

Convince Me in Couplets

Laurie Ricou

Each poem is another way
to say: *convince me*.
—Sue Goyette “And After”

- Rigorous scansion aside, *selfish* rhymes with *shellfish*. That realization is sufficient for a poem. The poet will approach that blurred and accidental echo with absolute conviction: the aural connection surely also contains an emotional and intellectual connection. I learned from Ricardo Sternberg’s *Bamboo Church* (McGill-Queens UP \$16.95) this essence: that selfish is just another way of hiding, of moving, of breathing underwater. And Sternberg learned it from trying a sestina. Arranging words according to strict rules brings unruly surprises.

Stated in the baldest possible way, the distinction is this: the purpose of prose is to be useful, to serve something, whereas the purpose of poetry is to be of no use, to serve nothing. Prose is an instrument; poetry is an end in itself. (Charles B. Wheeler, *The Design of Poetry*).

- This is not an editorial. Or its editorial opinion is bland. Poetry is valuable. Pay attention. That’s it.
- Pay attention to Lien Chao’s *More Than Skin Deep* (TSAR Publications \$16.95). Chao describes herself as a part-time “housewife . . . property manager . . . teacher . . . writer.” Or, at least the “I” in one of her poems “A Chinese Housewife, Eh?” outlines this biography. Another poem tells us about an “I” classified as a “third world woman” who no longer attends the MLA. These are wry, teasing and yet polemical poems. Chao is bemused more often than she’s angry: her poetry depends on recounting an incident, then reversing perspective on it; call it an anecdotal chiasmus. Chao explains that she wrote these poems in English, then translated them into

Chinese—the poems are presented in a facing bilingual format. I wish she had told us more about the “adaptations . . . that bring the two fundamentally different languages closer.” But the poems teach adaptation. In a fundamental way, the purpose of Chao’s poems is to be useful.

- In this issue of *Canadian Literature* we publish five articles. None is on poetry.
- One of Hannah Main-van der Kamp’s poems is titled “Was Blind but Now I Shimmee.” I have not quite figured out what “shimnee” means, but I want to find out. Although I am not sure about shimnee, I am convinced that bad puns and extravagant neologisms might make good poetry. See bp Nichol; see Gerard Manley Hopkins. Given that the title of Main-van der Kamp’s fourth book is *According to Loon Bay* (St. Thomas Poetry Series 383 Huron Str. Toronto M5S 2G5 \$20.00), *shimnee* might be one of the sounds gurgling in the call of a large loon. This poetry dances the shimmy—(what was that?). For a moment some swaying is noticeable; and then it dissipates. Both syntax and diction vibrate a bit off center, often delightfully shaking the reader’s perception. The poet inserts a verbal shim here and there to level things off. And poetry shimmers. Main-van der Kamp writes a lot of bird-watching poems, and flights into Biblical mythology. Amazing and graceful.
- Bravo to McGill-Queens University Press for committing to a poetry series. It has created a fine set of 5 x 7 elegantly designed volumes (small enough to hide). Ricardo Sternberg writes as zestily on “duplexity” as on mules in Greece: his is the oldest subject—the intellectual kinetics of love. When there’s “said not a word,” Sternberg says a word. This fine series, in delicious irony, is named for a novelist: The Hugh MacLennan Poetry Series.

A poem is what happens when a poet rediscovers. . . . In making [the poem], the poet learns what it is that he has rediscovered. Thus a child, when it begins to speak, learns what it is that it knows. And as a child will talk to itself, with no one around to hear, so in the poem the poet, it might be said, is talking to himself.
(John Hall Wheelock *What is Poetry?*)
- Jean Greenberg’s *Turning Dirt into Jewels* (Wolsak and Wynn \$15.00) is worth having just for the second poem in the book, “Dale Chihuly.” Greenberg muses on the audacious, absurd project of transporting Alaskan glaciers to build an ice wall in the Negev desert. As sculptures, the icebergs express the peaceful cooling of overheated animosities, their melting is spontaneous, environmentally improvisational performance art. Greenberg marvels at the ancient integrity of art work, at the “kinetic” knowing of the utterly useless.

Somewhere suppressed in the restrained accounting of growing a glass mountain lies a teasing questioning of how artist relates to signature. How is it that a host of glass blowers, publicists and copyright monitors combine to build artworks and be Chihuly. It's a question, slightly tilted, that Greenberg asks of her own words (*Turning Dirt* is her first book, at age 61): what is their origin? whose are they? did I plan them? where did the patterns come from? Joe Rosenblatt's skittish pen and ink drawings flit through the book, appropriately evoking both irony and delight in otherness.

- If you imagine yourself to be apolitical, it's difficult to come up with an opinion piece every three months. Few literary journals even try. The only subject I have strong views on today is that we have too many books of poetry on our review shelves—too many dedicated word-people published by more dedicated word-people often in elegantly designed artefacts—that are not getting noticed. So, if I pick a few titles, more or less by chance, and feature them, up-front, in the journal that should review all of them, maybe those few glimpses will be an argument to pay attention.
- I was startled to see, in the material accompanying the Public Lending Rights payout (February 2005), that a special formula is required for poetry. So few public libraries buy so few books of poetry, that the program's mandate to "protect Canada's cultural identity" requires an adjusted poetry-factor. Write a book on prairie fiction, and you still get \$301.70 a year 35 years after publication. Write a book of prairie poems and the PLR needs to add a "hit" for your title to provide you with even a token share of the "rights" budget.
- Among the 47 current Ph.D. students in English at UBC, five are doing theses on poetry. I assume comparable proportions exist across the country.
- In manuscript form, Steve McOrmond's *Lean Days* (Wolsak and Wynn \$15.00) won the Alfred G. Bailey Prize from the Writers' Federation of New Brunswick. The final section of the book, a 20-poem sequence "The Discography of Silence (Poems about Glenn Gould)," makes deft use of abstractions to perform the word-worker's aspiration "to understand the inner workings / of a piece of music." In humming anaphora McOrmond creates a poetics of waiting: "Glenn Gould is a slow-moving disturbance. . . . Glenn Gould is the condition of remove—"
- Sue Goyette's poems are an extended homage to all the poets. To Rilke and Neruda especially. And to ee cummings and John Thompson—to Elizabeth Bishop and Georgia O'Keefe and Charles Schultz's Snoopy. "O how we

believed” she sings in half-ironic tribute, “in every one of the songs // we heard the word love in.” Convincing us of the “family” of word, of song.

- Ricardo Sternberg might be defining poetry in his “Kinetic Study”: “subtle undulations, / microscopic curlicues, / eddies of movement.” Poetry shimmies.
- The Poetry in Transit program, in many cities, puts poems on the move. You can’t put an oblong novel up on an overhead poster. It won’t travel. But when you’re trying to stay upright in a bus, you must read and read and read those few lines. You read advertisements for language: they convince us in couplets.
- Sue Goyette’s *Undone* (Brick Books \$16.00) reminds me of Carol Shields’ *Unless*. Many of her poems pause over a single un-word, and in hesitating emphasis, often in italics, an apparently unpoetic word emerges as a “hinge of being.” Convince me, she demands, as if to convince herself that the poem must be something more than an undoing. She wants to believe that the poem supersedes the word undone: “let me speak directly, / let me step from these line breaks and unbutton / the metaphors.” The line breaks. Undone. The poem is in hiding:

Convince me, convince me in couplets,
in sonnets, in trees, in forests, in plaid shirts with the blue paint
of bedroom on the sleeves.

Goyette’s “con” is tricky: it’s together, and against, and with. It resists the need for convincing.



Canadian Literature *mourns the loss of a contributor, colleague, and friend of the journal. Gabriele Helms’ work on auto/biography, collaborative processes, genre, food, and contemporary fiction has been an important contribution to the field of Canadian Literature for over a decade. She was a generous, funny, and passionate advocate of Canadian writing. Her book Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels is reviewed in this issue. Gabi died in Vancouver, December 2004.*