

WRITING AS LIVING COMPOS(T)ING: POETRY AND DESIRE

by

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Abstract

I will not tell you or sell you a line.
As a punishment in elementary school,
my teacher required me to write lines,
and for years, all my writing was linear,
a composition of lines that began
at the left edge of the page and
marched with hypnotic fervour
to the right edge of the page,
a composition of lines that began
at the top of the page and
wound with galvanized zeal
to the bottom of the page,
a composition of lines that began
at the beginning of the book and
plodded with mesmerized devotion
to the end of the book,
a composition of lines that began
at the beginning of September and
snaked with soporific steadfastness
to summer's respite.
But in my linear writing I lived a lie,
a fabrication tailored from a fabric
of neat geometric lines
angles corners planes
founded on axioms theorems
and precise measures of consistency,
convention, comprehension, conciseness,
co-ordination, correctness, and conclusion.

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A poet stands before reality that is every day new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible, and tries to enclose as much of it as possible in words. (Milosz 56)

All the questions I need to ask; the stories I have yet to hear. The heart's two chambers—everything I most desire, everything I most fear. (Keefer 291)

To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy. (Heidegger 94)

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*Now I know my writing
is no linear composition;
it is a living composting.*

bell hooks writes: “like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body” (167).

Because we are constituted in language,
because we know ourselves in language,
because we constantly write ourselves,
and rewrite ourselves,
and write our relations to others,
and seek to understand
the loneliness alienation separateness
we know always, we need
frequent opportunities to engage
in discursive practices,
and an environment which nurtures
desire, insatiable desire,
to know, to quest/ion, to seek.
So, I explore ways of writing
that expose lies like vermilion threads
tangled in the illusion of a linear composition
that composes lives as lines
by experimenting
with composing in poetry,
posing in poetry,
seeking composure and repose
without imposing, always afraid
of disposing and decomposing,
constantly proposing and supposing
the fecundity of composting.

COYOTE WRITING

I leaned in the coulee
long enough to learn
the coulee’s flow in me,
walked narrow trails,
traces of other lines,
written to and fro,
when a coyote

composed its own line
across the coulee's wall
turned at the ridge
looked back to see
if I was chasing her,
knowing I was
 and was not,
slipped over the edge:
where does the coyote go?

Betsy Warland writes: "i believe writing we value is writing which springs from necessity. the necessity to speak the unspoken, the taboo of our lives. if we do not, we BETRAY: 'trans-, over + dare, to give' ourselves over, turn ourselves in, become agents of our own absence" (60).

And so I write in poetry
 autobiographically
 ruminatively
 narratively
 philosophically
 lyrically
 interrogatively
 pedagogically
 performatively.
In my poetry I seek
 to dispel absence
 by disclosing
possibilities for presence.

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MOCCASINS

with the honorarium
from my first published poems
I bought a pair of moccasins
in the Fredericton farmer's market

ordered exactly what I wanted:
soft deerskin leather, ankle high,
a rubber sole for walking,
and beads (men's moccasins ordinarily didn't have beads)

they fit like a word that gives you goose-bumps

I only wore them when I wrote poems
or thought about writing poems
or felt like a poem

the rubber heel was replaced a few times
they were sewed a few times
the leather lace was replaced a few times
some of the beads fell off

after years I only wore them
once or twice a year,
storing the poetry in my blood
like a winter stone in November sun

so she knew what she was doing
when she slashed them
with an exacto knife
and left them in the closet
where I would find them
after she was gone

it has taken a long time to write this poem

Ursula A. Kelly writes: “Seizing the importance of re-presenting and re-writing our selves as we reconstruct our visions of world communities entails deconstructing the stories we tell (of) ourselves and the desires that inform them” (49).

One Father’s Day a while ago
my son and I went to the carnival
where he invited me to climb a rock wall,
and strapped into harness and ropes,
I fearfully approached the wall,
several stories high,
until I saw the finger and toe holds
were letters of the alphabet
and then zig-zagged into the June sky
knowing once more the universe
is no single verse, no unified verse.

DIARIES

all her adolescent/adult life
my friend's mother kept a diary,
scribbled blank pages
bound in black and burgundy leather,

a store of words in an attic
bookcase, always locked

on her seventieth birthday
my friend's mother drank tea
under a bare birch tree,
watched the autumn leaves burn,
and wrote in her diary,
The End,

then gathered up her black
and burgundy years of words,
several boxes full,
carried them to the front yard
like a pallbearer and burned them,
month by month, with the leaves

my friend asked why;
his mother replied,
When I'm gone I don't want
you to read them and think,
All her life
my mother was mad

Martin Heidegger writes: "Truth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed, as a poet composes a poem. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry. The nature of art, on which both the art work and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual" (72).

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THE OL' KEG PUB

in the Ol' Keg Pub in Kitimat
the server asked me, what
are you writing perhaps
threatened by my writing
in a journal like I am writing
about her, will reveal
her secrets or do we fear
voyeurs, the whole universe,
everyone watching

and watched or perhaps
we hope others are writing
us, always hoping beyond
hope for any sign of attention

when the server asked
what I was writing,
I told her, I'm a poet and professor
like that explained something
when I should have said,
like Hamlet, Words, words,

or even a poem for making sense
of the snowstorm aswirl in my head
and heart, instead I declared
my credentials as if that
was somehow important,
as if my labels defined
who I am or might claim
attention in the Ol' Keg Pub in Kitimat.

or I should have said,
I am writing about
Lana who blesses me
with a long love weathered
by tempestuous winds
battered by tempests,
no tempest in a teapot

or I should have said nothing,
just scribbles that hold me a little while
so when Tina stops by,
drunk, of course, and speaks
about sadness, psychology, parenthood
I can listen, even hear her

Michel Foucault writes: "When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel" (22).

The poems
are an act:
look and see,
smell and remember,

touch and feel,
taste and savour
hear and listen.

The poems
are not
in the letters of all the alphabets of all the languages of all the words in all the worlds
in all the multiverse.

The poems
are not
in the landscape mindscape heartscape escape.

The poems
are breath,
breaths of long desire
without end.

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John Steffler writes: “poetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life’s miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning” (47)

FRAGMENTS

1

on his seventy-first birthday
Skipper said,
I’m a depression baby
but I’m not depressed

2

I went to a counsellor
and she walked with me
through the tangled garden
of almost five decades
of living in the earth
to a quiet meadow
where my father and I
stood all alone
among the dandelions,

both dazed and lost

3

a man met Jesus in the market-place
and asked, When are you going to return?

4

one summer I worked at the mill
and dug a clean clear hole
in a single afternoon
but the foreman said my hole
made the other workers look lazy,
so I dug a second hole, slow and sloppy,
like a delinquent gopher,
in days without end

5

I don't want to be a soap box evangelist
preaching damnation
or a late night show host writing
the world a bigger joke
or a car salesman promising a Land Rover
will help me wend my way
through an urban maze of rhinoceroses

what is the poet's place?

6

my dentist scrapes and grinds
my teeth and regales me
with stories of her belly dancing

7

I thought I was in love,
wildly in love,
but really I was just
a chunk of knotted alder
turned on a lathe
spinning sharp shaped
by a tungsten blade
like a kiss

I became
a decorative spindle
without edges
a kind of swindle

8

she wanted me to look after her
I wanted her to look after me:
stalemate, even stale mates,
after a while, KFC on Loonie Tuesdays
and beer and chicken fingers
in King's Head Inn on the patio
in the easy bake oven sun
where the stairs climbed only
to the washroom, no heaven

9

I always hope wisdom can be
contained in fridge magnets
like Carrie's wisdom:

always remember to forget

what you don't know won't hurt you

always remember somebody nice

kindness somehow stays with you

be open to new ideas

we're getting older like everybody else

be nice to want nothing

everything is good

10

she told me she had lived for a time
with an older lover but the chemistry spoiled
when they disagreed about a new sofa

11

three sisters went to a fourth sister's funeral
and on their way home on the highway
that winds along the Great Northern Peninsula
crashed into a pick-up driven by a drunk

12

Billy Mercer told Carrie,
I don't want any flowers
strewn over my grave
when I'm gone,
but Skipper has strewn
a lot of flowers
around me while I'm here

13

as a boy Carrie always bought me
McGregor Happy Foot socks,
soft and comfortable,
recently I bought myself a pair,
already I feel happier

14

one summer Scotties chips
sponsored a contest,
facsimiles could be redeemed
for Whitman classics,
Tom Sawyer and *Robinson Crusoe*,
I ate a lot of chips that summer

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Don McKay writes: "Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction" (27).

In school I was drilled
in grammar exercises
till I could only
march straight ahead
or turn right and left.

My writing was the progeny,
no prodigy, of intercourse
with conventions and rules
and the teacher's red pencil,
of intercourse without desire,
but creeping to middle age
I heard voices calling
desire, and learned
writers full of desire
who write with desire
will write desire
in writing full of desire.

Attending to writing both attenuates
and exhilarates, overwhelms with desire,
desire to shape and control words,
desire to disclose the world in words,
desire to be shaped and controlled by words,
desire to be disclosed in words.
But for all the desire in writing,
the consummation is never total.

WAILING WITH ROY ORBISON

the highway between Morrow's Cove
and Corner Brook is three hundred miles
of ice with twists and turns in limestone
hills around frozen ponds etched in dense
spruce, a desolate winterland
where I drive a pencil scribble
with Roy Orbison wailing, Only
the lonely know the way I feel tonight

but even Roy has never met Caitlin,
who after seven silent years summoned
me to the lounge of Gaudot's Hotel
where I longed for a priest's clean
word; I wanted Caitlin to declare
absolution, and she said absolutely
nothing, just stared with the sanitary
blue that turns your heart into quartz

one summer evening in another world
with other words, Caitlin and I walked
the beach of Black Bank and talked poetry,
when in the dusk she slipped away, always

slipping away with wry little smiles
over her shoulder like Meryl Streep
in *French Lieutenant's Woman*,
a text that compelled and defied me,

I waited and waited till she screamed
like lightning, and found her in tall grass
giggling like a gaggle of geese,
I knew you would come, I knew she knew,
I always answered because I wanted
to save Caitlin, to destroy the monsters
I pretended held her imagination,
but Caitlin didn't really need me,

the only self-contained person
I've ever known: she knew her heart,
to write the world in her image,
a desert winter land where the end
is never written, only kept in play
like a ball that mustn't touch the ground,
and I was mesmerized, but now
in the winter night of a new moon

I write this poem, and if I can
navigate the icy highway all the way
home, I will continue to write it,
so when Caitlin screams again
I won't hear her, filled with my poem
and Roy Orbison's wailing, Only
the lonely know the way I feel tonight,
better than I've felt in a long long time

In words I write my worlds,
aware always I cannot get it right,
aware only I do not know what it is.
Even now as I write, I ask,
Who will understand these words?
Who will stand with desire
long enough to know these words?
Writing is overwhelming with desire,
the desire to know my world in words,
the desire to know others knowing
other worlds in other words
fired by desire without end.

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