

## Notes on “Notes From Furry Creek”

**W**e probably need the discovery of one more critical theory less than the finding of yet another insect species. But none of the essays in *PMLA*, with their comforting sense of mastery, give the at-risk excitement of critical openness, the reader’s experience of trying to sort out what’s going on *as* it’s going on. The highly finished essay of literary scholarship doesn’t feel like an *essai*, a “try,” or “test,” or “trial.” The admirable “close readings” of New Criticism, for example, presuppose all ambiguities will resolve themselves into a complexly articulate organic unity. Structuralist approaches either ignore individual texts or box them into binary patterns. Critical “interventionists,” by definition, whether Marxist, Freudian, Feminist, or post-Colonial, troop in with *a priori* flags to impose closure, desecrating and denying the possibility of critical openness. Deconstructionists do not venture into a field of words without clutching a decentering implement which will uproot the entire crop, and leave behind a predictable un-meaning. Even with Iser, Fish, and most reader-response theorists, critical perceptions and emotions feel safely integrated into an undigressive pattern, as if everything is recollected (and revised) in tranquillity. And what that calm, reflective state of second thoughts and delayed perspectives loses *is* the process of intense shocks that makes up aesthetic experience. What criticism needs, then, is a way to get closer to the pleasurable (sometimes scary and bewildering) rush of responsiveness itself, the pulsing of intellectual encounter, raw sensory data, and the suspense inside the reader’s breathing about where a text might end up. As a way of setting

down this kinetic aliveness, I propose what might be called “field notes.” These critical notes would have parallels to projective verse: the critic “puts himself [or herself] in the open—he [or she] can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself,” and “the shaping takes place . . . each moment of its going” (Olson, *Human Universe* 52, 55) .

Maybe like a geologist, the critic takes a hammer to a chosen rock from a specific stratum exposed by design or accident at a particular site, cleaves it open, hoping to find a fossil—a form that has persisted as a bodied image—and in a small notebook makes quick notations about location, and shapes and colours, sets down guesses that might later be theorized, and—even as rain-water is washing the dirt off the writing hand to mix with the fluid ink—the mind (unsure of final worth) speculates about the possible mineral mix before back-packing out the heavy sample for assaying and carbon-dating. Before the notes are cleaned up, expanded, and organized, before the fragmentary hides itself in shapely paragraphs, before obscurities are obscured, before ideological purity edits out stray thoughts, before the provisional becomes permanent, there might be what Charles Olson calls “the PLAY of a mind”:

It is true, what the master says he picked up from Confusion: all the thots men are capable of can be entered on the back of a postage stamp. So, is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all? (55)

Perhaps the critic, like the writer of projective verse, should forget the design-governing strategy of the thesis statement, and “. . . get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen” (Olson 53). The critic might be a semi-skilled typist noting responses to the text as quickly as they occur, perception by perception, remembering like the Beat writers to use “. . . the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!” (53). Would such readings be sloppy, partial, incommunicable, self-indulgent? As a novelist, I don’t like critics using literary texts to build bonfires to their interpretive vanity, but I am interested in watching those moments of aesthetic response when damp kindling flares to brightness.

I hope the effect of a “field notes” criticism might be like reading scribbled margin notes, the underlinings and hand-drawn stars, the running arguments in library books (or on washroom walls, or on the net, or in vibrant class discussion). Although at times rude, crude, and indecipherable,

such shared commentary can offer immediacy, pointedness, and the emotional engagement lacking in the attenuated, yet bulky conventions of scholarship that claim intertextuality. If notes replaced essays, we might get nearer to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical, and critics might develop a jazz-like alertness to the spontaneous reactive moments of other critics. Such a group of readers might become like responsive soloists, taking turns, using the different *timbres* of their instruments to play out and improvise together on the underlying "melody" of a single text.

The following poem by Pat Lowther invites a response of kinetic openness through its title:

Notes From Furry Creek

I

The water reflecting cedars  
all the way up  
deep sonorous green—  
nothing prepares you  
for the ruler-straight  
log fallen across  
and the perfect  
water fall it makes  
and the pool behind it  
novocaine-cold  
and the huckleberries  
hanging  
like fat red lanterns

II

The dam, built  
by coolies, has outlived  
its time; its wall  
stained sallow  
as ancient skin  
dries in the sun

The spillway still  
splashes bright spray  
on the lion  
shapes of rock  
far down below

The dam foot  
is a pit

for the royal animals  
quiet and dangerous  
in the stare  
of sun and water

III

When the stones swallowed me  
I could not surface  
but squatted  
in foaming water  
all one curve  
motionless,  
glowing like agate.

I understood the secret  
of a monkey-puzzle tree  
by knowing its opposite:

the smooth and the smooth  
and the smooth takes,  
seduces your eyes  
to smaller and smaller  
ellipses;  
reaching the centre  
you become  
stone, the perpetual  
lavèd god.

**Title:**

- notes are parts of songs too. cf. her music poem, “In The Silence Between”:  
“It is as if huge / migrations take place / between the steps / of music / like  
round / stones in water: / what flows between is / motion so constant / it  
seems still”
- notes fragments of whole but plural, multiple (vague index to three parts of  
poem’s structure), bits of knowledge, role of observer as learner—percep-  
tion preceding/proceeding without hypothesis
- Since Keats’s odes, title prepositions crucial to tell how emotions fit with  
objects in space: “*to* a nightingale,” Romantic address, cry for communion,  
lyric apostrophe of transcendence and ironic gap vs. “*on* a Grecian Urn,”  
reflection upon, meditation about. For Lowther, “*From*.” What can be taken  
away, as well as derived, and also maybe (a sense of failure?) at a distance, an  
artistic remove from source

- a name, creek—north of Vancouver, with “Furry,” soft and warm, colliding with expectations of mountain coldness. Animal presence implied, threat of bears, fury? Or something undrinkable. [But my neighbour on Hornby Island, Marilyn Mullan, who’s just retired as head of the mining museum at Britannia Beach (a couple of miles further north) says Oliver Furry was a trapper, grub-staked by furriers in Vancouver hoping to find gold; he followed Dr. Forbes (a medical doctor who did prospecting on the side) and staked claims and worked for gold at Britannia in 1890’s, until a syndicate was formed out of early claim-holders to raise capital to mine. (Involved Moodie, railway figure and son of literary Susanna. His daughter interviewed as an old woman > never allowed to play with other kids: snobbery across the generations.) New York interests bought out first syndicate at Britannia Beach, and developed a mine that produced a little gold and a huge amount of copper.]

### Section I

- “The water reflecting cedars”—precise present participle observation, mirror theme (see her “I.D.” & “Reflecting sunglasses”) merging of land and water (with air in reach of trees into sky) an echoing fullness, unity of nature & world—cedar the emblem of West Coast; native arts of making: canoe, poles, lodge, basketry
- “all the way up”—perfectly, heaven implicit [conventions of no caps at start of lines (except for beginning of sentence that becomes note #1) and no line-stop punct. until last section]
- “deep sonorous green—”: back to musicality, double harmony metaphor through interfusion of sight and sound, the synaesthesia of “deep” as both bass note and intensifier of colour of life; experience of senses felt and anatomized at once, “reflected” upon, while the dash typographically updates the “O” of Romantic identification, or alerts us to a haiku-like shift
- “nothing prepares you” > anxiety, fear of future, a foreboding, acknowl. of inability to cope, startled as the line floats off into blankness, or future words. [With this phrase, hard not to remember that her husband threw her murdered body into Furry Creek][“What came to me was Furry Creek. Now I’ve loved it all my life. I know it like the back of my hand. My father worked there 25 years. I was raised in Britannia Beach a short distance away, and my wife and I spent some of our honeymoon there...” Roy Lowther, *Appeal Book* 353]

- “the ruler-straight” order of geometric line and human measurement vs. the drooping, tapering sprays of fan-like cedar branches. Comments on the opening image/sound; “log fallen across” > noun comes after the line break, the thing that falls into reader’s line of sight after delay, but this line ends with a prep. leading to expectation of more: “across” what? Never given because another perception is recorded instead in rush and discontinuity of note-taking
- Though “fallen” and “log” signify mortality, an image of a bridge here & the next line, “and the perfect,” counterpoints with sense of awe, so neg. and pos. alternate, form emotional rhythm that gives context to “water fall it makes,” where separation of morphemes restores the separateness of thing and act, so “makes” becomes a creative shaping, the Maker, the immanent God of “Tintern Abbey” (Wye=Furry), as inspiration for the poet as “maker” (cf. her “Inheritance”: “a long life of making”)
- “and the pool behind it” through parallelism implied as perfect too; “pool” felt as a *verbal*, an action as much as a thing, because of prior separation of “water fall”?
- “novocaine-cold” sense of touch, unfeeling feel, implies swimming/bathing/immersion, and dental assoc. paradox: painful needle to kill pain
- “and the huckleberries” taste sensation, assoc. with escape from civiliz. fraud, “Lighting out for the territories” of Huck converges with escapism of Romantics, breathless quality of repeated coordinate conjunction > a naïve syntax of child-like innocence, a pure responsiveness to sensations, ordering newness
- “hanging” ominous, anticipative, like reader before concluding line, suspended between sky and water—observer, as in opening lines; “like fat red lanterns” illumination, “fat” a neg. word given sense of abundance; delicious, ample light, enough to navigate by, festive welcome
- no period at end because no terminating stoppage; process of green nature sonorous, sounding on. [cf. Pat Lowther’s mother’s remark: “She seemed to grow by herself. She was no trouble. She just grew.” (back cover of *Final Instructions*)] In last word, upbeat ending of brightness linked to human design, “lantern” as human object, along with “ruler” and “novocaine,” offer tropes of measure, curing of pain, restorative light: edenic

## Section II

- “The dam, built”—opp. the one made by fallen log, the pause of comma to split product and process; obstruction of Nature’s flow def. of human

creation? ["I was headed for South Valley dam. There was a dam on Furry Creek. It's called Furry Creek dam. We call it South Valley Dam. My father looked after it for 25 years." Roy Lowther 359]

- "by coolies, has outlived" the shock of lang., the casual racism, oppression, esp. in natural setting, post-edenic consciousness now, made *concrete* in origins of dam, the colonial history of West Coast North America, the exploitation of Chinese, but inanimate has "outlived" the builders, a kind of monument to human effort; the what delayed: "its time; its wall" its limits of usefulness, wall of prejudice & also metaphor of time as confinement & evoking China civilizing achiev. of Great Wall against "stained sallow"—almost pathetic fallacy where object takes on "colouration," pale yellow of workers, and moral "stain" of "whites" > the BC female writer's fascination with cultural otherness of Chinese: Pat Lowther's poem, "The Chinese Greengrocers" [now in *Time Capsule*], bits of Emily Carr's autobiography, Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, Daphne Marlatt's long poem, *Steveston*, Marilyn Bowering's novel, *To All Appearances a Lady*: a book to be written about representing gender through ethnicity?
- "as ancient skin"—personified as if the thing had become its builders; as if technology had been returned to origin in human bodies; "dries in the sun" to become opp. of creek
- Stanza break, new sent. & "The 'spillway still" ambig. and oxymoron: structure there, but no water flows over it > life *and* immobility, but next line "splashes bright spray": action light wetness, "on the lion": animate form of predator menaces in "shapes of rock" and we're back to the unmoving, now "far down below" the creek's reflecting surface. [Now relative wilderness has become a golf course & condominium development: "The hardest part of playing Furry creek is keeping your eye on the ball. Superior golf requires intense concentration, particularly when playing the most beautiful course from sea to sky on earth. But bearing this in mind, we've designed our 6,200 yard all-terrain masterpiece to be as forgiving as it is challenging" (brochure "bumf") > but I found in Furry Creek a hard, dimpled ball, with black letters, "LEGEND"]
- St. 3—"The dam foot" (like a comic curse) "is a pit," a metaphor of death, Dante's hell or Poe's confinement > paradisaic feel of first section undercut; "for the royal animals" brings back lions, and (zoomorphic?) impulse of humans to create recognizable shapes; cognitively and aesthetically imprison; "quiet and dangerous" noise from spillway water, not from

(un)roaring animals, making menace more menacing > because “nothing prepares you”

- setting is dramatized in conflictual terms (pentad of story with Trouble)—switch from “coolies,” racism, etc. to animals that can hurt “in the stare,” scopic; merely cinematic fear, a playful illusion in reflecting watcher? The “sun and water” in a stand-off, with the bystanding “I” not openly part of poem yet

### Section III

- “When the stones swallowed me”—threat of lions seemingly fulfilled here, 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun > initial use as *object* of action, in past tense, so dramatic episode itself omitted; a Jonah hint of miraculous survival?
- “I could not surface” evokes Atwood, with some of the same R. D. Laing sense of drowning in depths as almost preferable to being superficial, but the personal can’t fuse with Nature, except temporarily: “squatted” > not erect like trees; also a trespass, to stay on property of another, i.e., remain outside a legal or natural belonging
- “in foaming water” angry, again precisely observed detail of fall, foaming at mouth=madness? > sounds before and after the making of words; “all one curve” curl of body, curve of spray of water, human and water together in a visual echo, (sub)merging
- “motionless,” body like rocks, unlike water, 1<sup>st</sup> comma at end of line to emphasize that stillness, but “glowing like agate” > from death to light, psych. reversal & an echo of lanterns
- first period in poem, rock-certainty, shining exhilaration, *satori*
- St.2—“I understood the secret” universal, mystical, unqualified (until next line); “of a monkey-puzzle tree”—a little bathos, puzzlement; the one tree that supposedly monkeys can’t climb because of spikey texture, maximum surface [[Iain Higgins, editor of this essay at *Can. Lit.*, writes in the margins here, “note too the “a” (not *the*)” [insight coming from and to the particular, not via Platonic Ideal?] & “also totally out of context, no? this is cedar/fir country” [bleak paradox: consciousness displaces, alienates, even as it connects?]]]
- “by knowing its opposite:”—her colon promising an answer, the riddle about to be resolved > progression in poem from observation to imaginative engagement to immersion to illumination
- St.3— “the smooth and the smooth” rep. as emph., and washings of wonder-



ment; “and the smooth takes,” loss, erodes, eliminates the superfluous, discovers essential form within; “seduces your eyes” > 2<sup>nd</sup> pers. pl. evasion & appeal to common experience when it’s particular; “I” again, but enlarged, shared: “Like Neruda, Lowther knows that it ‘isn’t easy / to keep moving thru / the perpetual motion / of surfaces’ in a world w[h]ere the bodies are ‘laid / stone upon stone’; but the process is necessary: ‘You are changing, Pablo, becoming an element / a close throat of quartz / a calyx / imperishable in earth.’ At the psychological level, Lowther’s preoccupation with stone, the most resistant of the things in the physical world, represents a desire to eliminate the surfaces, edges, boundaries that separate [hu]man from [hu]man and [hu]man from objects in nature” (Geddes *15 Canadian Poets plus 5* 395)

- “to smaller and smaller” stones?, more acute, minute and exact perception > “ellipses,” of course the eyes’ own shape, so organs of perceiver and perceived, self and world, “reflect” each other, as in opening lines of cedar and water
- “reaching the centre”—not *at* the centre, but getting towards it like Tantalus grasping; away from periphery, nearer core: in-site/insight
- “you become”—what? By truncating the line, a teleological statement offered, but aim left off, as if process itself is purpose > the condition of being alive which includes old self being swallowed, over and over
- But with “stone, the perpetual,” the shock of death-like fixity > hard, inanimate, unfeeling yet immortal. A horror image, but monumental, like “coolies” dam (bad pun on Grand Coulee dam?); “stoned”: 60’s vocab. here in altered state of consciousness, beyond prosaic reality that stones usually represent (cf. Samuel Johnson’s kicking a stone: “Thus I refute Bishop Berkeley”); Pat Lowther’s ’74 collection called *Milk Stone*, in the midst of such contemporary Western Canadian poetry publishers as The Very Stone Press (?) & Turnstone Press, and—long before Carol Shields’s novel, *The Stone Diaries*—“Notes From Furry Creek” was posthumously printed in *A Stone Diary*
- “lavèd god.” 2<sup>nd</sup> period, archaic word, musical emphasis, Romantic diction, Keats? > Pat Lowther’s neg. capability to look outside the window and be—not sparrow pecking around in gravel—animate & too easy!—but the *gravel* itself, the small rocks. A passive giving of self to l.c. pantheistic god in washing by Furry Creek; eternal in process of cleansing, renewal [S.O.E.D. “Now chiefly *poet.1. trans.* To wash, bathe. . . . 2. *trans.* Of a body of water; To wash against, to flow along or past”]

- An ending in which I can “explain” every word, but somehow I’m left outside; not washed clean by cosmic consciousness: Why this balking? Is it something in the poem, or a flawed reading, or does this sense of emotional strandedness reveal the limits of communicability, or just follow from the particular slant of my life (where Death, a heavy stone flung at the forehead, knocks out certain kinds of signif. and enchantment along with the living daylight), or is the balked response at the poem’s close due to an obtruding biographical awareness > [“Cases of domestic violence against women resulting in murder are so commonplace they have taken on a horrific banality ... leaving them [the children] alone to piece together a history from amongst the wreckage.” Beth Lowther, in letter requesting access to sealed documents marked “Exhibits”]

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