currently working to finish the creative non-fiction book of my Edmonton year, *McLennan, Alberta*, and, once I start my year in Toronto, I’m hoping to work a variant on the same kind of exploration before I head back to that Glengarry County project, tearing it all to pieces and finally putting it all back together. Being that the Glengarry County project is far more personal a project than any of these others, I obviously want to make sure the form presents itself properly before I push ahead, again, into any serious work on it. Who knows, there might even be an Ottawa book in there as well, but that could be years down the road.
Genre is a funny thing. I know there was a point when Michael Turner said he submitted “books” to his publishers, and they put the genre on the back cover, for bookstores. When it originally came out with Arsenal Pulp, Turner’s *Hard Core Logo* was published as “poetry,” and when it was reprinted after the movie version appeared, it was published as “fiction.” What’s the difference, apart from marketing? At a party on Boxing Day, a clinical psychologist, discovering that I wrote books, asked me what I would have written that he might have read. I said, “nothing.” First off, I would hope that if he had read anything I’d done, he certainly would have remembered it, whether he enjoyed it or not being an entirely separate matter. And did he seem the sort of man with a collection of contemporary poetry collections large enough that mine would have fallen there, between the shelves? Perhaps not.

Still, I wish I could write creative non-fiction like Elizabeth Hay’s *The Only Snow in Havana* or Stan Dragland’s *Apocrypha: Further Journeys*, but I just haven’t managed it, that blur between essay and memoir and fiction. How do they do it so seamlessly?

When I think in terms of any kind of “career,” it’s less a matter of political positioning (I would hope to god I’d be further ahead, in some way, if I did worry about such nonsense) but one of trying to figure out where this body of work is taking me, where the whole of it is going. I’m usually working on a dozen prose and poetry projects at any given time; does my current writing further whatever concerns I’ve been years working my slow way through? Is my current writing stronger and more interesting than what I’ve previously done, adding to and complicating the larger mix, or does it simply repeat? What are the directions I haven’t yet explored, be they considerations of rhythms and the line, further experiments in prose, or particular subject matter I haven’t yet touched? I constantly worry about expanding language and troubling syntax, and actually worry that my collection of literary essays have reached fewer readers than my poetry, or the travel book, *Ottawa: The Unknown City*, which can sometimes be my only title in particular stores around town. But perhaps literary essays, unlike poetry, have a longer reach, and it will take more time to see their effects, and I am certainly interested, say, in continuing in non-fiction ways around both literary essays and local histories.

I find it interesting, what you say about “glass” and the “broken weave.” I have to admit, I’ve found your poetry far more compelling over the past few years, from your third collection, *Pavilion* (Toronto ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2002), on, and it might have been as simple as the shift from, as you say, being a “blown glass poet” to “handmade sweater poet.” But that says far more about me than it says about you. Process, as they say. I have always been more interested in the broken weave, which is why aboveground press was always more like Maggie Helwig’s lowlife publishing or Stuart Ross’ Proper Tales Press in favouring rough edges than, say, Mona Fertig’s mother tongue press or Jason Dewinetz’ greenboathouse books. But I wonder, what do you think accounts for this shift in your concerns? Is it simply natural drift, or was there a point where it turned? I saw some Cole Swensen influence, for example, in *Pavilion* that wasn’t there in earlier works. How has your writing, from the first collection to now, shifted in terms of influence, or goals? How have those earlier audiences responded to some of the directions you’re working in now?

It reminds me slightly of Erin Mouré, who started out as a work poet in Vancouver, the only “language” poet (apart from Phil Hall and Peter Culley) that still has a following (albeit, sometimes, a confused one) of readers from those same “work poet” days. Do you have readers or contemporaries who prefer that older “blown glass”? Do you, even, have those around you who appreciate your current work, fully knowing that if they weren’t there for your “blown glass” period, they might not be bothering with your current work for perceived potential aesthetic conflicts?
SB: I don't know how aware others are of a shift in my work. It may not be as great as it seems to me right now, for it's been a slow, gradual evolution since I began writing, really, and obviously will continue. I did hear, after a reading I did at Tree in Ottawa a couple of weeks ago, one of the organizers (Don Officer, who had reviewed Pavilion for the Tree website) remark that he found my new pieces, of which I read only three I think, more compelling than my past work. And I've known for a while that you were more interested in the more recent poems. But for the most part I haven't had much of a response to the post-Pavilion work. People are aware of the subject – when I was publishing in journals before White Stone came out, people were aware of me as "the Alice poet"; now I'm the zoo poet – but, as you know, there's rarely any response to work published in journals, and when I've given readings over the past few years, people have said little. I don't know why that is, though I can speculate. The poems are not necessarily accessible on first listen, and there is less narrative in them than in, say, the Alice poems. They are also less image-driven, and images are often what stays with an audience after a reading. These poems are more about mood and moves, so what is there to respond to, in the few moments following a reading? Maybe they're not even poems that work well orally or aurally. Maybe they require the page. Maybe they require privacy. It's not that I want a response, but it would be satisfying to know, at least, whether the poems are engaging. It's so difficult to read an audience; to the poet up there reading, deep concentration resembles the elsewhere stare.

But to return to your question, I know that there are some people who will never appreciate anything I write as much as they do White Stone. That was clear to me early on. Many readers are engaged by the subject, and at the time some people even asked me if I was working on any other figures, assuming, or at least hoping, that I would write another biographical series. And at the time I was interested in doing that – there’s a fascinating character named Opal Whiteley, who, as a child in an Oregon logging town, wrote an extraordinary and magical journal; and for a while I nearly succumbed to Elizabeth I – but I didn't have to begin these projects to realize that although the research would be new, many of the concerns would be familiar, and I wanted my poetry to be about more than its subjects. Biographical inspiration aside, I think the Alice poems are accessible to most readers; there's a little narrative, some memorable images, a faint dash of humour, a relatively uniform syntax and form. I would not write that book now, though I'm glad to have written it, even though at times it saddens me to think that for many I've already done my best work. And that (I don't know if I should admit this) each of my books has sold fewer copies than the previous.

Pavilion shares many concerns with Two Bowls but the poems are more open, the syntax more broken. It's interesting that you mention Cole Swenson because I didn't actually discover her work until I heard her read at the AWP conference in Vancouver in 2005. (So, several years post-Pavilion.) It was one of those uncanny experiences in that I wanted to emulate her and simultaneously felt that I'd already written the poems that she was reading. (This happened again when I first read Aurian Haller's work.) On that occasion she read from her Ours project about Andre Le Nôtre's gardens, and I'd been working on many garden poems during the early stages of the zoo project, from around 2002-2004. When I came to her work on the page, there was again that sense that our subjects came from the same sensibility; I hadn't written about Chinese shadow puppets but I could have, and she hasn't (to my knowledge) written about zoos but she could have. We've both spent a lot of time, figuratively and perhaps literally, in glasshouses.

But that's all about subject, and what you're talking about is style. Though I found her style appropriate to her content, at the time I wasn't particularly excited by it. I had written loosely punctuated and unpunctuated poems as an undergraduate; I'd tried exploring space on the page at that time too, though didn't have the gut instinct for it. Taking a class with Daphne Marlatt in the third year of my B.F.A. meant that I had a sense of how to read such work, but Don Coles had convinced me (not overtly, but through
example) that there was no reason why poetry couldn't be written in complete sentences. And, indeed, I still believe that much loose syntax in poetry is a result of the writer not wishing to commit to a statement, or perhaps not having the grammatical skills to write clearly and succinctly. A number of the poems in my as-yet-unpublished fourth book (called, at this point anyway, *A Page from The Wonders of Life on Earth*) use a long, prose line, and are very associative, very gappy, but they're still punctuated, still written as sentences. In the last few weeks, though, I've found myself writing without initial caps, or without periods, and even resorting to indents in a way I haven't done in a very long time. (Actually, I did some of those things in the "Antique Glass" dream poems in *Pavilion*, but only at Don McKay's urging; those poems were more rigid at the outset.)

There's still a lot of blown glass in me, and as I said I'm still vulnerable to the charms of such work. I'm just not particularly interested in writing it. Because I can do it, I suppose. Sure, I could do it better, and if I weren't teaching writing I would probably just keep working at trying to do it better. That would be a worthy aim. But these days I'm feeling sick of the well-made poem. Part of this stems from doing all that reading for *Best Canadian*, and from doing that reading from a selective perspective. Well-made poems are being written, they will always be written, but when I try to write them now they feel like exercises. (This may because I don't have a single subject for the new work I'm doing, so it's not a matter of doing research, waiting for the spark to catch, then writing the poem. With nothing to start from, I'm increasingly drawn to form as a means of finding a subject.) Teaching has made me aware, simultaneously, that there are nineteen-year-olds writing impeccable lyrics worthy of *Malahat* publication (it's humbling, to see how good some of these young writers are), and that there are nineteen-year-olds writing work that is utterly their own, that does not fall into any of the established or even marginal aesthetics. It's impossible to become unjaded (or perhaps not impossible, but difficult, particularly as my job is my job, ongoingly); I do not have the freshness that those students have, nor the same intense drive, but if I'm not feeling excited about making poems then why do it? I want there to be something handmade in what I'm doing; I want the poems to be made as opposed to crafted. I could spend hours trying to describe the sheen on a *millefeuille* – I have and I will do so again, no doubt – but I'd like my poems to be . . . I don't know . . . perhaps just a bowl of fruit. This strawberry is a strawberry because it has to be one; I have not made a coulis from it, have not topped it with a dollop of cream. And over here we have a raspberry, the same colour but look, taste, it's another thing entirely.

You were asking not so much about where I'm going as about how I got here, and to that I can only say that the shift was subtle and circuitous. There was no particular moment when anything shook, none of the sudden evolutionary leaps that scientists know arise. The two long poems in *Pavilion* forced me to consider sequence and omission in a greater, or perhaps deeper, way than past projects had, as none of the sections of those poems, though haiku-like, were complete in and of themselves; they were separate yet interdependent. Playing with putting them together may have renewed my appreciation for space; certainly the recurring "Life of the Mind" poems in the new manuscript could be seen as briefer versions of those long poems, in that they're composed of discrete yet associated lines. Swenson has been something of an influence, and Robert Hass, my old standby, continues to show me what can be done with form. He's never overtly innovative yet his use of form is very wise, judicious. The aforementioned student, Kate Hall has been an influence. Actually, there were several really striking young women poets in the program at that time: Katia Grubisic, Sachiko Murakami, Johanna Skibsrud, others too whose names probably aren't familiar to you, and their energies and distinctive approaches to line and form and syntax taught me a lot. Friends, too, like Barbara Nickel, Christopher Patton, Susan Gillis, with whom much of the influence happens off the page, through the talk around the poems. Jorie Graham, who impresses me in her assertively non-gradual evolution, in the challenges she poses to herself with each book.

17 seconds ( : a journal of poetry and poetics)
One last word on your comment about perceived potential aesthetic conflicts. When I was trying to figure out where to send my new manuscript, Barbara Nickel, who as you know has been one of my closest friends and readers since we began the M.F.A. together in 1992, said, "What about Coach House?" It was an interesting moment because a decade ago I wasn't even interested in what Coach House was publishing; I was aware of the press of course, admired it, found it essential, but "not my thing." I've moved out of my literary adolescence at last to see that it's very limiting to have a "thing." And I'm excited by a lot of what Coach House publishes – Jeramy Dodds' book, for example. But could I see my book there? As much as I'd like to, I don't think I've gone far enough yet. Whether by reputation or nature, I think I'm still working within the first person lyric to a degree that would probably preclude Coach House's interest in me. Maybe I'll have the opportunity to learn otherwise, or maybe we'll just see where I am in five, ten years. But the very fact that Barbara (not a Coach House poet herself, of course) would consider it suggested that she saw a different aesthetic emerging.

A lot of what I've been on about here, in terms of the evolution of my work, dwelt upon teaching, and I know that you spent much of the past year as writer-in-residence at U of A in Edmonton. So – I'll try to keep the question simple this time – what do you make of teaching, and of yourself as a teacher? What has the practice given you and what has it taken?

**rm:** Well, Jeramy Dodd's Coach House, with current poetry editor Kevin Connolly, is very different than the Coach House of five or ten years ago, with previous editors Jay MillAr, Darren Wershler-Henry and Victor Coleman. Still.

I wasn't teaching at the University of Alberta, but engaged instead in a series of informal conversations with a whole group of individuals – students, peers, friends and writers – including Trisia Eddy, Lainna Lane El Jabi, Shawna Lemay, Jeff Carpenter, Thomas Wharton, Michael Luski, Diane Cameron, Alice Major, Myrna Kostash and Christine Stewart. There were a number of profs, at U of Alberta and Grant MacEwan both, who wanted me to come in to talk to their classes, but only Christine Wiesenthal and Janice Williamson, of all those who asked, actually got around to bringing me in. I even did three book clubs, which was far more fun than I could have imagined.

Still. Can writing even be taught? John Newlove didn't think so. By the time I hit west, I'd been running poetry workshops at Collected Works Bookshop for about half a decade, and have always found myself far more comfortable as “facilitator” than “teacher.” Do I really want to be an authority? Can you teach someone to write a poem? I'm not sure. I've always favoured the idea of giving those in front of me more tools to simply be able to do what they need to themselves. I like the idea of the large conversation. If you have only a hammer and I introduce you to the saw, you can build a far more interesting house. It's all about tools; and knowing, too, that we don't all want to live in the same sort of building.

I like to ask questions about why they make certain choices in their poems, in a line, in a word choice, in a line break. Not as a challenge, or a fault, but to see if they themselves know why they made those choices. It's my job to challenge, right? Even if it just felt right. It's important to think about why. Asking questions can make one a better writer. Conversation can make one a better writer. Reading widely and obsessively can make one a better writer. But so much of these workshops have me wondering why these people couldn't just sit in a library for a decade and read like I did; why don't they know they can just do it themselves? Why don't they know they don't need me at all?

This is how I've approached such, so it didn't feel too different at the University of Alberta having conversation than, say, sitting with Stephen Brockwell or Amanda Earl in Ottawa and talking about what
we’d been reading lately, or a consideration on the line. Except of course I was getting paid, and somehow
had an authority of some sort, which felt odd. Can writing be taught? Just before I arrived west, I’d
convinc ed a number of publishers to donate copies to my cause, so when kids came in asking about what
they should do with their stories or poems (which was most of what came to me as questions), I’d load
them down with Bywords Quarterly Journal, sub-Terrain, The Capilano Review, Matrix magazine, Geist, The Peter F.
Yacht Club or titles from Brick Books to take home. I brought copies of an anthology I’d edited for Black
Moss Press a few years earlier to hand out, and one sixteen year old even enjoyed the Andy Weaver poems
so much that he came back, wondering just what Weaver had otherwise published; I informed the kid
about Weaver’s first trade collection, later able to inform him about the forthcoming second, mere days
after it had been accepted. I even got the two of them talking, briefly, over email. Isn’t that what the whole
enterprise is supposed to be about? It’s all just a conversation, really. I’ve just been engaging with it a bit
longer and a bit wider than many of the people around me, which gives me that real or imagined authority,
and makes it possible for me to do writer-in-residence gigs (I would like to do more, certainly).

The best part of that conversation in Alberta included Myrna Kostash, as I went through her books and
was able to engage with both her and her work, moving into that foreign realm of creative non-fiction. It’s
one I’m completely unaware of, but so slowly learning. I would like to learn more.

I’m intrigued by what you talk about, wrapping collections around subjects or themes. I’ve wrapped so
much writing around geography that I’ve been trying, there and here, to move beyond the boundaries of
that into something further. Perhaps a book that organically grows out of a structure, or stylistic concerns?
I’ve done variants in the past, working “gifts” with specific rhythms and sounds in mind that I wanted to
play with, or “Poems for Lainna” working tight, lyric single-page love poems that included the whole
world, or the longer line attempts in the current “wooden hearts” manuscript.

For me, form and subject are almost interchangeable, once the project begins. The blur. When I am about
to start into a new project, I think to myself that I would like to write about “_____”; I would like to see
what is possible with “x” or “y” (whether longer/shorter lines, longer stanzas, particular rhythms,
conflated/compacted lines, etcetera), and then the rest of the manuscript is a trial-and-error negotiation
with just where all of that might end up. Guidelines, not rules; the book might end up entirely in a different
direction. Whatever I’m reading at the time also can have heavy influence, including Sarah Manguso on
most of what “Poems for Lainna” was working to accomplish. But still. Sometimes consequence looks
nothing at all like intent. I’m okay with that.

When they are successful, poetry workshops refuel me, and reenergize, the way reading tours once did for
me, years back. I do fewer of these now, it seems. I like staying home and doing more work, travelling less.
I’ve done the Toronto-Vancouver train some dozen times, I think, deliberately over-touring in my 20s and
30s so I wouldn’t have to push so hard later on. Foundational work.

Thinking about what might have been a book on Elizabeth I; some poets do fall into that trap, writing
more and more about different subjects (whether biographical or historical), but somehow exactly the same
as they (or others) had previously done, making the writing less and less interesting. I think each successive
book should be a movement further out into the world; there can be no repeats. Having said that, one can
still cover the same ground in a new way; by returning with new eyes, there’s no way it could be seen the
same. Even reading a novel as a seventeen-year-old and again at thirty-nine can make a text new.

You mention Don Coles. I know we’ve discussed him before, and that you care for his work. I’ve never
understood the appeal. If we’re to talk of craft and full sentences, give me Newlove, any day. I know
jwcurry has asked poets at the writers festival about what it is they do, poems that appear to be prose broken into arbitrary line breaks, “so you call that a poem?” Of course, the way he asks made it sound like a threat, a challenge, and most refused to answer. Apparently Don Domanski (I missed that session, being still in Alberta) made no friends through his answer, and A.F. Moritz spoke at length in such a way that made many of us presume he’d completely misunderstood the question.

I like what Cole Swensen has done with full sentences, or even Robert Kroetsch. I like the sentences of Juliana Spahr, Lisa Robertson, Kathleen Fraser, Pattie McCarthy and Lisa Jarnot and Sarah Manguso. I’ve been intrigued lately by what the long line and the sentence are capable of in a poem, and have been playing with such over the past year or three. Exploring. I don’t want to fall into expected territory, falling back on what I’ve already done with the breath/line break. Just how far can a single line go?

Someone told me that at your recent TREE Reading in early May (I was on an airplane at the time, returning west), you spoke of writing poems from/around lines by other writers, later removing those lines as your own piece emerges. Where did this idea come from? I know John Newlove wrote his “Ride Off Any Horizon” with the chorus line repeating, to keep his compositional flow moving, but lines he originally intended to remove once the piece was done, something he finally decided against. Do you worry about incorporating a line you can’t remove? Why not leave the line or phrase inside your own piece, embedded? I think, too, to Lynn Crosbie’s sampling from other pieces in her “Alphabet City” (from Queen Rat, 1998), doing with the poem what music had already been doing for years. Have you considered your work taking that next step and experimenting thus?

**SB:** To begin with your questions: The borrowed line doesn't always vanish. The first poem of this kind that I wrote (if I remember correctly) was the opening poem of *Two Bowls of Milk,* which begins with a line from John Ashbery. The line's from his "37 Haiku" and my initial intention was to write 37 such poems beginning with his lines. I wrote a good dozen, some of which evolved beyond their lines, shedding them with ease. This was the only poem from that series that I published in book form, and it's utterly dependent upon his line. The idea, as in some of your projects, was to pay tribute. And I've done similar things since, using other writers as inspiration and/or dropping quotes from other writers into poems where they fit. I have no concern about incorporating a line that I can't remove, as I have no qualms about making my debt to other poets – to other texts generally – public. As you know, I've worked a lot with found material, beginning with the Alice poems (though those were not very quote-heavy). "The Japanese Pavilion," one of the long poems in *Pavilion,* includes a good deal of found material, and I've produced/assembled a few entirely "found" poems. The new manuscript lifts from zoo signage, from Walter Benjamin's musings on his own found 19th century material, from newspaper clippings.

It's interesting that you ask about "that next step," because one project I've had in mind for years draws upon memorable lyrics from beloved 80s songs (beloved by me, anyway). For many years I thought that this might be a way into a novel, and it still might, but as I'm increasingly less interested in narrative as a writer (though still utterly compelled by it as a reader), I'm not sure how I'd pull it off nor how interested I'd be in doing this in prose. But a series of poems that riffs upon the lines not only for the sparks thrown off by the words but the mood and associations of their source songs, that's something I'm considering. I've begun jotting a list of lyrics but haven't tried any of the poems yet. Although I agree completely that the same material, revisited, will always be new – I may never stop writing about the passage of time, about frames and apertures and windows and doorways and cages – what I'm after now is a new approach to form and/or syntax. I'm as awed by well-done image and metaphor as ever, as interested in embodying these elements in my work, but I'm trying to learn how to do something else. Ekphrasis from music isn't a great leap from the visual ekphrasis I've done in the past, but if I can inhabit the cadences of those lines, or
try to produce in poetry the moods that those songs produced in music, then I'll be meeting a new challenge.

On the question of stylistic evolution, you're right, of course, that the Coach House of then is very different from the Coach House of now. Precisely why we mustn't become too set in our aesthetics; just as our own tastes and our own work evolve, so do the writers we're reading and the magazines and presses that publish them.

As for teaching, I, too, see myself as more of a facilitator than a teacher; in a recent article in *The New Yorker* (http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2009/06/08/090608erat_atlarge_menand), Louis Menand discusses the familiar question of whether creative writing can be taught, and in the process he mentions the fact that CW culture presupposes that the teacher won't actually "teach" in the conventional sense. What's imparted is experience rather than "knowledge," and the instructor guides rather than directs the discussion. This is his take, and I suspect it's generally true, although I know that many of my colleagues take a more authoritative approach. I've considered abandoning the workshop method entirely in advanced classes, but as my own education was in traditional workshops, I don't have an easy substitute at hand. Certainly I can imagine some uneasy alternatives, and eventually I'll have the nerve to try them, or will find a class that's right for them. Although I'm not comfortable in an authoritative role myself, I recognize that many students want and may even need me to play that role. I give students critical essays that represent a range of approaches in the hopes that they'll disagree and be forced to articulate their own take on the issue, much as you question them (as do I) on the choices they've made within their own poems. I may prefer to guide and nurture, but I've learned a lot from teachers who've been more hardline – who have given me something to embrace or resist. Being angry at a teacher's approach may make one's work seize up for the duration of the course, but there can be a productive explosion afterwards.

Why do students think that they need us, you ask? Some need the structure of a class for motivation, pure and simple. In many cases, though, it's a question of efficiency. A good workshop can create reading suggestions, generate ideas, teach craft (or a kind of craft, anyway), all things that, if learned through trial and error and the library would take much longer. Some writers work better with the longer, solitary approach. Ideally, both are going on. But, also, there's an industry trying to convince us that the right M.F.A. program will make us stars. Ever looked at the AWP Writers' Chronicle? It's alarming, the number of programs, the selves that they're selling. Many buy into that.

I've heard Alistair MacLeod use your metaphor likening the creation of a poem or story to the building of a house. He came at it from a different angle, however. This was in response to a question about the creative process, and he made clear that he felt it was essential to be deliberate. To crudely paraphrase, he suggested that to gather a bunch of wood and stones together and start trying things out was inefficient and unartful; one needs to know what one's building before getting started. I appreciated his eloquence (as I say, my paraphrase is a crude one) but was frustrated that he was presenting a single perspective as though it were the only one. No doubt most people in the crowded room believed him – his response makes perfect sense to the non-writer – but I could have gotten up there and described a very different kind of process, in which I don't know what I'm building at the outset. It's true that at one stage one must make choices, but to not know whether what one's writing will be a prose poem or will evolve into a sestina is exciting. Different writers become conscious at different times in the process, and some do much more work off the page. Clearly, MacLeod falls into the latter category. And his stories are impeccably well-made. I do my work on the page; I'm one of those, "How do I know what I think until I see what I've said" kinds of people. You too, I suspect. So much of your work is exploratory, associative, confidently tentative.
I agree that the classroom should be a place of conversation and that pointing writers in the right direction, whether that's by suggesting a form or technique or recommending a writer, is essential. One of the assignments I regularly give my students involves reading two books of poetry, one of which the student chooses and one of which I recommend. I give several choices, so that the student doesn't feel cornered. A twist element in the assignment is that one of the books must be by a writer the student considers like-minded – a literary soul-mate or a writer whose work the poet deeply admires and aspires to emulate – and the other by a writer the student (for reasons of style, content, general "difficulty") resists. It's up to the student whether s/he chooses the soulmate and lets me pick the enemy, or vice versa. And it's tricky on my part because I don't necessarily know the students and their work all that well when I have to make these suggestions. But there have been some happy matches. At worst, the student is better able to articulate why s/he can't stand Robert Frost. At best, I suggest a writer whose work transforms the student's. This happened this past year when I recommended Johanna Skibsrud (a former grad student of mine) to a current student, who met with me after reading Skibsrud's work and said, essentially, Wow, I didn't know that poetry could be like this, could talk about these kinds of things. Afterwards, she wrote what I considered her best poem of the year. So that's thrilling. I remember hearing that Rita Dove gave each of her students his or her own, original writing exercise, one designed to address particular lacunae (and strengths, perhaps) in their work. I aspire to do this as a teacher but I'm not sure I'm experienced enough yet. And I have mixed feelings about writing exercises, anyway. They're a great motivator for some, a crutch for others, and leave still others completely indifferent.

One thing I find in recommending writers is that, contrary to what many presume to be the case, the students are much better read in Canadian poetry than British or American (not to mention Australian, or work in translation). This is only the case for contemporary work, of course – they're still more likely to know Eliot or Shelley than Bowering or Zwicky – but it means that it's possible to introduce students to writers of whom they've never heard. Jorie Graham read at Concordia this past February and most of the students, even M.A. students, hadn't heard of her. All who spoke to me about her master class and reading afterwards were blown away . . . and stunned that they hadn't previously known who she was. You mention Sarah Manguso, who I'd never have heard of had it not been for Kate Hall (who's becoming a recurring reference in this interview!). Rachel Rose, a Vancouver poet, runs a "Cross-Border Pollination" reading series aimed at, as the name suggests, getting an exchange going among audiences and poets, Canadians and Americans. Thanks to all your touring, your extensive list of publications, your blog, above/ground, etc., etc., there are few Canadian poets who haven't heard of you. And I know that you've done some publishing in other countries as well, but have kept your focus here. As have most of us. What do you make of that barrier that is the border? What has been your experience in trying to cross, or transcend, national borders?

And, to gear up for another question arising from your last response, one of the things that interests me about the 80s lyrics project I mentioned is the collision of high and low culture. My poetry isn't really "pop poetry"; it's less accessible than it once was and, although I enjoy reading David McGimpsey's work, for example, I'm not that funny or hip. But I'd like to see what I can do in writing associative poems drawn (obliquely) from relatively accessible music. Even the alternative stuff I listened to, say Bauhaus or Echo and the Bunnymen or (the little known, sadly overlooked) Game Theory, reached more people than any of my books.

Who reads poetry? Why don't more people read it? You mentioned having visited (read to? conversed with?) three book clubs and enjoyed the experience more than you anticipated. What did you expect? What did you find? Book clubs are increasingly a marketing target, and the fact that the Globe profiles one a week shows that they've truly arrived as an area of interest. I visited a couple of book clubs during my Ottawa
days (it's a stereotype, I realize, but there are many well-educated, cultured women in Ottawa with a
comfortable income and time on their hands) and one of the women in one of the clubs, an intelligent,
critical-thinking soul who I met when I led a book discussion group myself through the Ottawa Board of
Education in 1996/97 and who belongs to a number of book clubs, has spoken to me about her fear of
poetry. Just as we have preconceptions about book clubs, so many of their members have preconceptions
about the genre in which we write. This particular woman said that her book club was tempted to "try" a
poetry title but couldn't take the plunge. I asked you earlier about audience with respect to your choice of
genres in which to publish. Now I'd like to hear about who you think the audience for poetry is and to hear
your response to that larger, oft-asked (and never satisfyingly answered) question: Can poetry matter?

rm: There was that Coach House anthology about narrative from a few years back, have you read it? Biting
the Error: Writing Explore Narrative (2004), edited by Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy and Gail
Scott, which began as the American online journal Narrativity. Or read Diane Schoemperlen; she knows
how to narratively move through, with much of her fiction compositions coming about through series of
lists.

The interviews I’ve conducted with writers over the years inform me enormously in terms of my own
practice, and reviewing as well, so I’ve worked hard to learn about the writers I think I can learn from, the
writers I’ve discovered that I enjoy enormously, including my aforementioned list. I get new books for
potential review in the mail almost daily, and devour many of them as quickly as I can, as well as constantly
returning, over some weeks or months, to many. Not just rereading (like Paige Ackerson-Kiely’s first
collection), but picking up something, months after I’ve received it. I might not have gone through yet,
looking to find out what I might have missed. Do you know of Arielle Greenberg? I’ve gone through her
first two poetry collections only recently, as well as Forrest Gander’s first novel, and they’ve both
participated in my recent second series of “12 or 20 questions.” Do you know of Calgary poet Emily Carr,
or American Paige Ackerson-Kiely?

That barrier of national borders you talk about is quite a strange thing. It keeps many books and writers
from crossing easily, or at least as far as perception allows. There may be more writers from Buffalo who
have read in Toronto than, say, Toronto writers who have read in Winnipeg, and Canadian regionalism
certainly doesn’t make it easy for writers in one area to be aware of those in another. After spending most
of my twenties working to educate myself in Canadian writing, I’ve been the past decade working to engage
with American. After my first decade of research, I feel I can move out further, and see just what is out
there, engaging as reader, writer, reviewer, interview, and whatever else. I’ve got my eyes focused on
overseas next, whether European or further. Since my girlfriend is first-generation Lebanese-Canadian, and
tells me I’m to eventually learn Arabic for our trips to the Middle East, there’s an entire series of cultures
that I’m very much looking forward to engaging with (although I do have to get some other projects done
first, before I can really fall deep into this).

Still, the barrier of borders is certainly frustrating, predominantly for just how difficult it is for books to get
across those arbitrary lines. We have access to Alice Notley through Penguin, but do Americans (let alone
anyone else) have the same kinds of access to our equivalent writers – Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering,
John Newlove? They only have Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood, arguably, because of their
successes through fiction. Somehow Anne Carson is one of those exceptions that proves the rule, yet
Christian Bök managed to get Scotland’s Canongate to reissue Eunoia where it became a bestseller in the
UK. The internet helps a lot, but can’t do everything. I’ve currently a British poetry collection from Stride
in 2006 (already out-of-print), an Irish poetry collection from Salmon in 2009 and an American poetry
collection in 2010 with Bill Allegrezza’s Moira, as well as Salmon’s talk of producing a selected poems for
2011. I keep wondering, are there any other Canadian poets publishing so much in other countries, and separate volumes as opposed to reissues? Probably not.

When I started attempting to publish in American periodicals, I approached it as though I was completely starting over fresh, as I had done years earlier with Canadian journals; they would have no idea who I am, know my work or even the publishers I might have already had books out, so I knew it would take time, and I'm slowly making some progress, but only very slow. I'm okay with that; it seems part of the process. What I've really been hoping over the past few years, apart from getting trade poetry collections out with American publishers, is to get a third and fourth novel going, get some of these creative non-fiction books placed, get me a literary agent, and see what the international options are for some of my prose. At this point, it might be the only way I can start making a decent living.

Still, I'm wondering about your interest in other forms. I know, at least a summer or two before your lovely Madeleine was born, you were working the beginnings of a novel. Do you see yourself (I hope) coming back to this? How interested are you in other forms, apart from poetry, and who are your models? When I write fiction, I know I'm influenced by years of reading such as early Ondaatje, Ken Sparling, early Lynn Crosbie, Sheila Watson, Elizabeth Smart, Dany Laferriere, Milan Kundera, Paul Auster and a whole series of others; although, more recently, well-written television and film have really prodded my desire to write fiction – *Mad Men*, *Spooks*, *Six Feet Under*, the movie *Smoke*. Are you hoping to come back to prose, and where do you see yourself heading?

And I'm fascinated by your zoo project, what finally became *Penneaded: Zoo Poems* (Montreal QC: Signal/Vehicule Press, 2009). In my review of the collection, I talked about how the project seemed very much an extension of your personal concerns with Victorian artifice – zoos and gardens. Where do these concerns come from, and what did the zoo anthology project teach you?

**SB:** Where those concerns come from is anyone’s guess, really. When I took an English Literature survey course in grade 12, it was the Romantics, not the Victorians, to whom I was most drawn, but that said more about my being an adolescent at the time than about my actual temperament. (Keats is the only Romantic at whose work I continue to truly marvel.) Since then I’ve realized that I’m a Victorian/Victorianist in many ways, interested in the tension between self-restraint (dрапing furniture legs; Ruskin’s horror at the fact of his wife’s naked body) and sensuality (fascination with fairy paintings; the lack of qualms about photographing children in the nude), and very interested in the collecting impulse, which really came to the fore during that period and was, of course, both a result of and part of the impulse toward colonialism. Let’s display the world’s riches – and let’s claim them! The zoo and the botanical garden both arise from that impulse not only to understand but to possess; the incongruity of the “wild” animal exhibited in a domestic setting – an ornate elephant pavilion, for example – fascinates me. But, as I said, I don’t really know exactly why; I think that tension is necessary for good art and I believe that these juxtapositions are inherently interesting aesthetically, ecologically, politically, but obviously not everyone shares the intensity of my fascination. Maybe one can blame it on my English ancestry (all those childhood hours poring over family albums from Edwardian England) and my Protestant upbringing, of which I wasn’t even aware until Patrick (my husband, your old high school friend), with his Catholic upbringing, made me aware of it.

The zoo anthology project actually taught me more about the dangers of editing anthologies than it did about others’ poetic responses to zoos. The other editors and I found a lot of great poems, and a good deal of mediocre ones (only a few bad ones), so of course there was the challenge of selecting, but that wasn’t nearly as fraught as making choices for *Best Canadian Poetry*, in which the work was more recent, the writers
living, the responsibility solely mine, and the public expectant. What I learned, though, is that editing an anthology is a largely thankless and largely clerical task. (I’m sure you know this already.) Without SSHRC and FQRSC grants, it’s highly unlikely that the book would have seen print; Simon Dardick at Véhicule expressed an interest early on but his main concern was the permissions fees, which proved to be exorbitant. The grant covered them, so the writers, estates, and publishers got paid. It was interesting to discover that most U.K. publishers assess permissions fees by the number of lines (we had to shelve plans to publish Ted Hughes’ “The Black Rhino” in favour of his more familiar “The Jaguar” because the latter was much cheaper) while American publishers charge fees based on reputation, of both the publisher and the writer. Small presses were lovely to deal with; most large presses were bureaucratic and greedy. Dealing with estates was often challenging, too; the executors for the most part prioritized getting money for the estate – no doubt due to an emotional attachment to the deceased writer – rather than getting the writer’s work into print. Those are all useful things to have learned but not particularly productive to my work as a poet, which is why I’ve resolved not to edit another anthology for a good, long time.

As for prose – genre seems the most prominent thread in this conversation – I’m increasingly drawn to it, but increasingly uncertain that it’s taking me towards a novel. I’m not sure that I’m a particularly good writer of prose, and yet over the past few years I’ve written a number of essays – never simply sparked by an idea, always solicited or suggested by others – that have heightened my interest in that amorphous creature known as “creative non-fiction” and, as I said earlier, made me increasingly uninterested in genre per se. I’ve been carrying around certain projects for a while, such as the plan to write something about the history of World’s Fairs (yup, the Victorian/collecting impulse again), and to write something about Disneyland/Disney World (ditto, mingled with my interest in artifice and nostalgia), but I’m not sure that these will be poetry projects. Nor are they likely to be novels, as the ideas always emerge for me as concepts, bereft of character or story. Many would say that I just need to be more patient, that characters and story will emerge. And that’s probably true. But my ability to anticipate the criticism that such a novel would eventually receive – that the story fails to rise about the ideas, a criticism directed at many “poet’s novels,” some legitimately, some questionably – does, I must admit, tend to dampen my interest in pursuing a novel before it can even begin.

As I’ve said before, time is a factor – I knew that having children would greatly slow down any progress in fiction – but it’s far from the only factor. Maybe I’m not mature enough to write a novel yet. Maybe I’m just not temperamentally inclined to write a novel. I experience the world as scenes more than as stories; I distill character into images rather than dialogue; I’m terrible at telling jokes.

That said, there are certainly fiction writers whose work I love, and whose work reminds me that character and story are not the be-all and end-all of prose fiction. (And yet I also love, say, Salinger, for whom character is primary.) Like your list, mine includes early Ondaatje’s (I appreciate how scant the dialogue is!), and I love Paul Auster (heavily concept-driven – though also very drawn to story), Siri Hustvedt, Kazuo Ishiguro. W.G. Sebald is probably my favourite prose writer; he’s written the works I would most like to have written. I can’t express my awe at his work. If I could pull off an Austerlitz, I’d sacrifice years of my life to the task, but the only reason I even contemplate it is that he makes it look so easy.

As for the writers you mentioned, I know Emily Carr’s work, but not most of the others, and I haven’t read that narrative anthology though will check it out. These days, I tend to come upon writers through word of mouth or personal encounters; I’ve been lucky enough to work with some amazing poets at Concordia and, within the past month, at Banff, from whom I’ve learned a great deal. Supervising a thesis or critiquing someone’s work in class demands of me a far more intense engagement than simply reading it in a journal – I just can’t give that kind of energy any longer to work that I’m reading for pleasure – so it’s
more instructive, and as a result I don't read many writers as closely as I should. I can see that, as I continue to teach, I'll be kept in touch with “the next generation” much more readily than if I were simply writing on my own. But also that teaching narrows one's focus.

Your mention of Diane Schoemperlen and her lists reminds me how eager I am to dive into the “lists” issue of *The New Quarterly*, which she just edited. Last summer, most of my writing consisted of lists; I was and am interested in the extent to which one can push the list, how one can pace it (clipped fragments versus run-ons), how a list can become a narrative. I make lists rather (increasingly, I fear) compulsively in day-to-day life, so it made sense to explore and question the form as a literary strategy, even a sub-genre. Early in my writing life, I tended to write what I wanted to write, which meant embracing the obvious. Then came a period in which I resisted writing what I wanted to write, or, at least, resisted writing about what I liked too simply, too easily. (The paintings of J.W. Waterhouse, for example, and much decorative art.) Now I'm interested in interrogating those things that I embrace readily – in asking myself why I'm drawn to them. So, pushing against the pull, I guess. For years I’ve considered writing about Robert Polidori’s photographs of ruined places (Chernobyl, post-Katrina New Orleans) but last summer I began a long mess of a poem in which I ask what he and I get out of looking at such images. It’s a complicated ethical question: sure, we’re looking at ruin, we’re bearing witness, but with no human beings in the photographs, the aesthetic response takes over and the response becomes one of romanticizing decay. I’m planning to pursue this project this summer, probing, too, the boundaries of the long poem – possibly this will be book-length; who knows – and the meeting points of poetry and prose, visual and literary.

You’ve talked a lot about your many ongoing projects, so I’ll end with a few questions pertaining to those. Why such productivity? Many writers say they simply can’t write all the time, especially poetry. Others write all the time but revise so extensively that they publish little. Most make the choice of doing some income-producing work and writing in the time that’s left over. I’d be interested to hear, at this point in your life, how you feel about your decision to make a living as a writer (as much as that is ever possible) and the sacrifices it has entailed; and whether you see yourself sustaining this level of publishing productivity for the next few decades. Also, we haven’t really talked about the “outreach” or “service” work that’s always been a central part of your literary life: above/ground, *STANZAS*, anthologies, reading series, interviews like this. You’ve done a lot for others, and although that work has given visibility to your own, it’s also, obviously, drawn a huge amount of time from your own, without contributing financially. So, again, looking back and forward, how do you feel about your commitment to such projects?

rm: It’s a question, isn’t it? Even when working anything over a relatively short period, I was still rewriting, still editing constantly. These days my projects simply go through longer periods of revisions, longer periods of gestation. I still work the same way I did before, but feel in far less of a hurry, I suppose. Let things take as long as they take, but still pushing hard into working through. I spend days writing and months revising. Everything that comes out “quickly” now takes years to see the light of day, sometimes by more than a few. How can I be producing my best work possible unless I give my full attention?

I feel very responsible as a community worker, as you know, and this has been shifting considerably over the past few years, since Edmonton. Apart from the pre-book fair reading as part of the spring 2010 Ottawa small press book fair, this is the first spring in possibly fifteen years or more that I’m not running readings, and I’m not sure if anyone has really noticed. My goals and priorities are changing, and others, such as Max Middle’s AB Series, the ongoing Dusty Owl Reading Series and Rod Pederson’s TREE Reading Series are already doing much of the work, so I no longer feel as though I need to; I’m participating in far less than I used to, nearly hermiting, in comparison. The chapbooks and broadside publications come in bursts, as opposed to the previously near-obsessive ongoing appearances they used to
make. But these “cultural workings” you speak of – publishing, editing, interviewing, book fairs, reading series, reviewing, essays – have always fed and fueled my individual creative work. It’s all part, to me, of the same process. The only difference now is moving my energies around, and working harder, slower, on much larger projects, and needing more attention for fewer projects, forcing some of the others to fall slowly away.

As far as financial, I would rather not be forty living like I was a decade ago, and imagine that my next few years will shift significantly, along a path I’ve already been on for a couple of years. I’ve been in a long, slow curve since 2007 or so, altering my direction, starting with my writer-in-residence gig at the University of Alberta and publication of my first novel that fall, to the non-fiction travel book, Ottawa: The Unknown City the following spring. I see my next few years falling deeper into prose, and, hopefully getting more in return from such, than my years of seemingly-exclusive work in poetry (which only appeared that way on the surface, I know). Where else can I take fiction, creative non-fiction? What else can I do with some of these little freelance gigs I’ve been starting to really explore? Hopefully some more residencies will make themselves available; maybe some international options for prose as well. I see myself editing fewer books for fewer publishers, and really focusing in on what I would like to achieve with Chaudiere Books. I want to start having some of those things I’ve been putting aside the past twenty years for the sake of pure writing; to live, and not just in perpetual (financial) crisis.

Productivity: we touched on that briefly a decade ago, in the previous interview. I’m forever worried about running out of time for all the things I think I’d like to achieve, although I never feel in a specific hurry (and far less so, lately), certainly don’t feel the same push to publish I did five or ten years ago, despite feeling perpetually behind. I see no reason to do anything other than keep moving where my interest takes me, moving further into prose, whether fiction or non-fiction. The poems will always be there, and appear when they need; I don’t need to chase after them anymore, as one does during one’s twenties. I’ve got my Edmonton creative non-fiction manuscript I’m still touching up, and a Toronto manuscript as well, that might be finished by next spring, I would hope, wondering where the future might take some of these ideas. There are two novels I’m trying to finish this year, a collection of short stories I keep tinkering with, the long poem Glengarry that appears next spring with Talonbooks…

Sacrifices: I would rather not dwell too much on what I might have lost, nor list off such for the choices I’ve made. They came from choices, after all. But I am thinking of some different things.
AN INTER(IM) (RE?)VIEW WITH PEARL PIRIE

Pearl Pirie plays in Ottawa wordponds, sometimes without her proper polka dot boots. Her most recent book of poetry, been shed bore, was published by Chaudiere Press. For more information, go to www.pearlpirie.com Her manuscript Thirsts won the Robert Kroetsch Award for Innovative poetry and will be part of Snare Book's Fall lineup for 2011. Pearl is also an inveterate blogger. Find her online, or for more challenge, try to find where she's not.

Sean Moreland earned his Ph.D. in English literature at the University of Ottawa, mainly by playing with dead things. His poetry and short fiction has appeared in a number of venues including The Malahat Review and the Bywords Quarterly Journal, and he is a member of the editorial board for Arc Poetry Magazine. He also co-edits, with Aalya Ahmad and Dominik Parisien, an independently published serial anthology of short uncanny fiction, Postscripts to Darkness.

SM: Hello Pearl - thanks for agreeing to field some questions from me.

PP: My pleasure, Sean. Lovely day to be in the meadow.

SM: In addition to writing poetry, you are also a prolific blogger, with blogs devoted to subjects ranging from food and cooking to daily observations about life, from photography to the process of writing poetry, to local Ottawa events, the literary community, etc.

PP: Yes, I've got several blogs. Each has a mandate. picture i is a 365-day self-portrait project. People who are foodies can follow that stream at Eaten Up. 40-Word Years was an idea started by Dan Weber that went viral a few years ago. It was to appreciate people who have been an influence. People would be deluged by updates if it were all at one url. Humanynms was the first and is the commonplace book in the parlour with some local events. Poetry people can go to pesbo.

SM: When, and why, did you start doing it regularly?

PP: How did I start? Once I knew the internet existed I was on it. I started a site for my poetry in 1994 in basic html called Thymed Words for the Mosaic browser. By mid-1994 there were 2,738 websites, according to Gray's statistics; by the end of the year, more than 10,000 so I was in pretty early. I eventually made the pages into chapters and chapbooks that could be downloaded and printed. Then, as static sites became passé, updates and asides outgrew the main text.
I've been keeping charts of stats on my writing rates since 1993. I started blogging in 2002 as a log of updates to my static website of poems with marginalia on the stats I was keeping of poetry writing rates and footnotes on life.

When people share information, everyone gains. When people try to be private they can't know or be known to the same degree. They can't collaborate and relate and build their own knowledge or help others make sense of what they have. Being able to connect with people overseas was neato-cool so I kept at it.

SM: You've been blogging and placing poems online for quite a few years now, and your first printed collections appeared in 2008, I think?

PP: I was first published in Bywords in 1995. I skulked about the back of reading rooms for a few years. I self-published a chapbook in 2007 and dropped poem flyers around town before then, mostly stuck in library books as guerilla lit additions. Yes, above/ground put out a chapbook of my poems in 2008.

SM: Do you see yourself as writing differently for online venues? Do you think publishing online has affected your approach to the craft of writing in any notable ways?

PP: I write. It is a way for me to process/think. What I show in different places will vary. If I post a poem to a blog it's generally good enough to not be garbaged and weak enough that it is not publishable for cash.

If you call posting the results of exercises online, publishing, I publish some online. It is a route to developing craft so far as getting immediate feedback from strangers who have no reason to be interested in what I write. It has been a way to keep the brain moving and to meet new people. In any group someone will be on a comparable wavelength.

It has the advantage in that the words, and the cheese, stand alone. There's personal connection with a reader on Duh Internetz, no empathy of psychoanalysis or gossip angle of what the poem could be reacting to in life. It allows the focus to stay on the poem not allowing the poem to be some convoluted way of expressing an interpersonal message. It's words as a thing separate from me. That means it flies or flops impartially, which is good data to have.

SM: Why is blogging such an important part of your life? When, and why, did you start doing it regularly?

PP: What you do is self-perpetuating. The more you do, the more you want to do it? A lot of people seem to try it but only do it for a month or few. I started interacting with people on the same wavelength regardless of their location or demographics. I like not knowing gender or age or context. That was freeing. I like that there is no top-down editorial bias and no advertising engine. People put out whatever interests and what catches, catches.
Why did I keep at it? Beyond meeting people it was useful for me to have an space where I had to be linear and coherent. Writing for myself I can go in any direction of loop-de-loops but to just head dump online, some people could follow it, but mostly traffic went down. Except for crazy people who felt connected and not alone and looking at those bloggers' lives I felt a disincentive to keep thinking in the patterns I did.

The rule of the blog post, to be short, to the point, to have a point even, helped me practice teasing apart my ideas and seeing what I am talking about. I used point form and bolding and boiling down. People have told me that over the last few years I track in a conversation in a more connected way. I can figure out what leaps people can make and what is too far so it acted as a cognitive training.

SM: Are there particular online poetry venues that you would recommend?

PP: There are many hubs. You probably know about UbuWeb, SPD, Poetry Daily, Jacket, Lemon Hound, Vox Populism and Dailyhaiku.org? Others:

- International Poetry Web for some voices that are outside Canadian context
- Wordgathering clusters together writing prompts
- listserv noise ratio can swamp, but Poetry-W I've been on for 8 years or so
- bywords.ca if you're local planning or planning to go to events, or coming thru town, this is immeasurably useful
- Quill & Quire for an industry-wide point of view
- The workshops at The Guardian are sporadic but detailed
- rob mclennan, an invaluable who's who and what's what when

SM: You've been experimenting a lot with photography, recently. (One of your Humanyms entries notes "Some systemic approach with a comprehensive exploration out from some node might prove useful, for photography or poetry." )

PP: Yes, I want to get my technical bar up higher in both. My knowledge seems piecemeal. I've been doing photography in the same always serious/never serious way since the mid-eighties. I took somewhere over 40,000 photos (those that I didn't delete) in 2010. I've been doing event photography for a few years. I've been doing food photography daily for about 5 years.

Doing creative portraits however is a different game than anything previous. It's art that uses the same creating part of the brain as poetry.

SM: How do you find photography affects, infiltrates, alters your writing?
PP: My writing hasn't become any more imagist or less imagist. When I do photography, it's not just time potentially for words that gets displaced but the desire and energy. Seeing how much time it takes to fix a photo that I rushed to take is an object lesson for poetry. I can wait and consider and get 'it' exactly, or I can do a lot of editing. Editing poems can be post-processing.

At the same time photography has improved my creative energy. I can be new in photography. There's a spark there, whereas with poetry I am disillusioned, cranky, closed, jaded, restless. In photography I can feel my way around blind which is much more invigorating. I can get that visceral yes! sensation that I used to get often with poetry and see what I'm feeling thru the lens easier than with a pen. I can run words on automatic too well to get past my own filters.

SM: One of your entries quotes Paul Graham as saying: “When you’re forced to be simple, you’re forced to face the real problem. When you can’t deliver ornament, you have to deliver substance.”

Who is Paul Graham? If Graham's statement were transposed to the literary, what would you take "substance" to mean?

PP: This Paul Graham is the IT fellow and essayist on design among other things.

The idea of making things as simple as possible, but not simpler is a good tool to not get cluttered by the magpie-reflex. In literary mode it's easy for me to get carried away in style, sound, external structure of the poem, have one idea and a Rococo setting for it. Robert Creeley is quoted as saying "Form is an extension of content." That's ideal but sometimes it looks like substance but is only a crust of form.

The K.I.S.S. principle is something I keep working at. I can get praised for babbling, which only encourages me to write more vacuous nonsense. I'm not saying nonsense isn't good. Honest or dishonest nonsense can be more valuable than overly earnest conscious intent. There's a place for vacuous nonsense and it's preferable to solemn taking- self- as- serious- truthiness, which is equally dangerous. I aim for balance. The idea of substance is a good counterpoint for me. In this-is-how-it-should-be-ness chapter in The Art of Looking Sideways Alan Fletcher says, "The original mind aims for the centre but the stylist can only rework the circumference. Locked into a repetitive pattern they are condemned to be victims of their own trademark." I don't want to be fiddling at surface level but exploring at deep structures not to look deep but to see underpinnings and utility halls that make things go.

Few poems can be dissected and when taken apart have carefully considered components. I delight when they are more than just off the tongue prosaic utterances. When each word and rhythm is carrying its weight of work. The thought structure is as complex as necessary, no more, no less than it has to be to convey the mood or scene or story or ideology of anti-narrative or whatever it is built to do as a language machine.
SM: What is the "substance" of your poems? How is it different from the substance of the poetry of others you admire (or don't)?

PP: Soundy is part of the substance. Intuitive meaty convolutions of things almost meaning to the conscious mind. There's a centred weight to some of the poetry I admire. There's a momentum still but more simplicity to map complexity. For example, nathalie stephens' *somewhere running* (Advance Editions, 2000) baffled me in how it could possibly work yet it did. Limited cycling of small vocabulary and subject yet it accumulated an emotional weight that was greater than its parts. Monty Reid's poems have that sort of pared back simplicity and also have that attribute I want to cultivate more of in life and poems, that sense of well-being, good-humoured perspective. The work has got a centredness and a twist of the surprising and inevitable yet while it leans, it doesn't lose its footing. Both use sound in a way that doesn't draw attention to itself as overtly, yet there's a musicality there.

SM: In your 12/20 Questions interview with rob mclennan, you mention that one of the "forms that influence your work" is "Local English, marked forms of English that don't get translated to page as 'valid'. I want to curate these." Can you elaborate on what you mean by "local English?"

PP: By local I mean non-standard, marked forms of English. It's not what's local to me anymore but what's stuck in my head from when I was growing up and when I visit outside cities. I define local as in what is spoken outside cities, is still active language except that I have rare access to it now because of the choices I made of where to live. I still feel like I have a foot in the country but it's asleep.

My resistance goes up when I'm brokering in language that is formal, academic because of the sense that this is upper class snubbing lower class language. The small differences are tiny when we can communicate with none of this baggage across species is particularly absurd. It imposed an unnecessary hierarchy on and separation between people and ideas because of words as a medium. That seems wrong.

When I was a child elders were still speaking phrases that were direct translations of Irish and Scottish settlers who settled the Ottawa Valley. The long school campaign against hisself and double negatives I found frustrating. I didn't see the grammar or vocabulary I heard reflected in newspapers or books or school. I want to be free to use all my language engine and not be under a foreign Queen's say of how Canada should be. I remember as a teen I came across a book by Rudyard Kipling. Then the poems by James Whitcomb Riley. They were written in dialect and it struck me how it was a recognition of how people actually interact instead of the polished written language that school for middle class morality and mobility taught.

SM: This [curating] statement particularly reminds me of a number of "Prairie" poets, including Robert Kroetsch and Dennis Cooley (whose essay/book *The Vernacular Muse* is something of a manifesto for poetic use of local idioms), who have really championed the role of regional dialect in poetry. Would you say they, or other vernacular-curatorial writers, have been a direct
influence on you? Can you think of any examples of "local English" that have really set your mind aflame, figuratively speaking?

PP: It's not the power of any particular phrasing that has any interest, but that familiar is permissible fodder for poetry. I can't say Kroetsch nor Cooley had wallops of impact on me in particular. I've read some of both and enjoyed although they are influencing no doubt as they an influence from many of the people around.

I'd like to look up *The Vernacular Muse*. (I'll put it on my list.) Cooley's

> animals were leather  
> the farmer wore  
> close to his heart

gets at that sort of double-mindedness of farming, loving the animals as people in the field and able to eat them as well. What will an urban-migration version of local look like when we have 95% of our population in cities? What will that do to our subjects, language and uniformity of expression? How could we create isolated areas where language can diversify in pockets?

But so far as vernacular captured, what resonated, so far as speaking local scenes and vocabulary, was John B. Lee's *Hired Hands* (Brick, 1986). It knocked me out of the water, feeling like someone had experienced something comparable to what I had. There was a metaphor of existential darkness made thru a dog with his head stuck in an ice cream container chasing it around the yard. Utterly concrete, grounded mundane and yet profound.

Likewise Stephen Brockwell's *The Wire in Fences* (Balmuir, 1988) struck me as there being another side to the ban on every mentioning in print any subject or speech I'd recognize from my life. It was like the sensation in grade 10 geography of being shown a map with my rural route on it. Up until then I'd thought there were maps of other countries, but no detailed ones of anywhere I knew. And his most recent book *The Real Made Up* extends this idea of content of people's speech and lives captured as worthy of keeping and as keeping in poetry. At the same time it is done respectfully. It uses everyday local language but with a listening for what is there filtered from here.

I like when poets talk about the immediate common lived experience, not all ache, but some achoo and dirt on the shoe.

Kay Ryan impresses me as valuing the unfancified and yet working a simplicity that isn't oversimplified. The turns outwards can deepen to something complex without feeling like they are pat or where the poem was always intended to be, set up to set off the pretty ending. Her newest *The Best of It* shows she's rigorous in extending something from expected yet in elegant gestures. She wants accessibility without watering down. I'm not interested in raising folksy
common man parlance as a great blow of the Little Guy against The Man, (both males being the only thing that counts in the dynamic).

As a side note, I have mixed feelings about "people's poetry" that paints a good ole boy idealism and seems disrespectful, self-caricaturting. In a way it is complicit in the game of class wars, playing up the hokey, limiting what can be said to what that class is supposed to care about. I'm more against deriding any form of speech as being inferior class and all the loss of communication that goes with that and so wanting to use the language from a position of safety without it seeming like an affectation, an appropriation nor caricaturing stylistic. I want it rolled into the rest of life so there's an integration of present and memories that doesn't do a disservice to either.

SM: On the blog Humanyms, you recently noted that you "can pull up a memory easiest by taste." Would you say taste is the most evocative component of your sensorium? How big a role does taste play in your writing, or during your writing process?

Think that was more a set up for the next post on chocolate. I'm more visual and write more from that.

I feel incompetent to verbalize taste. Like sound my threshold is narrow and low before sensation is discomfort. I'll probably recant that tomorrow as well.

SM: I love the eponym of your blog's title, Humanyms. What, in your mind, makes partmonteaux so peautent?

PP: Peautent, partmonteaux, a potent skin, a mantle of exploring what it is to live under this self-selected label of being human. We have a lot of diversity under this homonym (homo = same, nyma = name) of human. “To be only human” is to self-define and self-refine as fallible and forgivably loveable anyway. We're just another bacteria condo, a primate with delusions of godness. I attempt to look at the species and self in a compassionate way, looking for the positive spins, to stay soft against the natural tendeancy to want to nuke this scourge of a species off this planet and let the crows, octopus, lichens and ants have it back.

SM: To another direction, pwoermds. Are there any phrases, pwoermds, portmanteaus that you've constructed (or pirated) that you would especially like to see "go viral," memetically infect popular speech? That you think could really affect humanymity?

PP: I'm mostly a consumer and admirer of pwoermds. There's a few of Geof Huth's from NTST that I'd like to see go that way: monotonos or blo(ss)om.

I love the economy to the form. To add one idea to a person who would internalize it and bring it forward as a stepping stone to go past would be significant. One idea that would blaze across everyone? Whatever it would be, hopefully something about considering 7 generations and ripples.
SM: In earlier interviews, you've mentioned the importance that writing mentors have had for you. Who have your mentors been? Can you encapsulate some of the things they've taught you?

PP: Had I said that? The idea of mentor is interesting. What would be the line between teacher and mentor? Can one have a mentor before one is able to be one? It is a finer level of fine-tuning of someone already competent to be taken to higher levels. Can a child have a mentor or not until you've worked out your passions?

Apart from workshops I've been a part of organizing, I've taken about 2 dozen hours-long to term-long classes since 1993.

Let me start leftwise of topic first. David O'Meara (who you could watch for as an upcoming facilitator for Pre-Tree workshops) gave a City of Ottawa writing workshop that shifted some ways that I edit. A more systematic inventory of what's present and what's working to do what and look at strengthening the spine of sound thru a poem. He added some things to the tool box for editing and therefore hearing poems.

Sheri-D Wilson and Wendy Morton gave a one-off day's workshop at an Arts Festival, but they tugged me forward in performance so that my knees weren't locked when they weren't shaking. They — and I say they because they did the critique of performance part as a panel and I can't remember who said which things — introduced the idea of talking on top of a full column of air. In poetry and out of poetry, that helped. They started me towards projecting my voice, opening my body language, prying the nails out of my feet so I'm not stuck to the floor. And for god sakes breathe, don't wilt to the floor. Marnie Woodrow's workshops got me thinking further about being centred in the meaning of the words as you perform.

Stephen Brockwell shapes how I think of poetry and what I attend to. His workshop got the idea of deep structure of poems into my head. The idea of words as a garment for ideas. The form of the poem as the movement of ideas. It's sort of an inversion of Henry Ward Beecher; 'Ideas are pegs to hang words on.' Ideas can start either way, from words or from ideas.

He also cranked up my comprehension that formal verse can be done well. His passion for poetry and width and depth of knowledge of it is energizing. His insistence on there being a right way and standards that can actually achieve some particular effect flew in the face of my exposure to poetry as taught most of my life. It is heartening when someone, after a reading, can quote back a particular phrase and say, that part worked. It's more useful than global thumbs up or thumbs down.

I took several workshops with rob mclennan. I don't think I said a word the entire first term. people in that class with me don't recall my being there because I was so much of a wallflower. the dates and names and concepts all flowed over me like I was getting a walking tour of a city in a language I understood only from the language for tourist guides. it was disorienting but orienting.
the upshot of what I've learned from him so far includes learning that it's reasonable to tear away all of a poem except a line or phrase and not scary to start again. it's just a thing. I've never edited as ruthlessly as after I saw his way to scan and find the kernel of a poem.

the second immediate impact was to show what is happening in poetry now by people who are in the field. he introduced me to shapes and directions of poetry that I had no point of access for before. I was reading mostly 1800s verse and contemporaries muddling along being praised with E for effort and no other grades allowed. his insistence on looking critically at one's own practice, making and updating a personal statement of poetics also encouraged self-awareness and critical thinking. that pushed me into another level of perception of what i write and read, into the how and why away from just the what.

the third impact is the importance of being involved. it's more interesting than at the sidelines.

Exchanging poems with peers is a good part of the process of learning as well. For example Louisa Howerow and I have grown in craft over the last several years and we peer-learn, peer-teach and cheer each other on. I'd hate to not name some others who are key peers, who read and cheer and who I read and cheer. Sandra Ridley moves so quickly in craft that she'll soon be an international comet way.

It's good to have connections from those ahead in various direction, those at your level, and those newer to the language toys.

SM: You've also taught a number of poetry and editing workshops over the past few years. What are the things you try to convey to your students?

PP: I've taught several workshops on getting ideas, editing your poems and on particular forms. I try to get across the ideas of reading what you don't like and reaching out past the comfort zone. I press for analyzing your own work, stretching out of whatever you would normally write, by method, by subject, by whatever technique, and detaching from preciousness of "but it's true" to a measuring stick of "what does it do". My own mind works well with constraints to resist and direct effort but a nimbleness is gained when you divorce your words from your identity. It's a thing to be shaped, not your precious self on the page.

SM: Can you share any remarkable experiences you've had during some of these classes? Things that you've learned about the craft of writing from trying to teach others?

There's a magic whenever there's one of those wonderful communicators present who can pick up on the threads of what has been said by various people, connect them and extend with his point. People feel heard, therefore venture to say more. A room is more likely to gel.

One of those times, with a poem on the table several people gave their interpretation. Each person was surprised to see their interpretation wasn't the only one and that they could see the same poem in several ways with no one definitive way to read it. It was a short simple poem
about seating 5 chairs equitably around a square table yet rich for discussion and you could see
light bulbs going off as this poem which looks odd with weird line breaks against syntax and a
lot of repetition of a few words sits home and nearly simultaneously people get the poem, hear
the poem. That was cool. There was an extension of what could be heard despite the outside
shape of the poem which had sort of Creeley line break, stopping for neither meaning nor syntax
— although the poem wasn't his. For the life of me I can't pull out my head which poem it was
although I can even picture the font, I can't read it. Inconvenient brains these are at times.

SM: I've been slowly reading through been shed bore, a book of your poetry recently published
by Chaudiere books. I say slowly, because I find I have to stop after each poem, pause before
moving on to the next. I think this is in part due to the wide, even wild, diversity of forms and
structures you employ throughout the book - moving from poem to poem often seems to require
of the reader a kind of leap.

What do you see as the unifying elements of these pieces? Were you conscious of working on a
"book" rather than discrete poems?

PP: Yes, it was conceived of as a book but each poem was not written for the book. There were a
few poems made to link but it was largely a matter of threads interwoven so that they would play
against things not themselves instead of being isolated pockets of same mood, toy.

There was the concept of red, whether in the poem explicitly or by association. It was a choosing
of what poem contrasted against the last and somehow as a whole moved.

Andrew Zuckerman on interviewing said "if you're truly curious about your subject you're going
to unearth a sort of essence of them but if you go in with questions and ideas of what you want
you'll never get anything from the subject." It has a sort of application to writing a book. It's
observing and playing as much as making. As adage goes, if you aren't surprised then reader
won't be either. The poems have a wide range, (although less wide stylistically than one of the
manuscripts underway now which has visual and puzzle poems as well), but the structure of the
book has the more unifying element than poems progressing linearly in one story or one concept.

SM: A kind of concatenation, then? It almost seems as though the book is broken into gradual
chapters, cycles, phases, or what have you - for example, the book ends with a series of poems
seemingly linked to characters, with the title of each piece containing names (Gil, Janey, Dr.
Barb, Joe)... The sequence before that, from "snowbank" to "Centralia, Penn., abandoned
anthracite mine town," are linked to landscapes, weather conditions, a sort of poetic travelogue...
It is actually this cluster that exerted the most immediate sensory and visceral effect on me -
especially "the sink and tilt of township spring," which works miracles with sludge and suck,
with its combination of ingenious phrasing and vivid, immediately accessible tactile
impressions.... but this section contrasts sharply with the preceding cluster of poems, especially
the "parse purposes" series, which seem more concerned with "whether" conditions -
indeterminacy, dissonance, referential fission, cognitive leaps..
PP: The poem you mentioned about township spring was wobbling between manuscripts. It was with a group of poems about rural memories and landscapes but as a group, what the dreck are they doing. They weighed each other down so that it felt like a dreadful slog of a confessional. The title poem is also from the group which are more emotionally autobiographical, but dark. By pairing them with other poems, fictions and word playing, they were more palatable and not overbearing.

Poems went from inside the head to outside the head to head-hopping which was a sort of being inside and outside at the same time.

The poems came from 6 or 7 years of poems. They came together because they seemed to do something to the energy of what came before and next. Their energy seemed to segue in waves.

I wanted leavening of humour and intellect along with emotional content, not necessarily in the same poem but over the same journey of the book. I want to read poems that aren't a one-note orchestra so mixing it up and one poem countering and counteracting another or supporting made it feel interesting.

SM: Can you tell me more about the origins of these various sequences? Your sense of the interwoven threads between them?

PP: The idea of a renga (a group chain poem from the haiku tradition) informed the idea of the sections being like stages in a conversation. You start with a handshake and go up a sort of arc to a peak stress and then back down to a closing handshake. After some hook poems, the next section progresses to more involved and more intense, then you have enough of a relationship with the reader to introduce some more complex and darker stuff. Once that is permitted in, then to close, subject material that is more external. The last section is a set of monologues in chattier language than there rest which is more here I am being a poem sort of poem voice.

The poems overall go thru cycles. Each section goes thru a cycle of poems, a couple zips on theme, a portion of a shuffle text, a word chain, a plunder of bpNichol, or a backwards in-fill plunder verse then the other poems.

The plunderverse of bpNichol came from an exercise of rob mclennan's class and what Greg Betts does in that area. The idea of using what exists as material is interesting. derek beaulieu explained to me about the idea of using elements doing no harm to the original. If you have a red shirt I admire and so I make a red shirt out of the same type of material, you still have your shirt. The original still exists.

Likewise words and ideas can be appreciated, but elements can be copied and used for a different dialogue. It is not disrespect to re-vision content. We reuse letters of the alphabet. To use the letter a in say is to not imply or control or prevent any other use of the letter a in a word which has no overlap in meaning to say, such as agave or to suggest that anything to do with agave
must be spoken not written nor acted because *agave* and *say* both have this *a* in common. They are just things with building blocks in them. We take our building blocks are more precious than necessary. Our stories are seen as more precious than necessary. Here's a thing. It's a phrase. It's a story. Does it cause pleasure or pain or indifference? Would you rather have pleasure, pain, or indifference just now? Poetry doesn't have to be only lyric pleasure or narrative razor cut nor information disclosure to teach. It can be this other thing as well. We are manufacturing things.

We can use entire phrases or sentences, decontextualize them, make them strange to themselves and mean something else or mean nothing at all, be just objects for people to elect to let their feelings or ideas flow into. If we don't impose a story on words and just present words, people can accommodate the task of assigning meaning.

The parse purposes are reverse in-fill plunders. They came from looking closely at poems I liked and seeing how they worked. I took part of a line in biblical fashion. (The first shall be last and the last shall be first). I then did free association and sound association to intuit what would link that bit to the next bit. It's a bit like doing exquisite corpse with yourself.

What I learned in doing the parse purposes was that some poems when read backwards fell flat. Their trick was just an inversion of expected word order but conceptually, nothing was going on. When you broke some poems down, it was not solidly built. It was plain or it was edgy in form. Some poems were just as strong and fresh in any direction and under more scrutiny still gave off sparks of ideas from the enjamed ideas.

I was sampling and remixing the poems to something new as tribute and exploration against the idea that everything must have an explicit story. What is more boring than stories? What is more engaging than stories but we can't avoid plot arcs. They come at us built into every advertising photo, relentless in every elevator pitch and introduction, built into postures. It's wonderfully freeing to give the sense that everything must make sense and sell a story a break. There are sounds and rhythms and gestures towards but it's not overly controlled. It's a seeing what comes out and up. So, one strand of the poems came from that exploration.

Some poems existed as a series by nature. For example, the zips. Once I discovered the form I did dozens of them in a month. The form is a response to the idea of haiku except each of the two lines has a caesura in the middle which makes it be made out of joints in a way.

The last section and its crown of sonnets plus a bonus sonnet came about as a unit although the characters came from the novel started in 2008. Some voices disappeared and some finally found their voice, story and attitude in this format.

I think poems that are only playing with the element of language and leaving it up to the reader to take away what they will would be too slight on their own. One is fun. A sequence of back-to-back in that sort of style would cause my eyes to glaze over. It resists the reader. Other poems that are more narrative call the reader in which also can be tiring or tiresome. As a reader I
always circuit among many styles because if I have the same flavour, I can't taste anymore. I need to keep refreshing my palette. If there's a concept book exploring one topic, one way, I can't get thru it. I want novelty. My desire for novelty and surprise is very high. I bore easily.

SM: ....so you "shed" forms frequently?

PP: I never shed for good I don't think. Or I shed but don't bald. I regrow in form. I just have long loops in my walkabouts. I bear the cycles of shedding but regrow towards variants of the same.

SM: A few of the pages of the book also employ sub- or sur- texts, looming spectrally at the edges of the pages (22, 41, 55). The pale gray of their font face gives me the impression that they are in the distance somehow - I imagine them as being half-visible through some kind of paper haze. What can you tell me about these? Are they "part of" the poem they appear on the page with?

PP: Those graphic elements for the sections were done by the layout-lady-extraordinaire of Chaudiere's, Monique Desnoyers. They aren't an extension of the short poems that start that section more of setting the tone for the section to come. They do a lot of work to bind the book into one weave.

Each word is a sort of organizing theme for the book and chapters. It makes a sort of sketch of the arc of the book. There are as many sections as sestina repeats end-words excerpted from the first poem, that which is on the covers. The section words act like loose chapter titles; Before (for the preface poem), Shake, Lift, Pick, Rose and (for the end notes) Light. The main theme word is to set the sort of gestures in the section. They don't need to be read as part of the page but complement it.

The first section is Shake (of wind drops). The words in brackets are dropped in a scramble at the bottom of the page. The poems in Shake (of wind drops) are themed about poems to do with have your normal shaken by desire from afar. The upending of the world where life is like a windfall.

The next section, Lift (shifted moss), is the next stage of relationships where the inertia is giving way to momentum; invitations extended and accepted and dibs are called. The longing goes up a notch as does the conflict, such as in Lanark's Seeing Red where a double entendre leads to ladies getting into a near brawl over someone. There are other poems from that higher vantage point of kids and loss.

The third section, Pick(le parfum de la) has more of a panning back, expanding on the local and emotional landscapes and expands on the complexity that were introduced in Lift. In this part of the hero's journey, there's the point of distress and resolution to go forward and with the possibility of good humour, or at least absurdity.
The fourth section Rose (split into rails) returns back from the walkabout in the landscape and memories and explorations. The theme of desire and heartbreak gets particular faces, or at least particulars of name and he-said and she-said quotations.

It gets into a narrative of romantic relationships that as humans we are lumbering thru. We make stands to one another. We talk about one another rather, sometimes, than to one another. The poems each pass the baton from speaker to speaker. From wife's boyfriend to wife to husband to husband's boyfriend to the wife's best friend then to the couple's kid then the couple's therapist and back through the circuit again.

SM: One of the poems in *been shed bore* I'm most taken with right now is "desire's first ojala." The poem opens with an epigraph from Kenneth Rexroth, who was, at least for much of his career, associated with the Objectivist school of poetry - some of your formal play in these poems, the combination of precision and vertiginous tangentiality, also reminds me of some of Louis Zukofsky's or Charles Bernstein's writing. Are any of these American writers, or their poetic practices, particular touchstones for the book, and if so, in what ways?

PP: Thanks you. Notice each writer you've mentioned is male? Funny, huh. Although it was me who mentioned Rexroth first. I know of Rexroth thru his translations of Japanese forms.

I can't "hear" Zukofsky. I periodically try to read him but he seems an unpleasant man. His poems irritate twitches from my deep muscles.

He had a firm hand in editing his lover's poems, Lorine Niedecker, whose work I do love. She has an educated gaze, informed, intense, intent on details, and with music in it.

I can understand the sensibility of the Objectivist being present to what is happening now. It was a good part of a century with simpler lines entering architecture and kinks being taken out of social classes, growth for all kinds of human rights. We can be crushed by history and trying to relate to it. I can respect the Objectivist's rejection of mythology and classicism. Orienting or justifying now thru grand sweeps of stories seems manic. I appreciate the poem as object, sincere in itself. The bare bones decluttered utterances makes sense to me perhaps more thru the filter of haiku than w.c. williams and the like. My sensibility likes the concrete and its opaqueness.

At the same time, there is a twisting away from such plainness. Once something takes too much out of the picture it becomes as false as when too much is imposed into the picture. Reading Judge Samuel Sewal of the 1700s, he seemed on the cusp of revolution of thought. Whereas there used to be a singular reading, on a symbolic tea-leaves level, then there was this need to read things on two levels, the actual event and the mystical significance. If he had a toothache, it was about his teeth, but it was also a signal from god of misspeaking. In poetry we want to stab for a depth that isn't always there. The Objectivists are a good antidote, as are the surrealists, to this human instinct to apply sweeping significance to things. Steve Venright and Stuart Ross are also working — in a different part as the Objectivists — of the negative spaces around this
tradition of seeing poetry as epic and heroic and always terribly profound. The Objectivists and Surrealists have a more level, grounded take on this.

This sort of applying systems or superstitions to add order or spice to life can be engaging but one mustn't forget that it is some parts make believe. It is a weakening of mind and perception to insist that one knows anything, or that one knows nothing. It is best to be content with what is verifiable, plausible and know that when one is playing with absurdity that one is playing and exploring and to not take that too seriously either.

SM: "desire’s last ojala" also contains the, for me at least, spine-bristling line "the word the wild travel of etymology of hunger." How important is etymology to the kind of wordplay your poems perform? Is the history, the possible connotations it creates, often foremost in your mind as you write?

PP: Glad that caught you. :) I like boundaries of words and etymologies to unpack words and hidden or false roots to confound our sense of "knowing", like the acid in flaccid, the pan in discrepancies, the ripe in gripe. Particularly words that are embedded in words unnoticed as they break across syllables like the once in concept. The AngelHouse chapbook over my dead corpus project hasn't really ended.

SM: Speaking of corpses, corpuses, it may be my literary necrophilia showing through, or maybe the morbidity caused by devoting nearly a decade of my life to writing about dead writers, but I always feel compelled to ask.... if you could drag any poet (or writer of any kind) back from the dead for a long conversation, who would it be? and what would you ask them?

PP: As if it isn't hard enough to get a conversation going with the living, up the ante why doncha? :) Pauline Johnston. Did she love her schtick or resent it? What did she observe that she wouldn't record because of her sense of propriety? Did she have lovers and was just discrete? What were the stories her grandfather told her in conversational words? Did she embellish for the parlour audience? What did she think of England?

SM: You had an ongoing series of online interviews with haiku poets.

PP: Yes, I was the official blogger for the Haiku North America Conference.

SM: Why does the haiku exert such a powerful attraction for you?

PP: It is extremely difficult. It is painting delicately and occasionally pointedly on a tiny canvas. Any clumsiness will show. The people who practice haiku are exceptionally well-read on other people who have written the form across centuries.
SM: Have your dialogues with any haikuists on this site particularly changed your perception of the form, or of the poetic possibilities of language in general?

PP: The interview project was special. It was an honour to be able to interview these people who have been leaders for decades and continue to be part of the international conversation. One local man, Amarjit Sathi, took it upon himself to translate haiku to punjabi and make the form available as curriculum material thru the Punjab region.

An advantage and curiosity of this genre of poetry is that there is a cultural habit of humbleness. You can converse with someone and never know how many lights they have shining under how many baskets. Maybe its always true that the loudest speakers know the least but it seem particularly marked in the form as it's practiced in North America. There are no braggarts only masters of understatements. People press each other forward, encouraging with a soft touch. At the same time the form is quite hotly debated and rigorously defended but in an adult manner without personal attacks and wholesale dismissals more common in other forms.

So I guess, it made more obvious possibilities for poetic forms of living as much as for poetry.

SM: How has this form influenced your approach to writing, or poetry at least, generally? What are some of the haiku that have affected you most powerfully?

PP: The nature of haiku writing with an emphasis on slow perception and genuine satori moments breeds a sort of openness and readiness to perceive and patience. It also makes one’s ear keen to the ring of that which sounds false, convenient. What's that word? Contrived. It isn't hard to do cookie cutter poems but something with a true energy in them, and that are true up the challenge.

The nature of haiku is slow reveal. You can't gobble it down. They can be deceptively weighty for their size. The dense reading so it forces me to slow down my perceptions which is a useful cognitive habit. The principle of contrasting pivot that adds tension is a transferrable skill to any kind of communication, set up and change a key focus which changes the first retroactively and richly. I'm always trying to brainwash myself in multiple directions at once. It can cause cognitive overload as I make arguments and cut my feet out from under those at the same time. It leaves like like Harry Mudd's androids smoking.

SM: Favourite haiku?

PP: It's hard to say. I have some very marked up books. (Minimal marks, a dot, but still.) There's a senryu in *Haiku Mind*, an anthology edited by Patricia Donegan, by Hosai Ozaki:

   letting go
   of a slanderous heart —
   while shelling peas

17 seconds ( : a journal of poetry and poetics )
Although I tend away from haiku that are one thought instead of two, there's something both instructive and resonant there. And there is a pivot here, and an unconventional one; many haiku go from exterior to a gesture inwards and this reversal from inwards to outwards is striking.

Something in the sounds echo is of peas dropping into the galvanized tub. the almost iambic ..l…g……d……t….l…p. It reminds me of the cool of a garage on a hot day shelling peas with my aunt, a wonderful safe spot to decompress. All there was to do was shell peas, the meditative rhythm of action, the curative power of doing something useful.

And Marshall Hryciuk wrote a haiku crossover that tickles how words are supposed to behave:

\[
\text{k l t e g l i d e s t h r o u g h}
\]

(in Haiku Canada Review Vol 4, Number 2). There are haiku that are pwoermds are also in issues of Haiku Canada Review like 'payolla' by Sandra Fuhringer.

Haiku, whether acts of meditative awareness or of literature, can do anything a mind can do.

Ishibashi Hideno (1947) in Far Beyond the Field: Haiku by Japanese Women wrote this about the Osaka bombings:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{chapped hands} \\
\text{and no rice -- I weep} \\
\text{with a monkey's face}
\end{align*}
\]

There's something about the pulling out a very few zooms on details, the economy of words and the unity assumed in it. We, at war, indistinguishable from the rawness of the other monkeys, the other animals we are among. It somehow manages to not be maudlin.

In a recent World Haiku Review, a new poem by John Stevenson

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a candy wrapper} \\
\text{joins the leaf pile} \\
\text{autumn dusk}
\end{align*}
\]

It is the mundane everyday moment and yet there's something in the selection and arrangement that throws a sort of rim lighting around it. A candy wrapper is very concrete with a small set of sounds and associations. The narrator pans back and shows the leaf pile. The two objects relate in being similar in size, shape, sounds. We now have a season and temperature fed into the poem naturally without calling attention to themselves as hey, look here, I'm a kigo! And then the image fades to black. Whatever we feel about littering or the leaves and time’s passage and labour finished, all becomes hidden as dusk rushes in. Simple words, simple scene and yet it carries something more than the sum of its parts and does so with an elegance.
Likewise Marlene Mountain wrote (collected in *The Haiku Anthology*) "he leans on the gate going staying". It's compression without congestion.

Also in *The Haiku Anthology* (a core text edited by Cor Van Den Heuvel) is one by Gary Hotham that pleases:

\[
\begin{align*}
letting \\
the dog out — \\
the stars out
\end{align*}
\]

Like the set up and twist of expectation on any scale of syntax. That sort of gentle humour appeals too.

**SM:** The description of your chapbook *over my dead corpus*, from AngelHouse Press, reads: "The main source corpus is over 500 pages of scrap notes that served as fodder for recombinance. Words or phrases were scraped for letter sequences within syllable or that broke across syllable or word. The other corpus is incidental word combinations from scrabble strung in the mind's insistence for meaning or sound."

**PP:** Yay, someone read the description!

**SM:** Similarly, in one of your blog entries, you write "a) I want to integrate that elements that are usually apart. b) Scrabble. Letter combinations that could be words, words that wouldn't come together normally."

Do you play Scrabble? Do you have mad skills as a scrabble player? Is it actually something you've used as a springboard for writing poetry?

**PP:** I'm at scrabble most days of the week in extremely slo-mo games that can last weeks. Asynchronous is good because I can be slow to make a move. I'm not fabulous at it but I like it. I like our anti-scrabble where we can only make plausible English words that aren't in the Scrabble dictionary. That goes much faster and more polysyllabically.

Some of the poems in *over my dead corpus* are Scrabble results. Slinky Soapy Visuals is a stanziated list poem a selection of my best score words. stepping from he shackle of muscles to balcony black is also from words on one or a few scrabble boards linked with little words and arranged until a narrative nearly forms. "samely amazed" and "yawned favours" were as they lay on the board. Word combinations bump against each other like "inbuilt thumb goons" or 'wits smearing flesh herb hokily'. It tickles something. I like how words grow and become other words like 'bed' becomes 'gibed' or 'ate' becomes 'treated'. It feels like taking the lego pieces of language and cutting them into new shapes.

Sometimes what the tray gives sets out idea combinations that spark something "no gory hi" — that suggests a story behind it. It doesn't matter where an idea starts, it's where it goes. Any source of glass can sparkle with the right cut. The first fuss or drafts is something to dash out
and get onto the interesting bit of shaping and making a setting for what could be made from the material.

SM: Similarly, you've mentioned writing-related software a few times on your poetry blog, pesbo, including, recently, a rather disciplinarian-sounding device called "Write or Die" (Writer Die!)

PP: Yep, disciplinarian; it was pointed out by a D/s blogger.

SM: How often do you employ computer programs, electronic devices, etc in unleashing your wordhorde? How big a role does the random, the aleatory, play in your writing process?

PP: I like random. perhaps that's another influence of rob mclennan and his insistence that words can't help but mean. The readers will impose their lives. Some people will run in high emotion at any hankie or pancake. Some have to be lured step by step with a red flag signalling pauses and coaching and coaxing forward.

I've always been good at prompt: now go. My brain can leap non-linearly naturally. In a way that works for exercises and to keep some control, a subject and a time limit can contain some material to then scale back into something somewhat comprehensible.

SM: I always think of genetics when I hear the word recombinant used (as in, perhaps, Christian Bök's recent dabbling with recombinant genes in bacterial vectors as methods of poetic expression.) What do you think of Bök's microbiologicopoetic project?

PP: I hope he gets it done soon. I want to see it work, for the nifty factor. And I want to know what he'll do next.

And I'm glad he's so good at scandalizing people with the idea of poets setting a high bar and science being harder than creativity. Someone had to point that all out.

His peeve that people do poetry or are perceived to do poetry because of failure to be good enough to do something better or useful resonates. There's a forgiving atmosphere in poetry. Forgiveness is good and nurturing, but great craftsmanship to particular ends of communication is also nurturing and inspiring.

Some practitioners of haiku in a past century would have to study under a master for years before being given a go-ahead to publish under the master's seal. Only proceeding once you know what you're doing has some advantages. Plunging forward with no pre-conceived plan for what you're doing may take you to same and different places.

SM: Steven Pinker, the evolutionary psycholinguist, has written that "the workings of language are as far from our awareness as the rationale for egg-laying is from the fly's." To what extent would you describe your poetry as "instinctive?"
PP: I try to move instinctively and then edit with a mix of rational and intuitive. The intuition has to be trained by rational. Getting the balance depending on how far outwards you shove the balance beam.

SM: Would you say your state of mind, your awareness, is notably different while you are writing "a poem" as opposed to a piece of reportage, or as opposed to having a conversation with a friend? Or answering an interviewer's questions?

PP: I tend towards random no matter what the forum. Either I am clammed up or I am spouting. Those middle gears of the oyster bicycle are a bit harder to reach.

Poetry is instinctive play trained by zealous reading and reading about and tearing apart. Conversation, it depends on what the people negotiate by mood, tolerance, opportunity and energy. If the friend can understand me I can ramp up to thought speed. Or I have to translate myself and unpack more. I tangent readily.

SM: How does this instinct, this feel for speech or writing, complement the kind of aleatory methods, computer programs, etc, that you employ?

PP: I shape what the dice rolls me, sometimes what it literal gives by a process, cut until something that could be meaningful shows thru. Because the method is more the ideology-driven than the narrative, it can't be too explicitly orderly. The ideology that things are complex and nonsensical and beautiful and playful is part of the text's shaping. I magpie notes of interesting terms or ideas like most (all?) writers. I don't want to limit to what I find interesting tho. It's just material. Interest comes in paying attention.

SM: [a weird personal recollection] I think it was maybe the second or third time we met, back in 2007, and Trevor Tchir was playing at Zaphod Beeblebrox. You walked up to me, and showed me these images on your digital camera of garden gnomes. It reminded me of the French film, *Le Grand Destin d'Amelie Poulain*. For some reason, I've often found myself thinking about that, and the name "Pearl Pirie" is now, for better or worse, permanently linked in my mind not only to the act of "peering" and a certain sort of open and inquisitive expression, both facial and textual, but also to itinerant garden gnomes. Do you remember these photos? Was this part of a project you were working on? Can you please help me unravel the enigma of the garden gnome?

PP: Heh, it seems like me, but I don't remember those gnomes at all. You were wearing your fedora and to the south of me in the room. Sock Monkey was there that night. There was black light and he was hugging a glass of cranberry juice. I was taking odd shots of him. Lord only knows what I was thinking.

Occasionally in my *Humanynms* posts is the tag "gnomes" which I add at random to posts that don't reference gnomes but they're invisible, see. It's like an inside joke. Really deep inside.
SM: Hmmmm..... Sock Monkey! I definitely recall Sock Monkey. They (the gnomes) may have been invisible, but I did see! Or thought I saw....I think another dead white male poet (Rimbaud?) stated that poetry should enable you to "inspect the invisible," so perhaps the visibilizing of the gnomes was an unsettling side effect of having been introduced to your writing....

PP: Could be. Gnomes are mischievous wastrels that way. Or sock monkey pictures from gardens in Ireland might have cross-wired with Amelie's gnome, visibilizing from cotton to plaster in the draft of neon lights.

SM: Speaking of visibilizing, materializing, reifying (and things which, Snuffleupagus-like, are bear-ly there), a few months ago you were involved in a collaborative project called "barely their" with visual artists Lynda Cronin and Jean Jewer, as well as Maureen Sandrock. The project involved combining poetry and sculptural installation. Can you tell me a little about this project (how it came about, how you and your collaborators influenced one another, etc)? Is this kind of inter-media cross-fertilization something you would like to do more of? Do you have any other collaborations in the works with artists in other media? How about with other writers?

PP: It came out of an exhibit with SAW Gallery with Michèle Provost's Fibred Optics exhibit. Max Middle provided a forum at the AB series for a few people (Grant Wilkins, John Lavery, Sandra Ridley, Carmel Purkis, jwcurry and myself) to present responses to her work. Her work was a criticism of the language of art criticism done in stitched textiles and tickertape.

When the triumvirate of Cronin, Jewer and Sandrock were looking to make a community art project that combined words and art in an ekphrastic way, I was recommended from a couple directions as someone who might be up for exploring text as a 3-D object.

They gave me the materials and scale and subjects. After a few weeks, I gave a few designs and mock-ups of how the text could go with their dimensions of plexiglass. They manufactured the column.

I solicited people who might like to respond to the themes of the poem-sculpture, or the blue plexiglass column sculpture in particular. Several people leapt aboard. I like how the reading contained people from all directions and depths into writing life, from relative newcomers to decades into it. There were: Laurie Koensgen, Gillian Wallace, Terry Ann Carter, Sandra Ridley, yourself, myself, Claudia Coutu Radmore, Margot Gallant, and LM Rochefort. There was an open mic time when a few people stepped out from the crowd. A good-sized crew of a few dozen came out for the open air reading that was on during the exhibit.

I made a chapbook of the resulting poems under my little press, phafours. You may like this, Sean. phafours is a pun on the gene (pha-4) governing the esophageal and anal sphincters, pharynx as well as longevity.
Under phafours I'm now making another group chapbook, also incidentally blue, as the outcome of the Tree Masters Series Workshop with Roo Borson in 2010. It will have group-collaborative poems and poems by individuals. It should be out in time for the small press fair in June with a launch reading happening sometime between VERSeFest and then.

The next collaboration in the queue is an eco justice fair that I'm helping to organize. It'll be shortly after VERSeFest. Eco-Jest-Us will be April 9th at the Arts Court. It will have some plays, improv theatre, choir, booths on environmental products and organizations and some poetry readings on the ecological-theme. Always lots going on.

Thanks for your times and questions Sean! Happy writing.

**SM:** Thanks for your generous responses!

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