

Home Economics

Kevin McNeilly

For Christina Sylka

1.

In “Overdue Pilgrimage to Nova Scotia,” a five-sonnet tribute that first saw publication in the *New Yorker* in 1989 and was subsequently collected in his posthumous *A Scattering of Salts*, James Merrill retraces Elizabeth Bishop’s homecoming to Great Village. He comes upon images and lines from her Nova Scotian poems and stories still being enacted, half a century later, almost timelessly, in the small and quaint world he discovers there: Esso stations, school primers, north-side moss and prim black hats. Even the suds in a car-wash recall Bishop’s “The Shampoo”. His homage is underscored by a tension between visionary chaos and rational sanity, a dichotomy that, as Merrill is well aware, informs the text both thematically and structurally, and that for Bishop more often than not resolved itself in lyric restraint. Onto the uneventful calm of her childhood town an echo of the past descends, suffusing it with what she describes, in the opening lines of “In the Village” (from her *Collected Prose*), as a strangely hushed scream:

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies. . . . The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came to live there, forever—not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village.

That sustained, inaudible noise marks off what endures “there,” a certain tactile immutability in this bygone and ever-present place. It is the distracted voice of her mentally ill mother, committed when the poet was very young to a sanitarium, and whom she would never see again; it is the sound of sustained loss, essential lack. By the story’s close, Bishop’s forever has

modulated with a pressing cognizance of mortality, of decrepitude. Small objects, the precursors to those in Merrill's poem, mark this muting:

All those other things—clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream—are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal?

Ephemera—small, homely, “other” things that constitute the “almost-lost”—become vestiges of an endurance, as well as indicators of the delicate collapse into which Bishop's writing casts its cold eye.

Bishop's broken, rural eternity contrasts compellingly with the epigone aestheticism of Charles G.D. Roberts's reverie over the Tantramar marshes, as the poet seeks to preserve through poetry—however self-deluding and fictive, however precious a “darling illusion”—a memorial vision immune to “the hands of chance and change.” Bishop's Tantramar, passed on a bus in “The Moose,” offers only a fleeting “smell of salt hay.” If poetry can produce an artificial and temporary hedge against “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world” (as she writes in “In the Waiting Room”), an assertion, however precarious, of balance—of a momentarily timeless, nostalgic stasis—then Bishop's efforts are characteristically muted, preposessed by formal humility and quietly ironic dissociation. Merrill's eulogy echoes the echo, in its appropriately modest yet involuted textual economy:

The child whose mother had been put away
 Might wake, climb to a window, feel the bay
 Steel itself, bosom bared to the full moon,
 Against the woebegone, cerebral Man;
 Or by judicious squinting make the noon's red
 Monarch grappling foreground goldenrod
 Seem to extract a further essence from
 Houses it dwarfed.

Romantic gestures toward remaking a world in metaphor—bared bosoms and eternal abstraction—are reduced to seeming, to deliberate shimmers in a squint that only appear as little glammers, visionary gleams; that further essence, that wonderful bafflement, Merrill suggests—rightly, I think—can only ever be for Bishop tempered by, or better temperate in, her need to take hold, to hang tight: a passionate patience, or as Merrill puts it, a “pent-up fury,” waiting. What might have passed for the “visionary grain” in her work, “Silver-stitched . . . As by a tireless, deeply troubled inmate,” moderates into an art that “refused to tip the scale of being human / By adding unearned weight,” and stays put, clear-sighted, refrained.

Remarkable in both Bishop and Merrill is a specific verbal absence. “Your village,” Merrill opens, “touched us by not knowing how.” Houses, rooms, a shrine, a world, a space, are all hers, all “there” as she says in her story, but are never quite named the way it feels they ought. One word here remains unspoken, unspeakable: home. (Even when, in her story, she finally pronounces it, the word marks exclusion and inadmissibility: “Back home, I am not allowed to go upstairs.”) Any return immediately becomes leave-taking, an assertion of necessary distance, and a refusal to come to rest. (“We’re off—Excuse our dust!” Merrill chimes.) Poetry, even when it confesses, even when it finds a purchase in autobiography, is no more than an act of passing through; it can never quite step back again into a familiar landscape, now blurred as if observed through a bus window, or into the comforts of what once felt stable, whole, or fixed. Merrill’s tribute, like Bishop’s own migratory geography, is the work of a poetic tourist, seeing the sights and taking notes—“Gathering phrases for tomorrow’s cards”—but restless. It makes use of the world, converting it to verbiage, rather than living in it. Personal possession, laying claim, and impersonal dissociation, unknowing, mesh in Merrill’s work in the same breath: “Your village”—“*my* village,” as Bishop asserts—“touched us by not knowing how.” Merrill can offer Bishop, properly, only an homage that tries to refuse its poetic excesses, the unnecessary fictions of homecoming or the easily belied charms of knowing, having, dwelling. The poor mimesis of inflated convention would have made her cringe, he thinks, especially his own dry self-consciousness: “What tribute could you bear / Without dismay?” Her work, read through Merrill or on its own, certainly, locates her in a striking liminality, a detached language, that Paul Celan once named in a speech *unverloren*, unlost. She writes across a presence that can only refuse, even as it embraces, the existential given of being there, of being echoed there: the almost-lost.

The “judicious squinting” in Merrill’s text anticipates the vatic precision of “Poor Bird,” a formal gloss on Bishop’s “Sandpiper,” from P. K. Page’s *Hologram* (1994). The fraught visionary mechanics of Bishop’s lyric are expanded in Page’s literally interstitial poem, written between Bishop’s lines as commentary, or digression, or response, as she describes a bird’s uncertain hunt along a beach:

So the search began—the endless search
that leads him onward—a vocation
year in, year out, morning to evening,
looking for something, something, something.

Pecking down the strand, hungry, the sandpiper is a displaced figure of the poet—a student of Blake, Bishop calls him, following his visionary calling “in a state of controlled panic”; for the painter-writer Page, the bird styles himself a misdirected “Seurat (pointilliste) / or a molecular physicist,” stabbing at the sand. At moments, however, for both poets, as when their voices coincide at the poem’s close, a glint catches his attention:

Yet when his eye is sharp and sidewise seeing
oh then the quotidian, unexceptional sand is
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

The italicized lines are Bishop’s, and the roman belong to Page. Typography aside, Page’s text is as porous as it is strict, and succeeds poetically, as an undismayed tribute, to the degree that two distinct voices interpenetrate, tracing out, as she puts it in her note on the poems, “[a] curious marriage—two sensibilities intermingling.” A poem, especially this formal *glosa* for Bishop, is a means of seeing and hearing “sidewise,” not of melding two languages so much as releasing oneself into the give-and-take of a conversation, and plotting a verbal trajectory, diagonally, toward that other person, that other voice. “Uninnocent,” Bishop writes in careful partials in “Conversation,” “these conversations start, / and then engage the senses, / only half-meaning to.” Page points out the pleasures of poetic subjection when she describes the generic constraints of the gloss: “I liked being controlled by those three reining rhymes—or do I mean reigning?—and gently influenced by the rhythm of the original.” What distinguishes this form, its guiding principle, is reversal, since by “constructing the poem backwards—the final line of each stanza is, in effect, the starting line.” This reversal is not only stylistic, but conceptual; poetry is reciprocal, a returned gift. The rearticulations that Merrill and Page produce—drawing suitable lines from Bishop’s cautiously freighted sentences, unfinished and refinishing her architectures—attempt a kind of homing. They want to return her to her, to give her back something of the order that she has given them. They want to correspond. What they create, properly speaking, are poetic economies.

Those economies, however much we might imagine Bishop’s retroactive protests, are essentially governed by gender. Gender, in fact, offers us a name for that network of exchange and reciprocity, for that economy itself. Gender is a mode of poetic—that is, fabricated, home-made—giving, of giftedness. Page’s poem is a marriage between women. “The poets of my youth were almost all male,” she writes. “To find what I needed I had to

jump forward in time to Elizabeth Bishop.” What she needs formally—borrowed lines into which she can write herself with adequate grace—is also feminine, here, just as woman to woman, in Merrill’s tribute and throughout Bishop’s work, mother to daughter, or lover to lover, or friend to friend, connectives make their uneasy peace, as she writes in “O Breath”:

Equivocal, but what we have in common’s bound to be there,
whatever we must own equivalents for,
something that maybe I could bargain with
and make a separate peace beneath
within if never with.

Being “if never with,” unlost, characterizes a bargain, a trade between intimates, an interstice within which a subject can articulate itself as gendered, self-making and unmade—I, he, she, one—or, as Merrill put it in the resonant title of his own memoir, can discover “a different person.”

2.

It turns out I went to junior high just a few miles from Great Village, in North River, a municipality just outside of Truro, Nova Scotia. Mine must have been the last generation in which boys were compelled to take “Industrial Arts”—metalworking, carpentry and drafting—while girls were forced into “Home Economics.” (The three parallel units in their class are still a mystery to me, and as a teenager I never dared to ask, but I think they consisted of cooking, sewing and household management.) We had no choice: the genders were rigorously separated, and streamed. You became one or the other, and the right one at that.

Categories, particularly the bifurcations of gender, if we attend to the nature of their terminologies, can be enthralling. The word economics, for instance, comes from the Greek οἰκονομία, meaning, literally, home-management. “Home Economics,” in other words, is a redundancy; economies are always forms of orchestration and circulation centred on the οἶκος, the hearth. Economies inevitably turn inward, home. Given that they are inherently disciplined and disciplinary, the mechanics through which girls are supposed bestowed, at least institutionally, their socio-sexual identities, home would appear to be essentially feminine. But home, we need to remember, is also a construct, and for Bishop essentially displaced and uncertain. Poetry, as ποιεῖν, refers to craft, to making; the junior-high boys were diligently learning, in the Greek sense, to be poets, artisans. But when economies reveal themselves as productions, as networks of making, then the categories

themselves begin to collapse into one another; a poetic economy—inherently contravening the givens, the established rules of engendering—makes its home in the instabilities of division and difference. It returns the gift.

I have been making covert reference to Anne Carson's brilliant set of lectures on Simonides of Keos and Paul Celan, *Economy of the Unlost*. Poetry, situated by Carson at the emergence of symbolic exchange from cultures of barter, positions itself as a liminal gift, at once substantial and abstracted. Its liminality is created in the duplicitous and unresolved tensions between the aesthetic and the economic, in what I have been suggesting (*pace* Carson) constitutes gender: an irresolution. The materiality of the gift—toward which, I think, the memorial texts of Bishop, Merrill and Page aspire—resists appropriation by representational structures, and wants connection, unmediated contact:

Within a gift economy, . . . objects in exchange form a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver. . . . A gift is not a piece broken off from the interior life of the giver and lost into the exchange, but rather an extension of the interior of the giver, both in space and in time, into the interior of the receiver.

Translated into symbolic form, abstracted into value, coin, image, or note, the gift can no longer ground itself in human presence, and loses its bond, its homebound sureness. It estranges itself, or, as Marx would say, becomes alienated: "Money denies such extension, ruptures continuity and stalls objects at the border of themselves. Abstracted from space and time as bits of saleable value, they become commodities and lose their life as objects." Carson reminds us that, in ancient Greece, the word *xenos* had two meanings that, in our present age, seem contradictory, but within the economy of the gift need not be so: guest and host, stranger and familiar. This "reversible terminology"—think of Page writing backwards—suggests the "reciprocal character" of the "connective tissue between giver and receiver": a return. But that return, viewed along the axis of language, a symbolic economy, is lost in translation, as it becomes commodity. "Commodification," Carson asserts, "marks a radical moment in the history of human culture," radical, that is, in the sense of both *radix*—rooted—and resistant. Carson recuperates Simonides as a poet grounded in this destabilizing shift:

Finding himself born into a society where traditions of gift exchange coexisted with commodity trade and a flourishing money economy, balanced on a borderline between two economic systems and inserted into the disintegrating consciousness of that time, he took a naked view. He uncovered his eyes in both directions.

The tribute as an exchange within language, as conversation, becomes what Carson, through Simonides, names χάρις, “grace”: “Grace is the strange and impetuous currency of [the poet’s] transaction.” Like *xenos*, *charis* is

semantically reversible and includes in its lexical equivalents favor, gift, goodwill given or received, payment, repayment, gratification, pleasure afforded or pleasure returned, charity, grace, Grace. In other words, *charis* is the generic name for the whole texture of exchanges that constitutes a gift economy as well as for the piety that guarantees them.

But even as Carson aims to decode and to recover the bygone etymology of giving, what clearly emerges in her list of meanings are economies of the symbolic: the suffusion of commodity tropes can’t be helped, in English. Alongside Carson, in other words, we reach back through the degraded condition of our present language toward some point of contact, of happening. And in so doing, we become duplicitous ourselves: “Closer to both art and what we are” as Merrill’s tribute puts it. Or perhaps, as Carson writes in *Autobiography of Red*, we enter “a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste,” seeking an aesthetic—sensation, impact, presence—but always mediated by nervous abstraction. Consciousness is not contact; taste is not tongue, but its interpretation, its reflex. We are, as Geryon says, “neighbours of fire,” proximate and closer, or in Bishop’s terms there but never quite here. Poetry is not fire, but its neighbour, its vessel, its host: hearth, οἶκος.

In Carson’s long poem “The Glass Essay” (1995), a woman writer comes to terms with a breakup and the loss of love by returning home to her mother in the Brontë country of western England, and by dream analysis and therapy; the text is a displaced talking cure. Our narrator engages critically with the writing of the Brontë sisters, particularly the poetry of Emily, to rethink her “lonely life” and “ungainly body.” Carson, typically, fuses (or, more accurately, counterpoints) lyric with discursive commentary, autobiography with literary history, narrative with psychoanalytic reflection. As in *Autobiography of Red*, where scholarly apparatus conjoins with reworkings of Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson, or *Economy of the Unlost*, where an elaborate cross-talk among Simonides, Celan and Karl Marx, among others, works itself out, here in an extended poem Carson produces a poetic economy. Her writing—in a less formalist, though no less formal, mode than that of Page or Merrill—operates between texts, as connective perhaps, but at least in poetic exchange, in transit.

“The Glass Essay,” however, presents that economy in a carefully gendered

context. “Oh I see,” says the poet’s mother, “you’re one of Them.” “One of whom?” the narrator responds, her voice gone “very high,” but of course the answer has already been given, in her mother’s first words to her that morning: “Those women!” Carson plays ironically with the stereotype of the shrill feminist, but the critical reception of her work has already been framed by the politics of gender. Harold Bloom, writing in the spring 2000 issue of *The Paris Review*, can easily be pressed into service as an academic straw man. His praise of Carson there is as close to unequivocal as he can come:

Anne Carson, a Canadian, is quite remarkable. She has really captured me. I have been reading her obsessively over the past months. A stunning writer. One of her heroines is Gertrude Stein and another is Emily Dickinson. She is a disciplined version of Gertrude Stein; she is not of the caliber of Emily Dickinson, but then who is? In prose and verse I’d rather read Carson than Miss Stein [. . .]. Anne Carson has really come along . . . a sudden explosion recently with the remarkable *Autobiography of Red*.

Within a few pages, however, Bloom starts ranting about “*feministas*” and the canonization, apparently because of their gender, of “incredibly bad, minor poets, now raised to great eminence indeed. This is no joke.” Carson, apparently, is an exception to Bloom’s rule, more poet than woman, despite the clearly female lineage in which he locates her. What is worth pursuing in these remarks (and it isn’t Bloom, whose authoritarian posturing is just too easy a target) is precisely how Carson articulates gender in “The Glass Essay,” as if to anticipate comments such as Bloom’s, as an all-too-serious critical joke; she quotes Charlotte Brontë on her sister’s poems, fixing her terms of praise on an energetic and typically masculine imagination in her work, “Not at all like the poetry women generally write.” Traded across this reiteration is the memorial capacity of Carson’s own text, as a rereading of the work of her literary forebears—“This is my favourite author”—that draws Emily Brontë into what she calls, in *Economy of the Unlost*, embodied memory. “This poet,” and she means Simonides, but could as easily be referring to Brontë or to herself, “is someone caught between two worlds, remembering both. His flame is in every grain. For him, memory is both commodity and gift, both wage and grace.” Suspended between text and dream, a poetic tourist on a “visit” to her mother—the visit Bishop was never able to reenact—Carson recasts the poetry women write in a dark comedy of critical interchange, reading across her own ungainly presence to rediscover a balance between remembering and imaginative desire.

“Girls,” she asserts with dry self-consciousness in “The Glass Essay,” “are

cruellest to themselves.” To shake free of the “many ways of being held prisoner,” the gendered typecasting (“YOU KNOW MEN, / she was saying”) and wilful subjection to which she is categorically subject as a woman in poetry, Carson doesn’t reject her language so much as extend its purview, graciously, to disclose connectives, a corporeal and poetic economics in the last lines of her poem: “It was not my body, nor a woman’s body, it was the body of us all.” This is not a humanistic elision of gender politics, but a widening of concern, to suggest both the permeability and the reciprocity of homage and exchange; by reading, let alone responding or rewriting, we have been implicated, gendered, all of us. In one of her first books, *Eros, the Bittersweet* (1986), Carson focuses momentarily on a rhythmic excess, the blunder of an epic line attempted by Plato in his *Phaedrus*: “Our words are too small, our rhythms too restrictive.” Eros, abstracting the sexual, anticipates the economic concerns of Carson’s later work; poetry emerges—she recasts Marx in *Economy of the Unlost*—with “a surplus value that far exceeds its own calculus.” Elizabeth Bishop’s calculated refusal to exceed her means becomes in Carson the occasion of poetic grace, giving itself away.

3.

Poems, Simonides is reported to have asserted, are pictures that talk. Images and forms, committed to memory in language, are not so much drawn out of time in the poetic as they are temporalized, rhythmized. Ekphrasis, literally *ut pictura poesis*, is more complex and crafty than word-painting; it is a giving over of the figural into kinesis, of mute vision into verbal abundance (and along this line, the old saw that “a picture is worth a thousand words” takes on a new meaning). Carson explains the expansive effort to translate between media, to find a verbal correspondence:

[Simonides] is painting a picture of things that brings visible and invisible together in the mind’s eye as one coherent fact. The coherence is a poetic conjuring, but the fact is not. Together they generate a surplus value that guarantees poetic vocation against epistemological stinginess. To make “paintings that talk” is to engage in a conversation that is more than words and beyond price.

That is, in verbal excess the visual discovers rhythm as its call. In *Two Bowls of Milk* (1998), Stephanie Bolster enters into that conversation with open eyes. As with Bishop, her work finds itself displaced, at once homing and homeless: “that place I left was never mine.” “I’m out in it,” she asserts, standing in a “Flood, Deer Lake, B.C.,” positioned “here / where the path was last week,” grounded through liquid uncertainty; interrogatives rather than sureties

mark her closure, replaying the shifting lost-and-found of Elizabeth Bishop's "there": "When was I not out there? / If I leave here, where will I be?" The rhythm characteristic of Bolster's writing emerges even in these brief lines as essentially recursive, a doubling back: verbal textures revisit themselves, dilate, unsettle, distill. Hers is a give and take of grace at work.

In a series of poems written on paintings and other art objects in the National Gallery of Canada, Bolster concentrates on representations of women, of women's bodies, and finds herself implicated in and identifying with the figures to which, to whom, she bears witness. Identification, for her, is not mimesis, however, not imposture, but a struggle over the often misdirected and excessive mirror-effects that inhere in the work of description itself. ("Inept at everything except perception," she ventriloquises in "Chemistry," "and even there subjective.") In "The Beheld," a meditation on a painting by Fred Ross, Bolster modulates from a refusal to collapse subject into portraiture—"Not mine," "Not me"—to the seductive allure of identification—"I know what she wants"—to the embarrassment of being contained, exposed: "I avoided lenses." Scopis stricture, in a painting by Gustav Klimt—"I narrow in your eyes"—collapses viewer into the viewed; this meld, however, is immediately countered with a resilient opacity in work by Jack Shadbolt: "she does not recognize / any of our shut-tight shapes." Bolster's texts map out a tension in vision, a conflict that may at first appear dialectical, wanting development or transformation as it vacillates between identity and differentiation, but is better understood as irresolute, always "plural, rampant," overflowed. Negation, in Bolster, is not diametrical but generative, excessive. "The interesting thing about a negative," Carson writes, "is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement." "I am," Bolster asserts in a broken identity, "no more myself: bones pitched inside a tent of skin; / fear; one bound hand and the other binding." Describing a body cast by Colette Whiten, Bolster shifts between positive and negative space, the object and its shape, as an explicit concern with the visual fabrication of gender: "All that remains / is the space a woman once took." But as writer and commentator, she assays her blindness to the ways in which she, as a viewer, is implicated in the act, the art, of seeing, of reinscribing that negative form: "It was so dark that I was blind / to shapes my face engraved inside." Writing out, making pictures talk, is more than an assertion of sympathy or likeness. It is, in Carson's terms, "fuller"; and the word, the figure, for that excess is inevitably woman.

4.

Naming, figuring, this complex set of relations, this economy, in a single term can appear reductive, and it's important to insist on the tensions and pluralities that inform the word. The venerable Victorian etymologist Walter Skeat asserts that "woman" is a "curious corruption" of the Anglo-Saxon compound *wif-man*, which literally means "woman-man." Modern readers—including Skeat himself—hear in the Old English *wif* its descendant "wife" (a potential meaning that the term clearly did have, much like the later English "mistress" or the German *Frau*), and thus associate the word "woman" with second-hand dependency and subjugation. But Skeat also points out that the Anglo-Saxon *man*, like the German *Mensch* (not *Mann*), could signify both men and women. This ambiguity means is that it is possible to read "woman" radically, from its roots, not as derivative or subjugated, but as an economy of gender-positions. Collided with one another, they destabilize any absolute, bifurcated categories (like boys and girls, for instance), opening those positions up to negotiation, from all angles. Possibilities multiply, rather than divide: "It was not my body, nor a woman's body, it was the body of us all."

I don't mean this digression on etymology as an exercise in pedantry, but as a way of suggesting a verbal strategy, a poetic means, of refusing an essentialist feminism. Call it home economics: a gift exchange, a return. Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* centres on giving back, through poetry, to the women who have come before her, who have shaped her polyphony, her many-voiced speech:

Grandmothers hold me. I must pass all that I possess,
every morsel to my children. These small gifts
to see them through life. Raise my fist. Tell the story.
Tear down barbed-wire fences.

Telling re-connects past and future; stories are forms of possession and containment, but also vehicles of resistance and excess, passages. They economize, in that they produce and locate a domestic centre, the *oikos* around which family gathers itself, and in that they also extend, translate, pass on. Halfe attaches stories to women's names, a quiet genealogy now uttered, given not only familial but public voice:

Oh Sarah, Adeline,
Oh Emma, Bella,
tongueless in the earth.
Oh *Nōhkomak*,

your Bundles I carry inside,
the full moon dancing
beyond my wails.
I've seeped into
your faces,
drowned in the pictures
I have gathered
and cannot
hold.

Pictures of absent women, like Bolster's ekphrastic work, offer both identity—in their porousness, in their internalization—and difference—in their imaginative instability, their refusal to be grasped. "Woman," a word that recurs at least a hundred times, mostly in a list of names, in the first five pages of Halfe's book, frames this intricate set of relations and interdependencies; the women on whom she calls remain distinctive, various and specific, even as they are gathered together. Her task, as she remarks in a note at the book's close, is to honour their lives, poetically:

Although I chant and direct my prayers with names I've grown up with, as well as created, and names I've gathered from the archives, I do not claim or profess that they represent the ideas or thoughts in this reclaiming. They are, nonetheless, my saints, and in naming them I hope to honour their contribution.

Halfe writes in tribute, in homage, not to appropriate or to overwrite those in her gathering with her own voice—in her terms, not to make them representative. Instead, what she produces, prayerfully, respectfully, is conversation, a mutual interchange.

A women's poetry, read as Halfe or Carson or Bolster or Page or Bishop creates it, is not a category but an excursion, a writing outward. By thinking through gender as a poetic economy, as a fabricated, fluid set of relations and interchanges, as gift, we can all find a means to honour, in our reading, the manifold potential in the human and to discover our connective tissues.

With this issue, Canadian Literature highlights the editorial work of Kevin McNeilly, who recently joined the journal as Associate Editor. An accomplished poet himself, he introduces this sampling of critical work on Canadian women poets. In a later issue, he will present an extended riff on Walter Benjamin, his Arcades Project and his correspondence with Adorno, and the relationship of all of these to Canadian writing. "Riff" is not an accidental choice of words. As readers of his "Word Jazz" essays in Canadian Literature #164 and #165 will be able to confirm, jazz and its literary resonances are also a subject he knows a great deal about. Add to this work on Franz Boas, Robert Bringham, and transcultural encounters, and it will be readily apparent why we were keen to bring him on board.