

Shifting Form

An Interview with Aritha van Herk¹

BEELER You've written quite a variety of texts in terms of subject matter and form. Your publications include novels, short stories and ficto-criticism. Do you feel that your writing has become more experimental over the years?

VAN HERK I think it has for various reasons, one of them being that when you begin as a writer you usually try to emulate form or fit into the parameters of genre more carefully. Once you become comfortable with genre and you recognize the extent to which you can stretch it or the extent to which you can push the envelope, then I think you're willing to play with it more. And you feel more confident about playing with it because you know it as well as you do. So, yes, I would say that I've become quite a bit more experimental, even though I haven't lost sight of the temptation of the traditional narrative, but if you know that temptation is there, you can always subvert it.

BEELER How do you feel about the categorization of works according to specific genres such as the novel, the short story, or poetry? Does this categorization still have a place within the study of "writing" or should one not attempt to make distinctions between forms?

VAN HERK Well, the distinctions will always be there, because people want to be able to fit a text into some kind of category in order to look at it. This is the critical inheritance that we have, that we need a version of apparatus as a definition. But I think that more and more we have to negotiate the question of writing as writing because so many forms are

using different techniques or different models; they are interpolating a narrative, for instance, with autobiography, taking a dramatic moment into poetry . . . there's the prose poem, the long poem . . . and so I'm even more interested in moving beyond literary genres to the whole cross-over of geography with fiction, so that for me the *geografictione* becomes a real temptation to see what you can do when you use that kind of scientific discourse. I think that even as far back as *The Tent Peg*, I'm trying to talk about the language of geology and what an incredibly beautiful language it is, even though that's a very hard core science in a lot of ways based on all of the ages of rock development. So what we have to learn is that writing is itself a vehicle for cross-pollination—or what Derrida calls contamination—and we have to give it an opportunity to do that. One of the temptations of genre is the hierarchization, so that you're now getting to a stage where theory is the highest level of criticism. Then you've got all the critical enterprises, and then you've got the primary text. For a long time the epic poem and tragedy were considered the greatest genres. Now that's shifted and, of course, all we ever pay attention to are novels, which is too bad. So I always feel that I want to work against that.

BEELER Do you believe that there are certain implications for writers who choose not to write exclusively fiction or non-fiction? For example, do funding agencies have limited notions of genre?

VAN HERK Well the funding agencies are often quite flexible, but the readership or the audience gets very annoyed. They decide that you're a novelist or a poet, and they want you to produce your next novel or your next book of poetry, and if you don't do it the way they want, they say just a minute, what are you doing? And, so I think it's a question of the readerly text which insists, or the writerly text, which insists on some participation on the part of the reader which is often more difficult for an audience to access because we have relied so heavily on the definition of genre. Now an average person going into a bookstore can say "I want a mystery novel or a feminist mystery novel, or a local regional mystery novel." At the same time this reliance on that very tight categorization means that any deviation from it makes people uncomfortable.

BEELER So readers have to become more than consumers; they have to become active participants in the reading process, and that requires some adjustment.

VAN HERK I think so, and I think that right now because readers consider themselves to be consumers instead of participants, there's resistance so that you have levels of readers. And we're in danger almost of shifting back to a medieval period where the really good readers have access to the really complex texts, and the average person buys the prefigured, the preset. One of the things that really concerns me is that literature is going to become an enclave of a privileged few. To avoid that, you can, as a writer, interact with the public and persuade people that writing is writing and that if they just fall into it, they can relax and really enjoy it.

BEELER I was wondering about a particular form that you've chosen to follow or generate ficto-criticism. What first encouraged you to head in the direction of combining fiction and criticism in your writing?

VAN HERK Well, it's not actually my term at all. It's an art criticism technique, because I think that art critics and those people who appreciated art grew very, very tired of reading art catalogues that use a particular language which we all know is used, overused, overinscribed . . . they began to write parallel narratives to the art that they were watching. It really began as a New York phenomenon in the 80s. Writing a narrative that was an art catalogue to an art show was a kind of ficto-criticism. I just found some of these intriguing because obviously the desire for narrative was embedded there as a way of escaping the codes of the criticism that was at work, and I found it intriguing. It probably had to do with the fact that criticism is only now starting to talk about itself, and it's becoming very, very insular. For a writer who does both, there's always that sense of uneasiness about anything that talks only about itself, and so I thought, this is a really interesting technique. Maybe we can use this in literary criticism; we can start moving back and forth. So the ficto-criticism that I started with evolved into *crypto-frictions*, which I really see as secret codes and as a desire to get the critic to start reading the story to uncover a kind of critical position. That's been a lot of fun for me, because for me it's play, and I think we need to recognize the gestures of play in our work, or we're going to become deeply boring. (*laughs*)

BEELER Your comment on play is interesting, because I know quite a few of your works are humorous. How do you feel about humour in your own writing?

VAN HERK I write some things that are dead serious, but I think we have to recognize the extent to which humour can cut through a lot of concrete . . . and the fascinating thing is there's a desire for seriousness that I read, particularly in critics who have been schooled in a very heavy theoretical mode (not that I am in any way against that, because I use that mode myself , and I know it , and I enjoy it). I was actually at a conference a little while ago where a young woman was talking about *Places far from Ellesmere*, and she seemed to have no sense of the parody that was going on. So I said to her, "Well what do you do with the parody and the irony?" And she said "Irony?" as if to say, "Oh, my God, you mean you were sometimes actually saying the opposite of what you meant?" And I started to laugh, and I said you have to have a sense of humour about this enterprise, whether you are writing a text that interrogates another text, or whether you are reading that text. You've got to be able to laugh at the moment of your own investigation. And that's what I try to build into it. That doesn't mean I don't think that some literature must and should always be very serious, but I think the line between those two is very permeable.

BEELER Do you think that people sometimes have difficulty seeing the humour and the irony in your work because they confuse the narrator with you, the author? Do you find it irksome when people read your works as heavily autobiographical?

VAN HERK Well, it's not just irksome; it's quite silly, because I've never been an underwear sales rep, for instance. I'm only a very good researcher, and the notion that I would have had a promiscuous life like Arachne in *No Fixed Address* is tempting, but unfortunately not true. (*laughs*) There is that, and I think you're quite right, in many ways, I think that's why critics and theorists frequently don't want to put any elements of narrative into their criticism, because there is a fear that they will then be identified with the narrative. So they maintain the Olympian objective stance, right? (*laughs*) I think it's actually up to the critics and the theorists to say, just a minute, I want to tell a story here too. And criticism is the story of how we read, so there should be more engagement with that. But yes, when people say to me, well you have a pig farm, or you have a sister like this, I always laugh and I say, it's fiction. You've probably heard me having my famous argument with Fred Wah about *No Fixed Address* where he says, "But Aritha, what about

condoms?" And I say, "But Fred, it's fiction." And he says, "But this is the age of AIDS." And I say, "But Fred, you're a poet, you know this is fiction." In fiction, you can drop the necessities of an only too over-regulated and fearsome world.

BEELER I notice that you have tried to move away from this kind of regulation, or this Olympian perspective in your writing by bringing in different types of narrative perspectives. Do you think that you've moved from a more limited form of narration, to a more open-ended narrative perspective in your work?

VAN HERK I think so. I think that now the narrative I'm employing is more like a kind of dialogue. There's a desire to dialogue, to move back and forth within the narration itself. Again, I still have a good deal of respect for straight narrative, and I employ it. The novel I've just finished, which is really big, uses a lot of very straight narrative and many elements of magic realism, so you know you're hearing a story, but you know it's slightly off. And it's also got a lot of historiography in it, which is itself a kind of interrogation of the narrative of history. But I see it more as a dialogue and as an attempt to talk back to the text and to the reader, to the listener. The writer is talking back to herself, engaged in a constant kind of questioning. There isn't this "here is the story, I'll tell you all the facts, and then you lucky reader can be a voyeur to those facts, if you're smart enough to pick them out of the details." There's something condescending about that approach that I resist.

BEELER Does this novel have a title yet?

VAN HERK It has a title, but I'm not sure it will keep it. It's called *The Anatomy Lesson*, which is itself a narrative, a famous painting.

BEELER Can you describe it?

VAN HERK It's Rembrandt's. It's a painting of a doctor in Holland in the 16th century when autopsies were being done on cadavers. And it was in the very early stages of medical analysis.

BEELER Have you included or described the painting in the text?

VAN HERK No I haven't. It's just used as a kind of trope, but I'm not sure that the book will keep that title, or if indeed anybody will want to publish this book, because it is too big for its own breeches. It's very strange because I've done some very short, spare books recently, but this book is 900 pages in manuscript.

BEELER It's been building up over the years?

VAN HERK It's a book I worked on for a long time, because it's an interrogation of the immigrant story which is again another kind of narrative that we have reified and codified, especially in Canadian literature. That was something that I wanted to take apart and ask a lot of questions about and have a dialogue with.

BEELER I'd like to talk about the formal elements in some of your earlier texts. Your first novel, *Judith*, includes a third-person limited omniscient narrator and flashbacks. However, in "Judith and *The Tent Peg*: A Retrospective" (*A Frozen Tongue* 275-83), you indicate that in an early draft of the novel, the sows were vocal narrators, telling the story from their collective first-person point of view. Do you regret not having kept the original narrative perspective? Was it a compromise that you shouldn't have made?

VAN HERK It was probably a necessary compromise; the earlier narrative was a little too cute. I think that the collective voices of the pigs are still the dominant narrative control, and if you look at the novel carefully, even though it is told in third-person limited omniscient, there's very much the sense that the animals are the ones in charge of the story. It's a shift from the Circe myth where you have Circe turning the men into pigs. Then when Ulysses comes and threatens her with his sword (very nice phallic gesture), she says, they did but become what they were, which is a wonderful line becoming what you are. I was playing with that a lot, the whole notion of the pigs speaking as being themselves capable of story because they are what they are. That was a change that was made in my negotiations with the publisher and the editor. They just felt the idea was too odd, and it would have drawn attention to itself. But any good researcher can go and find the original manuscript and see that it's there. So, in a sense, I think it's more subtle now, although it's present . . . and in another sense, I kind of regretted it, but I wasn't as adept at managing the narrative then as I would be if I were writing the novel now. I was also playing with Faulkner's story of "A Rose for Emily" where the plural town tells the story, and where you begin to see that the focus of their attention, who is Emily, is merely a reflection of all of them. So while the novel pretends that the focus of attention is Judith, it's a reflection that comes from what she has surrounded herself with.

BEELER Your second novel, *The Tent Peg* is somewhat different in form. It

includes individual chapters narrated by the central female character J.L. and numerous men, including Mackenzie, Thompson, and Jerome. How were you able to sustain J.L.'s presence in a sea of male voices?

VAN HERK Well, again because she was almost always the focus of their dialogue with one another. That was a tough one, but in many ways I'm happy with how well that novel succeeded. She is there, because she is sort of the centre. In many ways, she's the domestic presence as cook. (*laughs*) You *have* to recognize that I'm being ironic, because I could never do something like that straight. But it's also that sense that a lot of their sections talk about her as well as about what they are doing. It raises the question, how do women maintain any kind of shape or identity in a sea of male voices?

BEELER In *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (1989) Rudy Wiebe referred to *The Tent Peg* as the only northern novel he knew of written by a woman (113). How do you think *The Tent Peg* and *Places Far from Ellesmere* differ from male authored texts on northern experiences?

VAN HERK Well, that to me is a very sore spot. I think that there's been a kind of gentle consensus in Canada that the North is a male territory. And there's a refusal to read it any other way. Therefore the plethora of books that you see on the North fall very much into the male context of the North as a frontier to be exploited and explored and that it has to just lie—as Annette Kolodny would tell you—to be taken. And I'm very frustrated with that because both *Ellesmere* and *The Tent Peg* are texts about exploitation and what you do with it. It's fascinating to me because after I wrote *Places far from Ellesmere*, I received a letter from a very well-known northern scholar who told me that I had exploited the North by my literary importation of Anna Karenina. (I thought the question of the pot calling the kettle black was really fascinating.) It has become as if those critics and writers feel that there is only one way to look at these texts, and it is that male way, and they cannot see any other way. There is a kind of deliberate "What do we do with these books? They don't fit what we have decided is the metaphorical approach to the North. What are we going to do with them? I think we'll pretend that they're not there."

BEELER I'd like to ask you about the different voices in *Places Far From Ellesmere*. There are four key sections in the book Edberg, Edmonton,

Calgary, and Ellesmere as well as a number of different personae or characters. How would you identify these figures?

VAN HERK Well in using the second person throughout the book, instead of the first person or the third person, I'm doing two things, and this is, I think, the key. I'm accusing the reader, implicating the reader, seducing the reader and suggesting to the reader that the story I'm telling is actually her story. At the same time, of course, the "you" is a veiled first person narrative. Very much veiled. The moment that you use the first person, the "I", there's a pretence of intimacy that I wanted to step away from. I didn't want to use the third person because I think there is again that pretence to an objectivity that doesn't work. So by spilling all of these personae into the second person, which is almost an audiential address, again part of that dialogue, I was trying to show the multiplicity of possibilities for the reader and for the writer, who are the same and different. And so in also using Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary and Ellesmere as personae, there is the notion that a place has a character. And of course that's a very old idea, because we talk frequently about the character of London or the character of Vienna. But we have begun to neglect that recently. It's become old-fashioned to assume that a place has a character or that a place can make a character. The work I have been doing in historiography suggests that people are much more heavily inscribed by place than they think they are now. There's a notion in a postmodern world that we can live in any place, and we aren't at all touched, or scarred or tattooed by it, but I think we are. And we haven't always found a way to talk about that. We have figured out how to talk about it in architecture; I think that we're starting to talk about it in terms of its influence on visual art, but we're not sure about it in terms of narrative, and you can see this in the way, for instance, that television and film will say, ok, we're going to use Toronto, but we're going to pretend it's New York.

BEELER You've reminded me of the maps that are made for various cities in the world; a photograph of Edmonton's cityscape is apparently used to identify other cities around the world. You were also talking about the kind of transformation that goes on in one's sense of place. Perhaps because we are a more mobile society, we now have distinct identities as we move from one location to another location. We start up a new phase of our lives, and I take it this is what you were trying to incorporate into *Places far from Ellesmere* as well.

VAN HERK Let me go back to *Ellesmere*. I have Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary, and then I move to Ellesmere; in a sense there isn't a named city or a place there. It is more a geographical place. I take a woman who is so sternly and firmly rooted in places that we have attributed a literary presence to (St. Petersburg and Moscow) and re-place her in a sense. What I'm trying to do there is interrogate our notion of where things belong and how they should be where they are, and I suspect that one of the resistances to *Ellesmere* was that sense that you can't move Anna Karenina out of Russia, when in fact we do it every time we open the pages in Canada.

BEELER I see the narrative technique in *No Fixed Address* as a precursor to *Places Far From Ellesmere* in terms of your interest in experimentations with form. There are a few sections that are written in italics, and they also incorporate a kind of narrative "I" or "you." The first part of the novel reads, "You discover in your search that the fashionable woman's shape has always been a state of constant change . . . No art, no novel, no catalogue of infamy has considered the effect of underwear on the lives of petty rogues." How would you describe this narrator? Whose voice were you thinking of here?

VAN HERK In the picaresque novel—and again that is its own genre, and it's fascinating because of course the picaresque novel is what inaugurates the novel per se, the picaresque moment—there is a sense that you are following the adventures of someone, but there's never a recognition that someone is doing the following. What I wanted to do was put the follower of the picaro, or picara in this case, into the text, so that the picaresque novel cannot exist without the one who searches or follows the journey as well, whether that be a combination of reader/ researcher. In *Don Quixote*, you have to have a kind of faithful retainer, which again I'm ironically playing with, and the search for me there is both a narrative device and a genuine kind of longing—to be able to follow. In *Thelma and Louise*, for example, when we are watching those women running, there is also, of course, the cop who is following them, so there's always an intermediary. In other words, you are watching the follower or the cop who is following, but at the same time you are following, and that follower or that watcher or that pursuer almost has to be there as a side trope to the picaresque heroine (and hero, usually) as well. And that's what I wanted to do, at the same time saying to the

reader, don't forget that you're implicit, complicit with this; you are implicated in it.

BEELER You also seem to be making a connection between Arachne, underwear and the kind of knowledge that history can provide, that history is in a sense limited or that historical artefacts (which may even take the form of underwear) are limited in terms of the information that they can convey about certain periods or people.

VAN HERK They are *very* limited because we go to them and we think, well, this will give me a frame. If I go and look at all this, if I go and look at nineteenth-century Russia, I will understand why Anna Karenina is the kind of character she is, is the kind of novel she is. If I go look at Tolstoy's historiography, I will understand. It provides us with a frame, but it can be a very deceptive frame. And we have to be aware of that. In a sense we are those sleuths following the person, the trajectory of the adventurer and the historiography pretends to give us some way of following but doesn't necessarily. I'm just now finishing a piece on Florence Lasandra, the woman who was hanged as an accomplice of the Emperor Pic, a big bootlegger in the Crow's Nest. And you can go to the papers and look at the trial transcripts, and you can think that you have some version of this woman. However, you know nothing about her, in a sense, because she never actually spoke at her own trial in her own defense; all you have are the things that are said about her.

BEELER And those observations are selective as well; they could be comments constructed by a reporter.

VAN HERK Absolutely. And you can read the court transcripts and see forty witnesses, and you can say not one of them knows anything. Although together, maybe they know everything, so there's that constant interrogation, that constant dialogue with the notion that narrative will give you a kind of answer.

BEELER I'd like to consider other forms of expression such as paintings, photographs and technology, and I want to begin with the cover of *Places Far from Ellesmere* which depicts a kind of land mass; in this case it's in the shape of a woman on which writing has been superimposed. How does this visual image intersect with the content of the text?

VAN HERK Well the cover of *Ellesmere* is very important because it's a kind of collage employing map, but as you say, it has words, it has language and it has the figure of a woman, so what you have is the photograph of

what is a kind of ceramic, or plaster cast—the art that was made imposed on top of a map, a palimpsest. You are reminded of the extent to which the map pretends to be a representation of the place, and although it can be very useful for finding out where you are or where you aren't or where you want to be or where you should be and the extent to which we give it metaphorical power— it is really only a two dimensional piece of paper with different lines drawn on it. In that sense it is mere language or mere cipher, so the photograph of the woman which is put on top of that, the plaster, is a much more imagistic or evocative map because it's not a real map at all. This isn't a real island or the shape of any real island, and you can see that there are pieces that are cut out. Suddenly you'll see a grid of Calgary which is up here. It's completely . . .

BEELER Non-referential?

VAN HERK Non-referential, exactly. And yet at the same time for all its non-referentiality it is *more* referential because it suggests to you that the map is an evocation rather than an actual palimpsest of a place. The only way a map can be a real representation is if it is as large as the place that it is mapping. So for me this is a wonderful complement to the text, because it's talking about the extent to which we cannot take literally the notion of place at all and the way that the notion of place is trans-portable.

BEELER And a character like Anna Karenina is not just a Russian heroine, but she's somebody who can be imported to the Canadian landscape; she has been read by Canadian readers.

VAN HERK It would not surprise me at all if someday there would be an island in the shape of a woman and it would be called Anna Karenina up north and I'm sure all the northern scholars would be disgusted with this.

BEELER Well, maybe on your next trip up north, you can go name that island. (*laughs*)

BEELER I'm also interested in the cover of your recent collection *A Frozen Tongue*. It depicts a landscape of ice and snow.

VAN HERK The cover of *A Frozen Tongue* which depicts a painting by Jane Evans called "Crevasse" is a painting that I own and one that I am deeply, deeply attached to although people come in here, come into my home and say, "Oh my God, how can you look at that? You have to look

at winter how many months of the year? Why do you want to have that hanging in your home?" But in effect it's a fascinating diptych, because both sides are different; they're not the same. It depicts a fissure in the landscape, a break, an interrogation; it's a question, it's a dialogue, and one of the things, if you look carefully, you see is that within the crevasse, there are all these little kind of rocks or stones or phallic movements, so that there's a real notion that the landscape is not smooth, uninterrupted . . .

BEELER Pristine?

VAN HERK Pristine . . . But it is there; it is dangerous, it's fraught and at the same time there is the notion that the crevasse is a kind of feminine mysterious. It's very sexual and it's very evocative in that sense. I knew that that was going to be the cover long before the collection was published. In a sense the title article comes straight from the painting instead of the other way around, so I'm writing a narrative for the painting.

BEELER Your description of the painting sounds very much like the Romantic understanding of the sublime, or is it an inversion of this concept?

VAN HERK Well the Romantic understanding of the sublime has influenced the way that we look at landscape to the extent that we probably can't separate our eyes from it. It's completely inscribed the way we look at landscape. At the same time it's a parody; it's an inversion. The collages that are painted into the crevasses suggest what is hidden and what is there. Again, there's that humour, there's that comedy, there's that parody, that irony saying you don't know what you're going to find. And there's slippage. So both of them are present; there's a recognition that you can't escape the way that the Romantics have made us think of landscape. At the same time it's turned on its head.

BEELER There is another painting by Jane Evans in *A Frozen Tongue*. It's a painting of Aritha van Herk, the author, and you're depicted as a laughing woman wearing a mask. Do you see yourself as a trickster figure when you write?

VAN HERK Absolutely. It was very funny when she did that portrait. She drew a series of portraits of strong women that she knew, and she was having so much bloody trouble with me. She did about three of them, and finally, one day, she said "Come over, I've figured it out." And I came over and she had painted this black, sort of Zorro mask on me, and I just

laughed. And of course the artist always wears a mask; it's a necessary thing, you don't unmask yourself to the world, but the recognition that there is a mask and the fact that I was perfectly willing to put the painting in there is a way of saying, okay we are in a certain kind of carnivalesque play. *Be aware of it.*

BEELER Do you think that interviews are also subject to that definition; rather than unmasking the author, they simply serve to introduce more complicated layers, more multiple identities?

VAN HERK Oh, sure. It's a wonderful opportunity to pretend to be something one moment, and then two years later, they can say well in this interview you said . . . and you can reply, did I say that? or I never said that! And you only have to see it when you look at a book of interviews or interviews with someone who does a lot of them. For instance, if you read interviews with Margaret Atwood, you'll see that from one interview to the next, she changes her mind. And why should we not?

BEELER There are several photographs of you in *A Frozen Tongue*. A photograph can be perceived as an artistic medium as well as a form which reflects one's identity. Do you feel that these photographs fix your identity in any way?

VAN HERK No. I think that in many ways photographs are the most parodic of all forms. And you can see it. Just look at books and see how the dustjacket photograph (the face of the writer, presumably) is presented. They're presented in very high seriousness. There's never much play and there's never actually much art in them. They're usually quite awful. And so the inclusion of those family snapshots (except for one formal pose of me graduating with my husband) is presented to you with a lot of playfulness. For instance, you see that there is no wedding picture. I won't comment on that, but what is left out is as important as what is put in. I think of those pictures more as class pictures than as person pictures. For example, the little kid clutching the doll with the chickens scratching in the dirt behind her is very indicative of a lot of things. What you see is a kind of record in pictures of class transformation, but at the same time it is completely parodic. There's the picture of me as bush cook with some of the guys I was cooking with in the tent in the Yukon. You cannot look at those pictures and think that this is an attempt to replicate van Herk's life, or that it will give you an idea of what she looked like in different times and places. Jane Evans' painting

of me in the mask is a sign, and then there's the picture of me and Jane Evans sitting together and laughing in this kind of mutual "she's the artist, I'm the writer" exchange. I think there is a desire on the part of audience to look at a photograph and to see it as being really representative. If you've read for instance, *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields, where she's got the photographs embedded in the text and then you go and read the text and it says, for instance, that Mercy Goodwill is taller than her husband; you go and look at the picture. It says Mercy Goodwill and her husband, and he's taller than her, and you say "wait a minute." There's a disjunction between the photograph that we're given, whether it's a real picture of these people or not, and what's described in the text. So you have to begin to ask questions about those things.

BEELER And it's not such a hard concept to accept, in a sense, because people are always *posing* for photographs.

VAN HERK Exactly. Photographs are all in many ways very constructed. I want to do more with that, actually, because I have a lot of photographs of myself and my women friends in different playful modes. One of my Spanish friends who teaches at the University of Oviedo came to the Calgary Stampede, so we went to one of those photo booths. This girl comes up and says, "So what do you want to be, dance hall girls?" And my friend looks at her and says "No, we want to be desperados!" So there's this great picture of us dressed in the chaps and the hats, and we're holding our guns to each other. The playfulness of that is a different kind of narrative text saying we will usurp the extent to which the photograph pretends to exert authority.

BEELER There are quite a few instances of friendships between women, both in your fiction and in your descriptions of your own life. How do you view friendships between women? What kinds of things can they share that may be lacking in relationships between men and women?

VAN HERK Well one of the wonderful things about feminism was the extent to which it valorized female friendship. There have always been friendships between women, but I think that feminists have really dared to say it and to say that women can be for each other all kinds of different things. And it's not just the tea party variety. For me, the complexity of the relationships between women is, if you are heterosexual, unfraught by that whole sexual tension that you get with men. And I think that there is a different negotiation of power. There are still power relationships, of

course, and we're becoming more and more aware of that. As time goes on you realize that that manipulation enters into things as well. But when you have two women who have a mutual interest in asking questions about that, and who also have a mutual interest in laughing at the power relationships of the world, I think you can have something that is just so . . . there's nothing like it. It's almost effervescent, so that you get that wonderful sense of support and nurturing and communication without necessarily having to articulate it. It's not for nothing that there are all of these pop culture books that show the difference between how men and women communicate.

BEELER You've mentioned laughter again as an essential component in these relationships. Do you sometimes feel that within the feminist movement, within feminist critiques of certain social structures, there's too little emphasis placed on this kind of rejuvenation and too much emphasis on the oppressive state of affairs?

VAN HERK Actually, I don't think that's true. I think that the whole feminist enterprise has been based on laughter and that it is only the *analysis* of the feminist enterprise that has attributed to it this high seriousness. It's like the joke: How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? One, and that's not funny. *They don't have a sense of humour.* I don't think that's true at all. The most raucous humour I have ever seen or been engaged with has been either gangs of women who are very strong feminists or with individual feminists, because if you can not laugh, by God you will die; the oppressiveness has been pretty serious. So I just refuse to buy that, and I'm going to make the wrong kinds of jokes and keep on laughing. I think there's an appreciation of that with these women who are very much survivors of a complex set of privileges and non-privileges. I think it is very hard if you are at the bottom of the oppression domino line to see the humour in things, but if you do, I think you'll have an additional tool that will give you incredible power.

BEELER Much of your work allows for transformative possibilities. How do you feel about the transformations brought on by technology? For example, there are now compact disks available with hypertext stories, stories that have multiple endings so that the reader can choose the ending. Have you thought of becoming involved in that aspect of technology?

VAN HERK I have to a small extent, because I'm fascinated by the way it offers you choices. But it's sort of like a pinball machine; I'm only just starting to learn how to use it, so I'm not quite sure where the rubber bumpers are yet. I like to know the speed reaction of the little metal balls, or ball bearings. I do think that technology is in a kind of pinball state right now; sometimes you hit it really hard and you get this beautiful run and it goes over all these bridges that's totally elegant and other times it just goes up to the top and it shoots right back down into a black hole. I think that you have to be suspicious, and yet at the same time that's its temptation, because it suggests to you that you ought to be suspicious. I feel more seduced by it than if it pretended to a kind of infallibility, and that's the wonderful thing about the potential of all computer applications and hypertext, and so on. At the same time, technology is itself an odd thing—in narrative anyway. I always remember Michael Ondaatje saying, "Oh I got to put a phone in this story! At last my characters get to use a phone!" Of course, maybe if you're writing stories that are set in earlier times, the very notion of using a phone becomes almost anachronistic. But that idea of a space which will write on your behalf . . . I still think you have to remember that the temptation of the computer is that there is a gap. . . .

BEELER There's also the feeling that computers are a global phenomenon; they allow people to access other parts of the world. Do computers allow us to move beyond a preoccupation with the regional?

VAN HERK I suspect that computers are going to make us even more regional because we won't have to move anywhere beyond cyberspace. You can stay in place, and you can pretend whatever you want; you can do it through cyberspace. Even that suggests a kind of sinister temptation. Will we travel anymore? Will we actually talk to people face to face anymore? You can see why it would be the zone where unhappy people would make attempts to meet one another, because they'd never ever have to engage physically.

BEELER Wasn't that one of the attractive features of fiction, though? For many it was a way to escape without making contact with your everyday world. You could escape the mundane aspects of social life. You could go into a completely different world of experiences or characters.

VAN HERK That's true and I think it offered that, but at the same time, there's something slightly more physical about the novel; you don't as in

hypertext have somebody popping out of the pages and saying here I am, I'm the man of your dreams. You do it in your own head. I do find that there is a sinister aspect to it. At the same time, I'm fascinated by it, because it is another person; it's another persona in there in the mix.

BEELER And people forget that. They think of the machine, but don't understand that there is a manipulator.

VAN HERK Yes, there's a ghost in the machine.

NOTE

- 1 This interview took place on August 21, 1995 at Aritha van Herk's home in Calgary, Alberta. The interview is part of my current research projects on Canadian writing and other media, including a bio-bibliographical hypertext resource on Jeannette Armstrong, Joy Kogawa and Aritha van Herk. I would like to thank the University of Northern British Columbia for funding this research.

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