



Accounted For
Cover Detail: "Landscape"
Cheryl Christiansen

Jeannine Savard: A Writer's Reflection and Four Poems, from her new book, *Accounted For*

I've been writing poems seriously for about thirty two years. What I mean by "seriously" is that I'm a serious-minded person and poet, but I do really enjoy others' humor and playfulness. I only have one poem that approaches a comic sense, but it's more like comic relief since the underlying mood in the poem is one of fear, very tense. That poem has found a place in the newest volume of poems and is entitled "Advance of the Stranger." So, yes, fear and love of the world do play a part in my life and arrive as themes in my poems. Emotions can motivate me to write as much as the more philosophical ideas can. Was I always like this as a writer? The answer to that is "YES." I've always been concerned with being, existence, and non-existence, surfaces, depths, the varying perspectives of friends and being a listener-in-between people's extremes. I'd have to say that weather too was an influence—I mean all weather: environmental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual that I experienced in the first twenty years of my life, and as it continues. Lots of grey skies, long days of winter, cold, and of course, the hot blasts in the summer, humidity without air conditioning, and then later, of course, the blistering Arizona sun, and desert land-scapes. Born more sensitive, I think, than I would admit to myself or to anyone, since in my neighborhood the boys outnumbered the girls, three to one. However, I learned to climb, to pitch, run, kick, dodge, swim, ski, tell little lies and confess them (as a Roman Catholic). The experiments with breath and silence, sequestering myself in places where I knew no one would find me, was a favorite pastime. It wasn't a mischievous act at all. I simply required it. I only found out later that it was a kind of intense "yoga" that I was practicing. I found something there that was assuring in a very deep way; whether it was meeting God, or godliness, an angel or invisible double of my self, I couldn't know exactly, but it was something I loved. "We sat silently, and at times, almost without breath. It wasn't necessary to name this, only to experience it.

I think I began to want to transform this interior life, this energy into language as I began to see connections, patterns in the world, with other people, and as my vocabulary developed. I began to read more interesting books in college. Before that, I simply went through the motions, reading little and submitting book reports when required. Tests were the usual measure and that's another kind of reading experience. Pretty shallow. So, what I'm saying is that my imagination didn't open up until I read poems by Whitman, Elliot, Frost, and later Ferlinghetti,

Ginsburg, Roethke, James Wright, W.S. Merwin, and some Russian poets like Pasternak. I think the first woman poet that I read and whose work meant something to me was Denise Levertov. And that wasn't until the mid 1970's. I, of course, read Dickinson but my imagination didn't really open to the language of poetry; that is, poetry on the page until I was out of high school. I believe that I lived poetry then, as far back as I can remember. Connecting in every way to the rhythms and images of my life, consumed with it, and not having the distance or notion to "Write." Seeing and listening to objects, to sounds, to the natural world, plants, animals, primarily, then people, to words and phrases.

There were many tongues moving in my neighborhood, including French in my own family. There was Italian, Hungarian, Yiddish, Greek, and a little broken English from some of the grandparents. Although I don't speak another language, I do understand a little French. The reason I speak English and only English is probably because it was the one language that all of the families back then agreed to speak, the one they made the effort to understand, and the one that made them united. I love that they all made that effort and I keep it going. It seems it shouldn't have to be an either/or situation, but for me, the English language is the one thing that is still important. Some people, probably most, believe that it is a self-imposed limitation. That could be true to some extent, but there is something bigger there for me, and it has to do with the sense of carrying on, being a locus for that whole larger community. All languages came together in one language: English. The links are emotional and philosophical, "I" and "the other(s)" in the language is what keeps life OPEN for me.

I write slowly and take my time to live. Teaching has been as big a part of my life as anything else I've done. I've written four books over the last 24 years; the first one re-published in Carnegie Mellon's Classic Contemporary Series, so all four of them are still in print. I don't know how much longer that will last but for this time they've had, I am thankful. I am working on a new book of poems that plays more with the form of the poem on the page, and am circling back after some prose poems to the tighter, more compressed lyrics like you'd find in my second book, Trumpeter. I'm interested now in what subject or subjects the next poems will take. One poem at a time.

Ekstasis

*unfolds continuously: feel the spinal flow,
those children running down the block, running
to the yellow house whose windows shine
with Irish ivy. Remember the giant beehive
broken open like a head?
Acoustical honey dripping down the lilac?*

*Nine parrots come pecking at the foot of the porch stairs.
A dance begins in the seed
set out for the sparrows.
An old woman claps on her knees,
calls these children “her band of feathered pirates.”
Think of her green stuffed peppers, grains of light
following the ghost of an encore signature
all around the fastest toe bones. A jig—*

*feel the awkward pieces of comb
left on a windowsill to dry,
ripples through the flesh, a hand
holding another’s hand in the dark.*

First published in *Marooned*.

Advance of the Stranger

At dusk, a semi-nude will be walking
as if resolved, as if on his way to hog heaven,
but not without first making you look
at the redness of his red breasts under
the blackness of his black chest hair—And,
you'll do it twice before you roll your vision back.
You're being broken down eight ways to Friday
by Buff Rule, Tuft Luck:

it's Common Sense who suppresses the growl
for the rule he does not follow. The practical High-Tops &
braided belt he's wearing won't assuage her forever.

Daddy's Little Pole Cat is fractious-ready
for the red pepper spray with the tricky release
tucked inside her slicker pocket.

Sophistica-Poetica wants to contemplate the guy as
she would a ship lit up at night, emerald
floating inside its matrix, impermanent erratic
on the horizon.

Grandma S., with the scorched nail of her right thumb,
crosses the notch running straight-up the middle of her brow,
looks both ways, and traverses the street
like some elite, world class skier.

Dog-Philo hooked to a leash, barks
under the splotch of her nose, scopes the stranger's burl
and belly-fur, then tugs out of the late afternoon
a sky-blue ribbon.

It's the No-Mess Chemist though who understands,
just having poured henna and a warm quart of beer over her head,
who'd never be the one to abandon,
always caught in a gust like powder for love. She'd never walk
ankle-deep through puddles, but underneath it all
she knows she's winged, would die for nothing.

Memory's Messenger coughs out the last
congested slug of air, a 12th century proverb
about a man's being proud
as a mountain in labor, but giving birth finally
to an adorable, laughable mouse.

It is again—Ms. Augustine—on her rounds,
renewing, opening to God outside of time.

She's thinking *All the numbers have gone eternal,*
only the cages children chalked on the sidewalk remain.
She's thinking *Good thing I'm thinking. . .*

I'll loosen that leash a little,
let Groper Boy see below Philo's pink gums,
let her lip's curl be that.

First published in *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

One Morning,

a spider climbs through the right eye of a brass god.

The obsessive girl is on the opposite side
sewing buttons on a shirt with double-thick thread
the day her grandmother, wearing her calf-length
raspberry wool, beaver-trimmed coat,
slips on the icy sidewalk
shattering her glasses and a wrist.

There's no rescue toward, just slow radio guitars
braiding air. In a kitchen bright sun, she bites off
the last of the seven knots,
spatulas out for herself a powdery lemon square.
She's struck by the certainty of the fork
left standing in the sausage on the stove,
the wooden measuring stick leaning at 22 red inches exactly,
as always, between the refrigerator and the tool bench.

She might have caught a glimpse of blood
splashed onto the snowbank from her window, but
her gaze runs towards the neighbor's eldest son
crawling drunk up the drive, bellowing something
about a dead dog put out in the trash.
The boy's father is whipping his back with a long birch switch
while his mother stands in the doorway, stroking her favorite cat
in sets of three, always praying under her breath
for the safe delivery of all souls.

The door is difficult to open. Dozen of years and the girl
must try to forgive them, herself. . . .
She believes the easy spider: *From now on,
carry nothing through the unblinking dark.*

Mysteria

—*the shade I was meant to unwind.*

—Jiri Orten

The rattlesnake in its hour-glassy skin
sifted through old horse bones,
three and one half turns to a stillness.

Coiled inside the false-bottomed music box,
the Egyptian black and gold necklace.

It was the melody the girl loved, and would bid on.
No one at the auction detected the hidden drawer,
a little choker clattering inside,
but she would, and considered it—no surprise.
Loaded luck is what she thought she had
after listening to what she shouldn't the week before
behind closed kitchen doors: her parents whispering
hung himself from a hook,
head limp, legs swinging loose in the dark.

She didn't know how to stop listening,
her friend's grandfather shuffling his feet as usual
around the block, the mumbling in lonely Italian.
Clouds that slowed down to a gray putty
would sink into her arms and harden
while she swam in the cove and swung out again
on the twice-knotted rope with the miniature moths beneath.

When he stopped for good, she promised—she'd never let anyone
she knew be lonely. She whispered *Protect*,
cautioned her friends against prying open
whatever was tiered or sealed shut.
Her grandmother thought she was always going too far,
all tied-up with superstitions.
Her grandfather understood wonder and fear,
scribed slow circles on her back. Late that night

a bolt of linen unraveled her sleep—
the random drop of quarter notes,
fish eyes, and slip knots—no screams, but
a goddess
enthralled by the length of her own body stretched out on a warm wet rock.