

Writing and Reading

George Bowering

ESSAYS



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That Blank Page

When you sit down to write a novel, and you are facing that proverbial blank page, you may as well have been plunked down in a country whose language you don't know. The language you are going to try to work with is useless. All you can hope is that you will come up with something that seems powerful, and something more rare than that — beautiful. In that case, you will not be comfortable, but you will be on your way to citizenry. When you sit down to read a novel, well, where are you?

Oliver

When we went down to the Oliver Theatre on a Saturday afternoon to see a western movie in colour, we saw the same landscape we would see the next day, when we went for a hike in the hills on either side of the valley. We were careful about where we put a foot down, because of cactus, because of rattlesnake, because of animal poop that hadn't been baked yet. A semi-arid climate, we were told in school; yet there were wet slugs in the long grass around the trunks of cherry trees. There were pheasants with eggs or chicks in that long grass too, and our young hearts would just about stop for the sudden noise when those big birds took to the treetops. The shade of those trees made wonderful respite when the sun's blaze went to three figures on the Fahrenheit scale. We boys took our shirts off when school let us out in late June, and didn't put them back on till they made us go back in for September. Nobody's house or car had air conditioning, and neither did the stores and pool halls on the main drag, also known as Highway 97. It rained hard one July day every year, just in time to ruin the cherry crop, and again on a Sunday in September, so a guy could sleep in instead of picking apples all day. Now I have been living in cities for sixty-five years, some of them on other continents, but I drive up to the south Okanagan every August, and when I get my first glimpse of dry hills and rock slides I say "This is how it's supposed to be."

Those Sentence Poems.

Naturally, as time goes by and you are still a poet, you get asked to contribute toward some kind of celebration of another poet. Perhaps the poet has reached a certain age — fifty, or seventy, let us say. Sometimes the poet has just died, and words are required. Maybe the poet is getting married, or asked into the Order of Canada, or delivered of a job the poet has always hated. Many years ago, when it began to look as if written tributes would keep on being required, I decided to stick with a form I may have invented. The poem would consist of a number of sentences, always a little over a line in length but not as long as three lines. The sentences would not develop any theme or argument, but just follow on one another until they had all happened. I have written a lot of these poems, and they have been published in newspapers, anthologies, one-off birthday presents, and as time went by, my collections of poems. I have written them for Louis Dudek, Allen Ginsberg and Leonard Cohen. “A Step this Side of Salvation” was written for a seventieth birthday party some good folk threw for David McFadden in Toronto. “Eh You” was written for a life celebration, complete with the best chopped chicken livers I have ever tasted at The Word bookstore in Montreal a few months after Artie Gold died. “Nechako Spring Morning” was written for Sharon Thesen, but I don’t remember what the occasion was. It was probably her birthday, but don’t expect me to tell you which one.

Poly Oana craquer

Each morning the first thing I do is to read some poetry before getting a coffee and the daily paper's prose. A lot of the books I have tried lately do not disresemble the latter enough. But the work (and play) of Oana Avasilichioaei has raised my hope for the future of our art. We do not really need poems that tell us what the poet saw and how he can make figurative language to give us his view of those things. We do not really need language that is passed over the counter by its baker. Ms Avasilichioaei is envired by language as she is by any world she enters, and when you read you don't read her *version* — you are too busy negotiating the pleasant difficulty of her pages. If you run into one another from time to time? Well, what a nice thing to experience first thing in the morning. This poet offers no Frostian conclusions, but possibilities leading in all directions. Judith Fitzgerald was right when she wrote that you can't really read the poems, but you can sure experience them — and if you do not want poetry to lull you, you will want that experience.

Oana Avasilichioaei's name is usually preceded or followed by the words poet, translator, editor, collaborator — and you always feel as if all those people are with you while you are experiencing her text. That text can make your eyes jump, maybe into the future. That translator makes you realize that your role is not

to consume an English-language text that has replaced a French or Romanian original, but to engage happily with the difficulties of both languages. The poet is not here to enclose but to compose, i.e. to put something beside something. I think that she will continue the work of poets such as Fred Wah and Erin Moure, to waken our ears and imaginations that have been stuffed up with the ordinary.