

## Afterword: Immediacies of Writing

*so the moon was painting in radium real this unreal-ing of  
foreground/background where she leans a luminous imprint  
paper remembers her, arms brushed with white pear's fishy  
scent ... "an old one that, if it could talk would tell you  
many things." transplant, she took her stand, in drift, in  
a river of grass flowing over her walk immersion as  
complete as the pouring of water into water*

this is not

background.

From "Reading it" in *Salvage* (1991), one of the poems later devised from *Steveston* discards. This particular passage describes and quotes the elderly wife of an Issei shipwright and fisherman living in Steveston. Sometimes, unknowingly, one writes a few lines that continue to reverberate as some kind of pointer for future years of writing.

Perhaps because I began writing in short lines, prose whether in long lines or in a prose poem opened as an arena of transgression for me. Prose felt ongoing, ecstatic in its potential for syntactic permutation, its rhythmic runs and sudden verbal associations, while poetry felt more measured, contained, committed to the versus, that break and semantic slide back to the left margin.

As a young poet in the early 1960s, I inherited discussions about free verse from the Modernist poets and their experimentations with prose. From the ecstasies of Whitman, or Saint-John Perse, or Rimbaud, I moved with greater need to the sinuous sentences of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein. As a woman, especially a woman poet, the need to transgress limits of gender, class, and inherited culture seemed more possible in the relatively open space of prose, but a prose that could meet poetry in its attentiveness to language. After all, I had also inherited from the New American poets and their sources attention to the rhythms and diction of contemporary speech. So here, at the beginning of my writing, was a basic dualism between my woman's body and then-inherited place in the world, and a male-engendered poetic and grasp of that world.



In prose there is the appeal of the rhythmic run of a sentence, the way a thought will grow, extending itself through rhythmic variation, syntactic possibility, and melodic association to branch out into extended meaning – as if a sentence might embrace the multiplicities of an immediate world/whatever is local to it. This movement from word to world suggests a real that depends on the often unstated I behind those words, whoever is speaking/singing/uttering (outring) her way into meaning others might recognize. The hope for communication, communication as both common in the sense of shared and a making known of individual perception.

My emergence as a poet coincided with large-scale political awakenings: the civil rights, anti-war, feminist, and later post-colonial and lesbian/gay-rights movements of two decades, the 1960s through the 1980s. In the early 60s, mentors such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley attuned my awareness to such awakenings. I began to listen to voices and their diction, markers of social class, gender, ethnic background, political stance, or religious affiliation. This led to early work in aural (or oral, but I like that insistence on listening in aural) history and, subsequently, a certain amount of intertextuality in my poetry.

However, poetry has never been for me simply a form of reportage. Composition, the act of putting words together, is full of immediacies. There is always edge, the edge a poem rides in its coming into form out of the inchoate, the formless.

Any writer is familiar with wordlessness – or let's say perhaps the phenomenon of wording, the astonishment of a word or phrase rising to meet the page "live" in its connection with a previous word or phrase, this against that empty prior-to-wording state that can be a sort of patient fishing before anything recognizable surfaces as "catch." And the "catch" is slippery, comes in a backwards-forwards motion suggesting new variations of thought as it refers back to earlier ones. A word in its immediate claim on attention will relate as much as it also isolates, based, as words are, on small and very specific distinctions (that "I" for instance that separates *world* from *word*) and their capacity for play – add *elle* to word and you get a world of difference.

At the most immediate level in composition (crossing a threshold with each word or phrase, sometimes each syllable, certainly each line), words come shadowed by their histories, half-forgotten remnants of past language activity, just as particular people and sites come shadowed by their stories of past actions and relations. Poems often begin for me as a moment's thought-activity gathering at the threshold of larger unworded potential ...



– “You’re very beautiful,” her words interrupt, float up from the deck below. In that moment I hear the insistent coo-cOO-roo of a collared-dove that has been haunting our neighbourhood and now announces its presence on the birch behind my window,

... potential as large as what IS this life we are caught up in together? This groundless limitless web of relations multi-dimensional, folding and unfolding in drift, each of us small knots of radiating (and potentially radiant) connection on which we project fixed identity, transient as we are, constantly changing, becoming and breaking. How can a poem, that small immediate web of words, point at or gesture towards some of this largeness?

In its coming into words (the immediate act of composition), a poem will generate a current, a charge as it develops. This current pulls into it material that may simply be flotsam (surface float) or may further the current, twist and merge with it. Writing – not the fingers on the keyboard or the pencil (yes, their rhythms and movements too) so much as listening, listening in the echo chamber language operates in charged thinking. Hearing other / alter(ering) even errant possibilities of connection on both phonemic and semantic levels, on memory levels (resonating phrases from others’ work through time), all points of contact in the resonating web of language that is our medium for thought.

Although I’ve written poems based on visits elsewhere, I find it difficult to write anything but notes, journal entries while travelling. So I write at home in all that surrounds the act of writing at any point: house, neighbourhood, city, larger coastal terrain, each with its diverse inhabitants – widening and interconnected spheres of immediacies experienced within personal, collective, and historical webs of relationship. The linear depth of the historical, the lateral sweep of the surround. Within these, connection and continuity, the basis for narrative – but also the increasing breakages our info-addicted globalized late-capitalist culture inflicts on wordless environments. In this current (warming) climate we get news stories that move attention rapidly from crisis to crisis without follow-through or adequate investigation of causes. We get people torn from their localities and community stories that tell them who they are. Instead, we get virtual realities that entertain, entail illusory images of who we might become, putting us out of touch, out of actual contact with the physical context on/in which humans exist interdependently with so many other forms of life. The give-and-take of those myriad connections in the ecological web of which we are a part – how they fade out as mere background



noise. To write against this is to respond to background. To listen in, give close attention to almost inaudible connections even as they transform and change. The web of language is its own web, but in its multiplicities it parallels those other myriad connections in which we also live.

There is a particular connection that has given life to this book, a connection to be honoured, namely Susan Knutson's dedication to the project of editing this selected poetry. Despite being the victim of a head-on highway collision in September 2012, despite subsequent surgeries, constant pain, and learning to walk again, she has persisted in reading, selecting, and corresponding with me across the distance between hospitals in Halifax, then her home in Weymouth, and my home in Vancouver. From the miracle of her survival to this book: a long journey, the result of heroic effort on her part. All my gratitude to you, Susan.

– *Daphne Marlatt*