

THE TRAVELLING LIFE

An Account of some Pits and Peaks in a Three-Week Poetry Reading Tour of Canada

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THE ENTRANCE HALL OF THE COLLEGE is thick with chattering students, all animated, all in a hurry. I sway under a sense of vertigo I often have in crowded places — a feeling of the irrelevance of my purpose there, and that I'm suddenly going to pop out of existence without a ripple, leaving no trace.

Suddenly a young man darts up to me and asks if I'm Jeni Couzyn, the visiting poet? My host has posted sentries for me at each of the entrances to the college. I hear my hesitant footsteps begin to click with the confidence of someone who feels wanted as I trot beside him.

“What were you and the others told to look for?”

“Someone about thirty, with dark hair and looking lost.”

Perhaps it will be a good reading. My host shakes my hand, hangs up my coat, gives me a cup of coffee and a comfortable chair in the staff room — all good omens. These first moments are the signs by which you test the water. If they're good, it probably means a competent introduction, a good room to read in, a lively audience. If they're bad, you know you're in for a cold swim.

As I walk towards the hall I ask about the students. Technical students, he says. Very few in literature. Business management, nurses, and so forth. None of them very academic, I'm afraid. I did advertise the reading but I doubt we'll get many students.

That apologetic tone — a bad sign, one of the worst. My glow of anticipation vanishes on a cold wind. A knot of frozen mercury is rolling around in the pit of my stomach. I was expecting very bright literature students. My prepared programme won't do for this audience who'd enjoy a lighter programme, personal and narrative poems, incidents and characters they can relate to directly, patter that touches on the concerns of their own lives. I'll have to abandon my prepared reading and improvise. I start stringing poems together in my head.

A notice on the door of the hall announces **STANDING ROOM ONLY**. Another about turn — large audiences like to laugh a lot and be entertained. They need a hard fast pacing with slick patter and lots of irony. I look around at the many

faces in front of me — they're young and neutral — no hint of what they're expecting or hoping for, no tuning A. A false start is a costly mistake at a reading, as the audience accepts the opening as a key for how to relate to you for the rest of the performance. They'll accept flexibility within the framework you've given them in the first few minutes, but seldom tolerate your coming at them from a totally different angle once the reading is rolling.

My introduction from my host is competent, warm, and brief. Then he sits down and there's nothing left between me and them. Their faces are still quite blank. Nowhere a hint of eagerness, humour, moodiness. I rummage frantically through the catalogue of poems in my head, finding nothing that seems to fit. Panicking I decide to revert to my planned programme and say:

“Robert Browning once said that when he wrote his poems, he and God knew what they meant; after a little time had passed, only God knew. I find that some of my poems do become more mysterious to me rather than less as I live with them. Like children they seem to grow away from me, until I don't really understand them at all. This is true of the poem I would like to begin with today.”

The faces show puzzlement, mistrust, even a little alarm. I put my head well down, veil my eyes, and plunge in.

WHAT YOU DO WITH YOUR EYES at a poetry reading is an intricate and delicate affair — something like the ritual of undressing before making love. Too direct and naked eye contact as you read is for an audience an extremely unpleasant experience, something like having a total stranger rip off his clothes and stand naked in front of you, and then begin clumsily trying to take off yours. It's an invasion of privacy at best insensitive, at worst threatening and aggressive. The result is bound to be a drawing away.

On the other hand *no* eye contact is like trying to make love without removing one's clothes at all. Meeting eyes is a kind of touching — without it there can be no intimacy. The polite and disappointing encounter is as banal and uneventful as small talk anywhere — a travesty of the poet's work, since a poetry reading should be *deep talk*.

But this audience is as shy and nervous as a pack of wild deer. Until they relax I'll have to let them think themselves invisible by covering my face, so to speak. I keep my eyes tightly locked on the page in front of me.

The poem I'm reading is called “Leper Rejects the Missionaries.” It begins:

priest. hooded messenger in my
territory. night mothman who makes my oneness
glow who lowers huge lights and hungry
lenses down it. . . .

I put all thoughts of the audience and other poems out of my mind and concentrate on the sound of the words. By the end of the first stanza the poem is beginning to sing, and I'm able to separate a part of my mind to listen to the silence.

Silence is a curious element. It's a part of the sound you weave into the heard poem, as the spaces in a painting are part of the design. There are as many kinds of silence for a poet reading as there are kinds of snow for an Eskimo. First there's the Rustling silence. It means that the audience is not with you — they are scurrying about in their minds like small animals and it's the rustling of their thoughts that you hear.

Then there's the Attentive silence. It is perfect stillness like very clear water, where every note you drop into it resonates. A third kind of silence occurs when the audience is attentive but there are frequent interruptions of sound — people arriving late, voices outside the door, laughter outside the window. Then the silence in the room turns into Clenched silence. For the audience and the reading poet it's like lying in bed trying to dream while one's body is tense and knotted, listening for the sound of a key in the door or stealthy footsteps on the stairs. As you have to sleep in order to dream, so the silence has to relax and deepen for a poem dropped into it to come alive.

Best of all is the Electric silence where you hear the audience's thoughts and weave them into the texture and meaning of the poem, so that it forms somewhere in the air between you with its own resonating life. Worst of all is the Filled silence, the kind created by the mechanical hum of air conditioning or neon lights. Trying to read against this kind of hum feels like suddenly being deprived of one's eyesight in a familiar room. It prevents anything but the crudest communication of idea and feeling, and working in it is spiritually draining, even damaging.

This silence is none of those. It's an Opaque silence. I can hear the audience hearing me, but I can't hear them. Half way through the second stanza I wonder if I can fake an ending somewhere soon, or leave out a few stanzas. But no opportunity presents itself, and I labour on into a silence thick as fog that is swallowing my words and lines whole, undigested, in great lumps.

At the end of the poem I pause and dare to look around. When a large number of people are looking at you there are many ways of looking back. Most common is to look without seeing — a kind of glazed stare, more a way of showing your eyes than seeing with them. Your awareness remains locked inside your head, and you mainly see what you imagine they are seeing in you.

But there are other more useful ways of looking at an audience. One of the best is a hard penetrating look quick as a glance, so the audience barely feels your eyes on them. But a beam of your awareness flashes across their faces like a computer, and comes to rest for an instant on one face that is a true reflection for that second of the general feeling in the room. Then it meets those eyes — not

for long enough for the eyes to change, seeing themselves being seen, just long enough to pass an idea or feeling along the eyebeam from one heart into the others.

I once tried reciting my poems and gave up within a few minutes of beginning, when I saw that everyone was listening with turned away faces. Audiences like to be invisible, which is why theatres are so often kept dark, and why I always pretend to read my poems, even those I know by heart and in my sleep.

There is a way for an author to look directly at an audience, but it has to be used with caution, and sparingly. It's a long sweeping look that seems to take in everybody in a way that says to each person in the audience: "Tell me who you are. You matter. This is a dialogue between you and me. We are alone together and no-one will interrupt us."

It's a look of this kind I give the audience now. Their response is immediate. Somewhere near the back a hand shoots up. Yes?

"Do you think your poem could mean that the lepers are afraid of being cured?"

Whatever my answer is, it has plenty of warmth in it. Others are encouraged to try to explain my poem to me as they see it. The atmosphere begins to bristle with excitement. Understanding a poem that the poet herself has forgotten the meaning of is an invigorating work, and a revelation, always, of the interpreter. People will sometimes share things with a visiting poet they would only otherwise share with a therapist or priest. As those students get high on explaining my poem to me, I am getting high on vivid miniatures of their histories that would normally take years to discover. The exchange of gifts has taken place; the magic is working as it should.

When I cut the discussion to move on to the next poem, I know that I can't fail with this audience. A bond has grown between us that will make it possible for me to read them anything I choose.

Audiences have a way of punishing poets they don't like, which takes the form of the Grim silence. This has nothing in common with the Shy silence, or the Nothing-to-Say silence, neither of which is unkind, or the Patronizing or Prying questioning, both of which are unbearable. The Grim silence is an unspoken, unveiled hostility. If you ask a question, no-one answers. If you meet an eye, it stares you down. If you make a self-deprecating joke, no-one smiles.

The opposite of the Grim silence is for the audience to want to talk. You are showered with a feast of questions that are offered as gifts. They mean "I'm on your side. I think you're wonderful. Whatever you do, I'm with you." This audience wants to give and give. Every poem I read falls on fertile ground, and grows between us like a lovely plant. At the end of the reading I am mobbed in the humble way that poets get mobbed: I sell every book I've brought with me to sell, including my reading copies.

I AM DUE AT THE SCHOOL at eleven-thirty. At eight the school librarian who's arranged the reading telephones me.

"About your African chanting groups . . ."

No, I explain, I am doing a poetry reading.

"But we've been studying Africa in our special projects. We understood that you are from Africa. . . ." I agree to play a tape or two of African music, but I am firm. I am not leading any African chanting groups.

"Well then," says the voice, a little high-pitched I think, "about your poetry reading. Will it be all right if I put the grade twos with the grade sixes, because they've been working together on reading, or would you like them separate?"

"Just a moment." There's an alarm clock going off in my head. "How old are these children?"

"Very talented six-year-olds," she sings, "and some eight- and nine-year-olds. All hand picked, these children, the cream of the school."

I am glad I didn't know in advance that I was to read to such tiny children, or I'd never have accepted the reading. I spend half an hour doing some quick thinking, then wade through the snow to my taxi. When I arrive Miss McCarty greets me warmly.

"Would you prefer to sit on the owl, or the pussycat?" She is pointing at two cushions on a little stage. I see that she is serious.

"The owl, definitely the owl."

Two groups, forty children in each. When the first group files in and sits down on the carpet in front of me they only seem to fill a few square feet. They are so tiny, their little faces look up at me eagerly like a bed of charming flowers.

"We are so lucky," says Miss McCarty to the children, "to have a real live *Poetress* who's come all the way from Africa to read us her poems today."

My apprehension melts away. I play them an African chant and they all laugh, because they can't understand the words. I read them a sound poem about a slow lorry, and they creep around the library being slow lorryes. I talk to them about magic and read them a spell: *Spell to Banish Fear*:

By the warmth of the sun
By the baby's cry
By the lambs on the hill
I banish thee.

By the sweetness of the song
By the warm rain falling
By the hum of grass
Begone.

Never has fear been so far from my heart. As they repeat the gentle lines after

me, I find myself almost in tears at the sweetness of their voices. My little poem becomes true and poignant spoken by them as it has never been, spoken by me. We talk about our senses, and the powerful things in nature around us. They suggest thunder and lightning and volcanoes and blizzards. We talk about the power we have inside ourselves to make wishes come true. As I tell them things about magic that I have said too many times, my words become true for me as if I were discovering these truths for the first time. The exquisite honesty of their faces, believing me utterly and taking every word I say literally somehow purifies what I am saying to a level of truth I have long ago lost. I read them another spell, *Spell for Remembering*, and we talk about the power in tiny things:

By the crocodile's eye
 By the scorpion's sting
 By the tooth of the shark
Let me remember

By the jaw of the ant
 By the prickly pear's horn
 By the hair of the wasp
Let me remember

By the charred cross
 By the fist of ash
 By the blood of earth
Let me remember.

Then we make some spells together. Spell for Happiness, Spell for Peace, Spell for Good Health, Spell for Sunshine. The eight- and nine-year-olds want to talk about magic in Africa, and the difference between magic and superstition. Afterwards one little girl says to me,

"I just wanted to hug you and kiss you when you were reading because when I grow up I want to be exactly like you."

Another says: "I used to be a follower but now you've changed my life. Now I'm just my very own self."

Miss McCarty buys three books for herself and three for the school library. Two of the children want to buy books and bring the money from their parents the next day. Miss McCarty buys the books for them out of school funds.

"It doesn't matter if they don't bring the money in," she says, "the school will pay for the books. It's too important that these children should have these books to let the chance go by."

A few days later I get a fat envelope from the school — a thank you letter from Miss McCarty, and poems from the children. Spells for Happiness, Peace, Colours of the World, Friendship, and a little love poem written for me called *Brown Eyes*:

If you are out in another world
 Not knowing who you love,
 Just look for the brown-eyed person
 Who will care for you till up-above.

They bring good luck, wisdom and beauty,
 They take away bad times and cruelty.
 They share their thoughts,
 And have good times. Yes,
 Look for the brown-eyed person.

THE BUS RUSHES ON AND ON, through a charred landscape flat and featureless, now and then a small ugly gathering of buildings that passes for a town, stubble grass burned to khaki grey by the cold. This is not what I think of as countryside. No trees, no hills or rivers, no green no blue no earth brown. Everywhere the sky and land is steel grey, flat and endless. This is how I imagine the world will be after a nuclear war — a nightmare land of ash where nothing moves.

The bus station is like a piece of film set — a kind of glass shed, with three or four shadowy people sitting about and a single taxi. I climb into the taxi and have a strong feeling that the bus station will vanish the second I turn my eyes away. Ten minutes later I am standing in front of the school.

I stare at the massive yellow building in the middle of nowhere, unable to believe my eyes. It looks like a prison for the criminally insane. Along the whole length of the building, which is three storeys high and a few thousand yards long, *there is not a single window.*

The corridors are the same yellow brick, with neon strip lighting overhead and a grey floor. Nowhere are there any pictures, notice boards, coat hooks to relieve the desolate prison walls. The place is filled with a feeling of doom. It's a large school, two thousand pupils, the teacher guiding me explains politely. I am almost speechless with indignation: "Who would build a school without windows?"

"You get used to it," she says lethargically. "You'd be surprised. There are a lot of schools like this. They were the fashion for a time."

Groups of students stand around, leaning against the walls, hardly speaking to each other, not noticing us passing. In the classroom where I am to read, half a dozen or perhaps ten unattractive teen-agers are scattered along the back row.

"Is this all?"

"I'm afraid so. Twenty bought tickets, but sometimes they buy tickets to things just to get out of their classes."

“Out of a school of two thousand, only twenty students bought tickets to come, and only half of those turned up?”

“Well none of them have any money you see. It’s a farming community around here.”

I am thinking how even in the richest schools I’ve read at, I’ve never known the children being asked to pay to come to a poetry reading.

“How long would you like me to read?”

“An hour in the first period, and then we’ll have a ten-minute break, and then another hour in the second period.”

It’s impossible. Even the keenest adults have trouble listening to poetry for two solid hours. The neon lights are hurting my eyes already, and the air is so dry I can hardly breathe. Perhaps it’s the walls without windows or pictures, the ugly furniture, the featureless faces, but my throat keeps closing over as I try to speak. Luckily there’s a drinking fountain in the wall outside the door. I fill a paper cup with water and begin.

My plan is to read them some poems that will stir them into discussion, make them laugh a little, and then set them free after about an hour — though freedom seems a mean gift in this sad place. I begin with a poem about a policeman going down into the subway to retrieve a body that has been beheaded by a train. In the dark tunnel he sees something twitching, and thinking it’s a rat (rats are his phobia) he and his mates surround it and make a grab for it. When he has it in his hands he discovers that it’s not a rat at all but the fellow’s heart. The poem usually has the effect of shocking the audience into a troubled alertness, where they don’t know what to expect next, and they aren’t sure whether to laugh or be appalled.

By the end of the poem now, though, the faces are as dead looking as when I walked in. Something stronger is needed.

I read them a poem called “Preparation of Human Pie.” It’s a recipe poem, written with a deadpan detachedness, and some quite unpleasant details, from the point of view of an alien species which sees humanity in much the same way as we might see prawns — simply as potential food. I have had audiences fall about laughing at the poem. I’ve actually had someone rush from the hall to vomit. The previous day the teacher hosting me made me promise to read the same poem to the second class of students as well. These students stare at me with dead eyes, registering no response at all, not even censure or boredom.

I’m desperate — I *have* to get them talking. I talk about how we use animals for our convenience, without ever thinking about the quality of their individual lives, or the misery of their deaths. I talk about calves, being kept in stalls small enough to prevent them from moving from birth till their early death, so the veal will be tender. I talk about chicken batteries. And then I ask them for their

comments, and sit through a long silence before one of them finally, hesitantly asks:

“Are you trying to say that chicken batteries are *wrong*?” His voice is an almost visible shrug: Anyone could see that I am weird, a nut case, nothing to do with them.

Farm children, I think. I look around me. Chicken battery — without anything beautiful or exciting or free. None of them has known anything different in their own lives — why should they care about chickens. These are not farm children of green fields and rivers, the warm smell of hay and puppies and getting up at dawn to call the cows in by name for milking. Pails of warm milk and new laid eggs and the delicious smells of animals and wind and new turned earth and the many voiced morning. These are factory children, brought up amongst giant machines that manufacture food out of seed and flesh, without ever noticing that it is alive.

I am filled with pity for them. I give them the landscapes of my childhood, my loves, my songs, my dreams. I stir them to a pitiful flicker of awareness. But I know that for them it’s already too late. Long ago they lost the use of voices and wings.

I don’t sell any books at that school. I escape like someone reprieved from the death penalty. As the bus drives me back into the deep snowy streets of Toronto I listen to the joyful shouts of a group of youths playing ice hockey in the road, and find myself praying with gratitude for the richness of my life.

THE SECOND LAST DAY of my tour I do three readings, two at high schools and the third at the Women’s Studies Centre at York University.

This is my ideal kind of reading. A small room is packed with fifty or sixty people. There’s a table at one end well stocked with food and wine, and everyone is comfortable and at ease. A baby talks through my first poem, and when he begins to shout ditty! ditty! his mother gets up to take him out.

“Oh give him some titty” I plead with her, and she turns scarlet, protesting that he is saying kitty, kitty! The audience roars with laughter. The atmosphere is so receptive that I choose this moment to read a large chunk of new unpublished work that I haven’t read to anyone before. The poems are from the book I’m currently working on, called *A Time to be Born*, about the birth of my daughter and the first six months of her life.

At a reading, nothing is as rewarding as successfully reading new poems for the first time. Tonight the reception my new work gets is overwhelming, and the reading is for me the highlight of my tour.

My daughter, now aged twenty months, has managed very well during these three weeks, taken care of partly by her nanny, and partly by her grandmother. Although she has slept in my bed each night, and seen me for at least an hour or two each day, she is seeing a lot less of me than she is used to, and by now she has had enough. On this penultimate day I leave her at eight in the morning, return at two that night, and then spend another hour talking to a journalist who is interviewing me by telephone from the west coast. She wakes up immediately wanting a feed when I crawl into bed at three a.m. and it's another hour before we are both able to get to sleep. Only one more reading to go.

Four hours later I'm woken by the telephone again.

"Get up quickly. You have to be at the reading in an hour. There's been some kind of a mix-up." This reading, at an art college, was booked for noon.

I wake my daughter and we have a bath together. Then I wake her nanny and order three taxis. I've recently discovered that after a heavy snowfall, before the roads are cleared, taxis are like gold. One of the three, I hope, will come in time.

I arrive at the reading four minutes late — a triumph, I feel, under the circumstances. Arlene Lampert, the organizer of my tour and a close friend, has chosen this reading as the one she'll come along to. With her is another close friend, a fellow writer, Rachel Wyatt. When I arrive they are waiting nervously for me on the pavement, and rush me off to a remote building, down some stairs, and into a kind of basement room where a class of students with their tutor is glaring coldly at the door.

I ask for some water and the tutor says it's not possible. "I'll get it myself, if you'll tell me where," I insist. Grumbling, he fetches some water in a paper cup. "We do hamburgers too," he says, and the class titters.

"Aren't you going to introduce her?" one of the students whispers.

"I don't know anything about her," answers the tutor loudly, and glares down at the table.

"It's quite all right, I can manage without an introduction," I smile, and then I listen to the silence. It's a Filled silence. The air-conditioning unit for the whole college is in that room, and its engines roar with a steady menace, unflinching.

"Is there anything we can do about that roar?"

"Nothing whatsoever," says my host, smug and patronizing. I begin with a humorous anti-man poem, called "The Red Hen's Last Will and Testament to the Last Cock on Earth." I aim it directly at the tutor. Not a smile. Not a sparkle. Those students are like grim judges at a death trial.

"We'll have to do something to break up this ice," I mutter cheerfully, "Or we'll all be frozen to death." The ice creaks with menace. I read another humorous poem, this time at my own expense, satirizing the visiting poet. Nothing. The silence on top of the Filled silence is Grim silence.

To hell with them, I decide, and putting my head down I read a poem that takes twenty-five minutes to read, without once looking up, or pausing to draw them in. To my surprise I hear my voice flowing out calmly, without the slightest tremor of hurt or self-doubt. I hear myself beaming warmth into that room, without needing to be liked in return. I feel strong as a rock, unassailable, and it fills me with joy. By the end of the twenty-five minutes those students are mine. In spite of the tutor and the ugly cloud around his head, the ice in the room has broken up and floated away.

For the rest of the reading I read poems only by request. They want everything. After an hour when I suggest drawing to a close, they say:

“We’re here till two o’clock. Go on as long as you like.”

The tutor is ashamed. My friends are jubilant.

“That,” I announce to them as we leave, “is what I call working for my money.”

“You were great, great!” says Arlene, hugging me. “You were gracious, and dignified, and the poems were great, great! I’m going to get that bastard fired.”

“A firing squad would do nicely,” says Rachel, in her mild way.

I know that it was not a great reading, but somehow I’ve survived it without being raped, which is the spiritual equivalent for a poet who bares her spirit to a hating audience. There are many dangers that lurk on tour for a reading poet. Filled silence is one of them, Grim silence is another. This reading had both. If a reading is good, you come out feeling created. If it’s bad you come out feeling raw and cheapened, degraded, ashamed. One of the common hazards is the Would-Be-Poet as your host, who has brought you there to read in the hope that you will somehow further his career. Worst of all hazards and all hosts is the Failed poet.

This tutor, it turns out, is a Failed poet. He’s been turned down, Arlene confesses to me, by the very organization that set up my tour. My reading was forced on him, she explains, by the head of the department, as his class was the only time she’d been able to offer for me to read in. The offending tutor changed my reading time to much earlier at the last minute in the hope that it would mean cancelling the reading, and moved it to that impossible basement room from the normal reading room in the hope that if I did come to the college, I would never find the class.

The air-conditioning was a stroke of genius, but on the whole that Failed poet has done me a favour. He’s made me feel capable of handling almost anything. My work is over, and I have two free days to spend with friends, skidoing on a frozen lake in the deep fresh snow. In London my beautiful serene work room is waiting for my return.