Editorial

When it Rains It Winks

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When it rains
it winks, then puckers up all over, then,
moving two more inches into metamorphosis,
shudders into pelt.
Don McKay "Pond"

Outside the window
is the rain, green
because it is summer, and beyond that
the trees and then the world,
Margaret Atwood "You Begin"

The Royal Society's annual symposium in November 2006 addressed the topic of water. One in six people in the world lacks clean drinking water, we were told. Humans are now literally "mining" groundwater, another speaker warned—mining it like gold or coal: "We remove it, and it cannot be replaced." Developed countries in particular cherish a myth (clearly intended in this case to mean "illusion" and "false") of an endless water supply. And, then, a voice said ruefully, as if turning to Canadian literature, "we have an image of ourselves as a nation of canoeists."

I was rather carelessly jotting down (and not attributing) these and other alarming observations, because my mind kept drifting to a question: what does literature, and its critical study, have to do with all this? I thought of how the narrative of Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, pushed and pulled by a deep and ancient Aboriginal knowledge of water routes, meanders, as water moving through landforms at once deposits and erodes. And, since the connection between the novels is inescapable, I thought of the intricate aspiration of hundreds of water images in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*.

A few weeks after the syposium, I read Don McKay's "Pond." "Pond," McKay's exquisitely delayed, suspended syntax announces, "takes [everything] in": it "declines[s]" "nothing." Such poetic fullness seemed to add the dimension I'd been listening for. In an exuberantly restrained freshet of water vocabulary, McKay subtly reminds that each water verb—"been rush

been drip been / geyser"—is also a noun. And so, of course, is "pond" a noun-verb. The small, confined body of still water is also a movement, both instinctive and planetary, a gathering together. The narrative of the poem might follow the elusive, invisible, vital cycle of transpiration that keeps our animal body, and the planet, breathing and nourished. Look in a pond, McKay wonders, supposing a new Narcissus:

> would the course of self-love
> run so smooth with that exquisite face
> rendered in bruin undertone . . . ?

To pond is to ponder the "pollen, heron, leaves, larvae, greater / and lesser scaup" that the pond takes in and is. And looking at this wholeness, the human bears can't help but see themselves composed of earth and decomposing into earth.

"Pond" is my favourite poem at the moment. This claim is sufficiently adolescent that it's worth keeping because it might launch the envoi that seems demanded of any retiring Editor. Just recently I was being interviewed with video camera rolling: as a final question, the interviewer asked "What is your favourite book?" To which I replied with evasive conviction: it's whatever book I am teaching at the moment. *As You Like It* is as important as *King Lear*; Edgar Lear as valuable as John Donne; Daphne Marlatt as audacious as Anne Carson.

I hope some principle hides in this glib and familiar response. If the book I am teaching tomorrow is my favourite, I am keeping myself as fully open as possible to its possibilities and connections, to its patterns and dreams. I want to allow it to make its meanings, to connect in ways I'd never thought of, to prompt deep feeling in my students.

I remember being asked a similar question not too long after I began teaching Canadian literature at UBC in 1978. "Who is *your* best author?" challenged one of my colleagues slightly imperiously. "Well," I stumbled, "Canadian literature has so many authors worth reading I don't really want to think of any single one as *best*." "Mine," came the abrupt response, designed to close off the barely opened discussion, triumphantly—"is Shakespeare."

Thirty years later I still like my hesitant position—I'm more convinced of tentativeness now. Sometimes my favourite piece of Canadian writing these days does not even fit most categories of Canadian literature. Canadian liter-

ature has evolved in this capacious, open way. *As For Me and My House* is my favourite Canadian novel. But I have not taught it for years. Maybe it will become my favourite again.

A sense of being possessed by every verb seems to be economically expressed in the opening lines of a poem generously addressed to me in Robert Kroetsch's *Advice to My Friends*:

> Let the surprise surprise you, I said
> (or should have)

In that curiously permissive imperative, in that half-swallowed redundancy stirs a manifesto of sorts. It speaks not only about being open to the unexpected, about being willing to be surprised, but of creating surprise, of not wanting to reduce the wonder. The *sur* in surprise signals something in addition to the *prise*, something beyond or above the *taking*, some attitude that allows that everything has the capacity to astonish.

"The rain," McKay observes, in "Five Ways to Lose Your Way":

> after you've watched it for awhile,
> seems to discover stillness in itself and,
> though it keeps on falling,
> pauses. Each drop
> equivocates and would,
> were it possible, ebb back
> up its plummet.

But of course it is possible. The poem makes it so. As it words itself, the poem uncovers its surprise. By making the ordinary strange in a twist of syntax and image, McKay makes us alert to reciprocating pond and rain. When we let the surprise surprise us, we discover hope, the pond winks within a culture of perpetual environmental crisis that might lead only to desperation or inaction. Let poems mottle the chemical analyses of groundwater. Let poems texture the bulleted precision of public policy papers. Let's be pond, touching and taking in—with generous restraint—the wealth and limits of our planet.