WALKING IN ELYSIUM

For some years now, I've been walking in Elysium. I'd got a sense of it years ago reading Michael Crummey's "Her Mark" where Ellen Rose surveys her earthly estate:

> Bounded above by the sky, by the blue
> song of angels and God's stars. Below by the bones of those who
> made me.
> I leave nothing else. Every word I have spoken the wind has
> taken , as it will take me. As it will take my grandchildren's children,
> their heads full of fragments and my heart not among those. The day
> will come when we are not remembered. I have wasted no part of my
> life in trying to make it otherwise . . .

Not that Canada is at the end of the earth, though I did have that sense of vertigo in Vancouver, on my own, looking out to sea. And the clarity of the air was sometimes disorientating for this mortal. Not, of course, that the country's Elysian plains, or prairies, are in any sense, *that*, Elysium, for the struggling people who live midland in the decimated farmlands. Gary Geddes rightly rounds on any simplistic notion of Canada as peace maker, "a nation of gentle saints", rather he points to its tradition of of "noisy compromise". Perhaps, too, there is a parallel with Newfoundland, something special about the land, its own earned *dúchas*. As Adrian Fowler noted in a few words for the cover of *However Blow the Winds* (2004), it was to a large extent the Irish and English poor, who together prizing their freedom, peopled the province. Similarly, on the mainland, decent people fleeing the manifold tyrannies of Europe, or wherever, sought out Canada and made it their home. Something of their original goodness must permeate the national psyche and, of necessity, filter down into its verse.

Not that the First Nations could take such advent lightly. Theirs were the sacred grounds of a shared native Elysium of the Great Spirit. A white aggression bred from Genesis knew neither stopping nor sharing. Ongoing tensions still colour these pages. What happened in Newfoundland still cries out to heaven in the words of poet, Joan Crate:

> New-found-land the title,
> a joke, a riddle, and
>
> *What shall we do with* -
> me; a suspended sentence.

("Loose Feathers on Stone", for Shawnandithit, a long poem where Crate's persona joins hands with that of the last Beothuk).

On the poetry front, it has become apparent to me that no anthology, however ambitious, or series of anthologies, can ever deplete the Canadian fields. Each book offers a particular armful of poems gathered at a particular juncture of time and opportunity, governed by the eye that sees and hand that picks. Such contingencies. An initial request broadcast across the eastern province brought in hundreds of manuscripts. Only a fraction constituted *The Backyards of Heaven* (2003) governed as we were with inadequate budgets. I can still see submissions in piles languishing to window sills.

All the while, I became conscious of voices in verse outside the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Some of the poets from the province included in the two volumes mentioned made a living in other parts, Toronto or Montreal, for instance. Pratt was an early example. At the March Hare Festival, I met poets from BC, twice the distance from Europe, major voices like Lorna Crozier and Susan Musgrave. Talk inevitably led to other names in the trade. I began to read wider then. I first got a sense of the immensity of Canadian space from Jan Zwicky, and it was somehow hugely consolatory. Odd names started to appear in the verse, like *Brandon, Limerick* . . . What were such doing in Canadian verse? Maybe there was a buried hinterland of Irish connections? Certain enclaves in Montreal and across Quebec and in the west were mentioned. So, the prospect of a third anthology, one spanning coast to coast was discussed and shelved, and discussed and shelved for the umpteenth time as preposterous. An earlier attempt (by others) appeared to have vanished without trace. Not that any anthology would be in any way restricted to "Irish" voices; early on, Stephanie McKenzie laid down a marker on this and she was right; for instance, against what was intended on one grants front, First Nations from Newfoundland & Labrador were as comprehensively included as we could manage in *The Backyards of Heaven* (2003). Chief Misel Joe came on Irish tour. Stephanie McKenzie found the funding for a five-city trip for her compatriots to Ireland, the poets of Newfoundland and Labrador.

But *Canada*? An anthology comprising *Canada and Ireland*? In one rash moment, the decision was taken to proceed. A research grant from The International Council for Canadian Studies made research visits possible on both sides of the Atlantic. Colleagues were helpful with names and advice, often totally contradictory; lists were arrived at and torn up and replaced, until some consensus was reached for both sides allowing us to proceed. Duly launched in Ireland and Canada in 2007 and 2008, the 1280-page *The Echoing Years*, as it became known, the third part of the trilogy, might have concluded the effort. The penultimate launch was at Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in UBC.

It was then I came across the well-stocked poetry shelves of UBC Bookstore. *All these new names I'd never even heard of*? It was not that my colleague editors were unaware of such names: such a range simply could not be accommodated in *The Echoing Years*. I spent a few hours browsing on the hoof and made enough selections of new work to blow credit cards and cash with just about enough to see me watered and back. The ridiculous sprang to my lips as I sat down mid-day outside O'Mahoneys for a bite with Stephanie. "Count me out!" said Dr. McKenzie bringing down her cigarette on the ash-tray with the force of

excommunication. Got the books back and started serious reading. On reading Joanne Arnott's "Conception", I knew I had the *fiat* I needed. At a Leonard Cohen concert on a dark rain-washed magical evening in mid-summer Dublin, I heard his song "Anthem" as if for the first time and I knew I had my title if I could procure permission for it. And so on to David Zieroth. The in-between is history, other leads, and hundreds of emails. On getting wind of the venture, Randall Maggs emailed me on another insomniac bleary-eyed night declaring me "incorrible". I had not the heart to tell him to add the "-gi-" bit. Later, last October, when they awarded me an Hon. Doctorate of Laws at SWGC for my previous labours, and after Rex Browne had driven me to Glenburnie to see the house where that intrepid Campus Principal, John Ashton from Barnsley, spent his last days with Sheila, Rex took me to Stephanie's office. I presented her two volumes of possibles. Without a word, she took the lot, left them behind a press and resumed her reading. Only then did I realise fully I was on the right track, - reinforced by Fred's warm reception for *The Echoing Years* in *Poetry Ireland Review* (PIR 95). Soon Kent Jones and his art students at SWGC, Susan Doyle with hers at Rhode Island and colleagues and students at Waterford had become absorbed with another version of the Illustrated Manuscript. If not quite *The Leabhar Mòr* or *The Great Book of Ireland*, still on the same trail. The absence of my colleagues on the editorial scene on this occasion allowed me to include their work, which I admire anyway, this time without conflict of interest. So concludes for me the formal anthologies. Sixty-five soon, grandfather now, I tell my "kids" I'm near the age of liberation, - to resume "To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new."

Meanwhile, back to Elysium, where E.D. Blodgett's fine *Elegy* presumes a living community of spirits past and present (like Al Pittman's *West Moon*):

only ghosts will cross
the landscapes that compose
the soul

until my soul
becomes
a ghost

people lingering in the mind with all the resonance of Glück and his blessed spirits. Somewhere in this landscape, John Donlan might enthuse with Hopkins: "long live the weeds and the wilderness yet". In this case, the poet lives for half the year on a lake north of Kingston, Ontario, surrounded by one hundred and seventy-seven acres of wilderness. Elise Partridge describes him as having the reverence of Wordsworth combined with the tenderness of John Clare for creation in his verse. His poem "Columbine" is dedicated to Susan Musgrave's partner, Stephen Reid, the subject of *The Stopwatch Gang*, an account of a gang of bank robbers. Perhaps these latter had read too much Pound, whose discourse on banks is relevant to our times. Speaking of

Pound, old Ezra must surely enthuse over the pictographs of young poet Matthew Hollett, whose superb line "helios brings morning to corner brook" took *The Backyards of Heaven* into allegro maestoso, its final movement. Matthew Hollett's pictographs appeared in *Shift & Switch*, an exciting new anthology of experimental verse, whose concerns are as much mathematical as metrical, and whose oeuvre for specialists in Irish medieval verse, will recall the latter's similar obsession with the laws of pre-Einstein Physics, it being the work of poets (no shrinking violets) to reflect and re-inforce the powers that held the universe together. The pictograph links also with the genesis of First Nations wonder in its first articulations.

An important criterion in any piece of writing is the apparent truth or emotional veracity of its contents. Poetry is no exception. In the realm of characterisation, symbolic cardboard types fold as quickly as their makers. Allegorical types survive through the details of portrayal. The real soon create their own ambience.

Again and again, throughout the poets, whose work can only be sparingly represented in the following pages, people walk off with the poems constructed to contain them. I have been fortunate to meet salt-of-the-earth fathers, mothers, sons, daughters and neighbours, heroes and villains and sometimes animals, broken down trucks and lawnmowers in their midst. The pages of the following, amid others, are alive with the real, as opposed to the literary: Bachinsky, Benning, Connolly, Dawe, Deerchild, Dempster, Donlan, Doyle, Gottfriedson, Johnston, Leggo, MacPherson, Maggs, McKenzie, McLeod, McWhirter, Philips, Rader, Rhodes, Rogers, Sinclair, Smart, Suknaski, Trussler, Tucker, Wilson, Zieroth and others in between, say, Szumagalski's partner cowering in silence, Suknaski's own father warts & all, his Dunc and Babe McPherson, Rhenisch's Evelyn in BC, the raw power and affection of Rader's old mustang, the burial of the horse in Philips, Connolly's "Aunt Olive among the Heavy-Petters", Riggs as remembered by Tom Dawe, people and circumstance touching the raw nerve. Decent fair folk, people the author of *Piers Plowman* could rub shoulders with, or Chaucer, speaking of whom I'd refer readers to the 252-page *The Office Tower Tales* (The University of Alberta Press, 2008), Alice Major's *tour de force*, a kind of high-rise office *Canterbury Tales* up and down the escalators and in places people must meet perforce "in an age not so much evil as incoherent".

What was surprising to this reader was the number of poems in contemporary volumes addressing issues of the individual soul, spirit or individual psyche, however one wishes to define that chemistry. Old biblical forbears are done and dusted to walk again in the poems of Carla Funk, a kind of observant Penelope or Nazarene Mary in her sewing room. Samson and Delilah breathe again, good old fashioned Gluttony, obese as you like, finishes last in the race of the seven deadly sins while the St. Thomas in everyone is addressed in "Love Poem for a Skeptic". In a memorable re-visioning of the Healer, Himself, Harold Rhenisch envisages Him as the saviour of small engines at the garage door in "Hymn for Small Engine Repair". Rhenisch also writes what must be a hymn for whales, getting to the task before Brendan the Navigator. Mike Doyle has a poem "Written on the Soul"; Elis Juliana remembers "A holy moment"; Barbara Klar's eloquent "Prayer" calls for the strength of the bear in adversity; Barbara Leifso has a sequence "Prayer for Rain"(unlikely to find many imitators on this side); Andrea MacPherson finds a space in her European travels "where [I] will learn to pray", Randall Maggs writes of Sawchuck (reviled by fans

one week, idolised the next) slumped before the statue of the virgin in “Dinner at the Priest-House” where dropping the apostrophe s has a curious effect); Diane Tucker’s poem “while praying” takes place outside a shower; Sheri Benning’s “Descent from the Cross” makes extraordinary use of the blank page; it appears Tim Lilburn and Stephanie McKenzie have a soft spot for Jesuits in “Fr. Paul le Jeune, S.J. in the Forest” and “First Vision of Father Marquette” respectively; David Zieroth remembers a time he could pray and not thereafter (well, maybe, as we’ll see):

I planted, and prayed
for the market to hold, and when
it failed I stopped praying
and never began again . . .

In “Dogwood Tree in Winter” Mildred Tremblay considers the many falls of her father in his last years:

The sound of crashing
in this house terrorizes me. Jesus
only fell three times.

Her humour in “Jehovah”, when two ardent young men call to her door bent on conversion, has her heading to the hills for sanctuary, while “Thee” as a no-holds barred love poem has its familiars in the “Thys” and “Thous” still current on the tongues of Sunday. John Terpstra surveys “The Little Towns of Bethlehem” . . .

If a Christian *mythos*, therefore, informs both imaginative thought, structure and emotive thrust in poems for many, its ancient contemporary in the catacombs, Orphism, imbues the work of Graham Good in no small measure in his elegant translations of Rilke’s late poetry in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Writing of a part of the world where God for years was much trumpeted, if not much in evidence among the savageries of the warring parties (in the words of Richard Murphy in *The Battle of Aughrim*,- a kind of native Irish Batoche, -

. . .They know nothing about God
Only something of the evil exploded by the word),

George McWhirter at the end of his remarkable poem for his sister on the Shankhill Road in Belfast, who survived the bombs but not her cancer, writes “God bless you, Lily”, an ending that is authentic, apt and earned (“*Pensée Poéme Assay* for my Sister”). Few poets would get away with such verbal sweep in Ireland: were it not for the ghost of Joyce frowning on any such after him in his toast to Tim Finnegan , in matters of the spirit, Rhoda Coghill put paid to any such creeping revisionism in her fifties lyric “Leave us, Religion” in its lands where archeological warehouses are packed to capacity with the toes of monks and cranial memorabilia as highways inch forward.

When I first considered setting out on the anthology trail for Canada, I collected as many recent anthologies of Canadian poetry as I could. As a teenager, way back, I had Ralph Gustafson’s *Penguin Book of Canadian Verse* (1957), and primal echoes of F.R.Scott’s “Old Song” and its spacious music, -

of no mind
out of long aeons
when dust was blind
and ice hid sound

only a moving
with no note
granite lips
a stone throat

have long striated my own mind. Gustafson's strictures on the verse he saw as Canadian were quite purist though: "There are Aphrodites in Canadian poetry - the seafoam is too cold". He advised on poetic conditions linked to the seasonal and geographical contingent, - a spare lyricism and metaphysical wit were to be cultivated, with the Laurentian Shield preferably as backdrop. What he would have made of the tropical imagery of Jan Conn in *Jaguar Rain* and *Botero's Beautiful Horses* must remain conjecture. What is very obvious to this reader is that Canadian poets will come and go imaginatively as they please; the world today is very much every poet's oyster anyway and foreign treasures may well be appropriated back home in a manner parallel to or replacing the imperialist mindset. At one memorable Hare Concert in Gander, Anita Best announced that she was on a one-woman crusade against Irish cultural imperialism; she then proceeded to sing songs in Irish. Like Seamus Heaney (whose every line is enriched by his undergraduate studies in Linguistics), Jan Conn's scientific education informs the precise reportage of her poems; her *anam cara* is Margaret Meade, orchid hunter in Brazil from the 1950s to the 1980s. Jungle, jaguar and the human imagination in a ravenous hunger for the exotic comprise the imaginative trinity of Conn's memorable poetry. I found the Canadian poetic enriched by many other seams from abroad as well: Shane Rhodes with his Hispanic themes; Brenda Leifso's excursions into Greek Mythology with chilling empathy, "The Maenads Prepare for the Hunter"; the entirety of Tim Lilburn's *Orphic Politics*; the poems of Bolivian poet Yvonne America Truque (who later settled in Montreal) translated into French by Jean-Pierre Pelletier; the Afro-Caribbean Papiamentu of Curacao writer Elis Juliana translated by Hélène Garrett. Jeramy Dodds wishes "Happy Birthday to Carl Linneaus, 300 Years Old" while Heather Brett from Newfoundland and living a near lifetime in Ireland takes her poems from our midland landscapes. Mary Dalton's riddles have an Anglo-Saxon provenance: they at once tease and fret, like a good detective novel in haiku, opening up lots of cul-de-sacs. One has got to test Mary's road to be taken against a lifetime of experience. A marvellous sense of Wordsworthian pantheism pervades the *oeuvre* of Sue Sinclair. A pantheism here not of Constable oaks, but of inanimate things that appear about to speak to the reader. Tables and chairs have a halo of a Joycean *quidditas* about them. The breaker on the cover of *Breaker* appears to be coming at us with a mind's eye of its own. A certain new humour, as in "Dawn till Dusk", sometimes makes her world that bit less disquieting:

We awaken to find the house
waiting for us,
patiently grazing

in a field, chewing
the same mouthful of grass

as always . . .

Elizabeth Philips could not have written some of her best poems without Keats at her shoulder. One of her poems is entitled “To Keats”. Never mind if it’s forty below and

an implacable
prairie winter cracks the floor joists . . .

she continues to savour “the soft-dying day”. She is a poet who thrills in opposites and the richly apposite. Her “River Edge” is pure Keats, too, loading every rift with ore and the detritus of the thaw. Canadian poets look to mainland Europe, also, for imaginative sustenance or umbiblical anchor: Andrea MacPherson visits the Celtic Isles seeking forbears; Stephanie McKenzie immerses herself in Van Gogh. Earlier, *The Echoing Years* took from “Forests of the Medieval World” (Don Coles in olden-year France and Germany) while Carmine Starnino etymologised his Italian tongue in “On the Obsolescence of Caphone.” Dominique Gaucher writes in French on the subject of journeys savouring the atmosphere of cities Vienna, Sofia, Bucharest and more besides. Francis Catalano’s translations of the Italian poet, Valerio Magrelli, earned him the national John Glassco Award in 2006.

In its own way, *The Echoing Years* helped to bridge the gap between old and new worlds with its inclusion of twelve poets from Eastern Europe translated by Irish poets. And is Sawchuk, the archetypal hero of hockey (and father who keeps facing the day to put bread on the table for his kids), not from Ukrainian stock?

Such cultural cross-fertilisation has always made for greatness: Keats taken with the Grecian urn, Coleridge away with Kubla Khan until the knock on the door from Porlock. Ireland’s greatest treasure, *The Book of Kells*, could not have come into being had not church artists from Byzantium travelled west in an iconoclastic time (the miniature had limited possibilities with the faithful who liked to adore their saints tall). In turn, the Irish monks, formerly slave traders, faces quite well made up it seems with berries in fashion, marched back across Europe well-stocked now with hymns and quills, illuminating the Word in manuscripts this time in dark ages in monasteries built by their own hands, forgetting sometimes to erase their Gaelic snarls from the margins if the bell for supper was late, again.

There is one trait or physical distinctiveness of Canada that is immediately apparent to visitor and reader alike; the sense of utter spaciousness in landscape and art. This dimension colours both book titles and contents as well as thematic fixations. At the centre of it is a sense of “the sacred essence of life” a phenomenon Kim Anderson identifies in the work of Joanne Arnott but which probably owes all to a continuing First Nations consciousness. Joanne Arnott writes eloquently of her struggle for space, establishment of that sacred space that is the self and the individual spaces between herself and her children. Yet, having established space, the poet is lost without its plenitude in “Gone Not Gone”:

With the kids gone
I sleep in a messy house

that I may wake up
with the illusion

Michael Trussler stakes out his own space, apart, in *Accidental Animals* yet every line, and the spaces between them, are over-run with his absent children as he still in imagination seeks to amuse them. Issues of personal space inform Barbara Leifo's masterly "Letter to Kirk: Vancouver" as surely as they did the equally impressive Catherine Hunter poem "Two Thousand and Two" we were fortunate to come across for *The Echoing Years*. At the heart of this spatial focus is often a quietist, tender, meditative tone on the losses and gains of the spirit, as in the poems of Michelle Desbarats, in for instance, her lines on the death of an animal, "The Miracle of Beside a Dog". There is a quality of unaffected openness about all this that is refreshing. Crystal Sikma can write a beautiful tender love poem, "Driving down into Qu'Appelle". The Qu'Appelle Valley has long been an important otherworld crossroads for First Nations and immigrant Canadians. See a title by an Irish poet, "Driving into . . .X", and one might expect a demolition job on the landscape whatever the location. One might wait a long time for a title like Anne Szumigalski's *When Earth Leaps Up* to emerge from the Irish midlands (though I confess I've yet to read from any of the thirty anthologies pioneered by Heather Brett). Sometimes the issue of space can be haunting, as in the lack of space one might have accorded someone. Anne Szumagalski was by all accounts a most generous person and mentor to many young poets, yet she regrets hugely the lack of space accorded a partner in "Untitled ('When I think of him . . .')"

In reading anthologies of Canadian Poetry, I was particularly struck by a statement in the *15 Canadian Poets X 3* anthology by Gary Geddes referring to a constant aimed at in Canadian poetry one could easily overlook or take for granted: an essential decency of spirit. Without this quality embedded in the psyche on a grand scale, Canada as a nation could not have become the kind of gentle giant it has largely become in world affairs (many would pray that it retains this position, for everyone's survival if for no other reason). This quality comes to the fore in verse in different ways. It is the bedrock from which David Manicom speaks in *Desert Rose, Butterfly Storm*. Where, really, anymore is the "home of the free, home of the brave?" In a poignant re-take of Robert Duncan's "A Poem beginning with a Line by Pindar" and emulating the latter's ode formations, Manicom touches base with north-american thinking on unbridled militarism, armament rhetoric and contemporary savagery. Wilfred Owen is dead a long time and the dialectic between his two protagonists in "Strange Meeting" might never have been spoken. The humiliations at Guantánamo shocked a whole continent. The bloody mess that Iraq became. The US standoff at United Nations that made the razing of Gaza another muscle flex in the exercise of strategy. Manicom is drawn back to Eliot's *Wasteland* to locate a co-relative for the times we live in, in an attempt to get to grips with contemporaneity. Eliot prefaced his long poem with "NAM Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent . . . / With my own eyes I saw the Sibyl suspended in a glass bottle, at Cumae, and when the boys said to her: 'Sibyl, what is the matter?' She would always respond: 'I yearn to die.'"

Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower –
where among these did the power reside
that moves the heart?

wrote Duncan in the section "The Thundermakers descend," and Manicom rejoins in "Gameboy" set against the background of new fundamentalisms:

JehovahYahwehJesusOsamaAllahGeorge
What is this particular fucking prayer-faced ruse
All about?

He invokes Yeats who clearly saw in "The Second Coming" the nazi monster, while we continue blithely unaware at the brink of extinction, like the callow boys, on their way to grow up for another war far away, or the immolative car bomb someone else decides, with all the calculation of prayer, still questing the Sibyl on the human condition.

Which is not to say there are not lesser conflicts nearer home, or the playout of these continuing on prairie or in any small northern town in Canada or Ireland. Alice Major in her poem "What is buried under the walls" speaks of a woman's voice with "anger ripped from her throat" arraigning her residential street at 3am:

You're on Indian land, man.
You're all on fucking Indian land, man.
This is fucking Indian land.

The treaties have long been made and broken and whatever re-verified into our time, but hurts still linger and fester, whether these be of historical recentness or part of the contemporary reality. Readers of Newfoundland literature cannot but be aware the hold the fate of Shawnandithit and the last of her people still has on the popular imagination. Joan Crate's long poem "Loose Feathers on Stone" from *Foreign Homes* (Brick Books, 2001) is dedicated to Shawnandithit, the poem note referring to "The Beothucks, a First Nations tribe of Newfoundland … the victims of European disease and genocide". If one is to judge from the poetry of Rosanna Deerchild, ("Cousin comes in from the bush"), Garry Gottfriedson ("Strep-throat"), Neal Mcleod ("1895, Batoche"), Sharron Proulx-Turner ("anxiety of influence") or Janet Marie Rogers ("Check Point"):

another day
young ones wait outside
without coats

without kisses goodbye
for late buses
to take them
to racist schools. . .

- the past, or remnants of the past still linger today. This time there can be no excuse for decent people not to take a stand on basics at every opportunity if any bedrock of decency be true. One of the most poignant and shattering moments in compiling *The Backyards of Heaven* (2002 – 2003) was our wait for permissions faxed to us from The Labrador as First Nation Innu trekked from Davis Inlet to Natuashish, beside whose circumstance our own concerns were as nothing. In UBC Bookstore, I saw shelves and shelves of stories and studies re-living and expunging a ruthless residential system, which religion supported and bolstered, during which time some one hundred native languages were systematically extinguished. In the face of such holocaust, the *bata stick* looks benign. The mind baulks trying to come to terms with

the enormity of the scale of extinction. Yet, somehow from this dustbowl of tears, a re-flowering of First Nations culture in life and in the arts emerged. This re-emergence is examined in depth by poet Stephanie McKenzie in her study *Before the Country: Native Renaissance, Canadian Mythology* (University of Toronto Press, 2007) in the context of the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. The continuing re-surgence (and here I can only refer to voices in poetry) can be gauged by the inclusion of eight First Nations poets in *The Echoing Years* along with the additional six included here(excluding Suknaski ,who writes with eloquence on First Nations heroes and circumstance). Inadequate, but better to light the candle than to curse the darkness. What is remarkable to this reader is the depth of First Nations tolerance despite all. Joanne Arnott sees her poems, from one angle, as opportunities for mothers (First Nations and other) to compare notes. In the introduction to *MOTHER time*, she asks, "In later years, were your teen-aged sons handcuffed and tasered by sadistic 'peace officers'? Or were their lives transformed by a human, dressed as a police man, being touched by a human, dressed in criminal clothes? Our stories, spoken truly, are essential: food and drink, fresh air, room to grow?" An old wisdom asserts, "the truth will set you free". Neal McLeod acknowledges the evil committed by both white and First Nations in the past and the need now for new modes of reconcilement. He pays tribute to the "brave white boys" who came to his neighbourhood to take on his team in hockey ("James Smith Hockey Arena"). First Nations, it appears, pick their battles more carefully today. A little subversion can go far. Neal McLeod has an uncle smoke his pipe through a sermon on hell and damnation. The Jesus-obsession is neatly critiqued in another church context, by the words of McLeod's great-great-great-grandfather, a Cree-Dene from the Cold Lake area of Alberta:

he said, he couldn't understand why
they would talk about Jesus
when they killed him
he used to think
they were afraid
they would be punished

Such recall the Irish folktale tradition of the priest-on-horseback versus the raggy boy on foot and their exchanges: "Where is God, boy?" / "Why, did ye lose Him?" where an exercise in cathechism is boomeranged back on one in the saddle of faith.

In *Gabriel's Beach*, Neal McLeod finds his own redemptions. His uncle was one of many First Nations to win praise for bravery on the beaches of Normandy. To that extent they became members of a collective withstanding tyranny on a global scale. They earned the respect, if not the full rights, of people back home. In the poet's case, mosôm Gabriel is a model for personal re-generation. Sometimes the context of the uncle's exploits will have a familiar ring with the *Táin*: in a contest that lasts over three pages, Gabriel and his opponent take breaks to see to the health and sustenance of the other, in scenes that echo with Ferdia and Cúchulainn. In a book that is as excoriatingly confessional of himself, as it is celebratory of the Cree nation, he recalls in "Words for my Sons" a time when "[T]he ancient river was so dry in my soul that [I]could no longer cry" and pays tribute: "Our women have been strong in their stories, but we have been weak in our silence. Remember, it is our grandmothers who helped us survive". Women like the grandmother of Sharron Proulx-Turner, who like

a silent Penelope, continued reading the blanket in her hands knowing one day her house would be restored, the heroic return. Of the eight poets featured in *The Echoing Years*, five were women with four out six in this volume. It's not, of course, as if First Nations are short of male heroes to dwell on. McLeod, himself, recalling Batoche ("1885, Batoche"), remembers how the old men sent the young people away, then

old men fought
told jokes, teased ,chided
each other
as bullets cut
bodies into the earth

Strange, then, that whatever common ground was initially established between white and First Nations was partly achieved by other outcasts once from nearer home. Recognising an archetypal forbear in the poem "Song About", Joanne Arnott muses:

. . maybe you remember her

she married nice gaelic men
she married herself
into the white race . . .

When I first made contact with Sharron Proulx-Turner, the poet wondered if it was because another ancient forbear of hers was Irish (she honours also the French connection). Not at all. Sharron's titles are awesome, and fascinate, before one even gets into the text.

The Irish have something else in common with First Nations today; a parental preoccupation with education; an education for their children at all costs. Colleagues from Canada have been amazed at the privations Irish parents will put up with to finance their "kids" through third level and beyond. John Conway in his marvellous book of photographs from Saskatchewan, his native province, *Saskatchewan Uncommon Views*, recalls how he heard a chief say that just as buffalo meant life to their ancestors in the past, it was education, "getting an education," that was buffalo today for his young people.

When I visited Ottawa last summer on the way back from Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at UBC in Vancouver, poet and professor at Carleton, Armand Garnet Ruffo kindly drove me round the city to see the sights. As we looked down on the massive locks connecting the Ottawa Canal with the Ottawa River, he pointed to a space beneath the cliffs on the other side. "If you and I had been here at the time, we'd have had our labouring shacks down there". Later, I saw close by hidden away under some trees, an old lichened celtic cross, with three symbols, - the pick, the wheelbarrow and the mosquito. But I could see no monument to First Nations. This only bears out the opening lines of Joan Crate's "Loose Feathers on Stone":

There is no stone, or word, or prayer to mark
Our fleet lives, our staggering deaths . . .

Or maybe as ex-celts, we're just better at erecting crosses.

Speaking of Saskatchewan a minute ago, I'd refer readers to *FAST FORWARD New Saskatchewan Poets* (Hagios, 2007), a memorable anthology and apparently the first in twenty-five years. I've chosen from the work of the following therein: Sheri Benning, Beverley Brenna, Neal McLeod, Jeff Park, Mansel Robinson, Crystal Sikma and Michael Trussler. Had space, time and opportunity allowed I could have picked the lot. Mansel Robinson considers the politics of poetry readings in his poem "A Poet Prepares". If he's not careful, he could end up like Paul Durcan addressing empty chairs. Poets Sheri Benning, Barbara Klar (editor), Neal McLeod and Michael Trussler have since published full volumes which are drawn on for this work. Speaking of their anthology, editors Barbara Klar and Paul Wilson point to this new swathe "looking up from the prairies toward possibility and a broad world view". Perhaps, too, it is salutary to remember Kavanagh's advice in "Epic" as he surveys the local goings on in Monaghan:

> Homer made the Iliad from such a local row.
> Gods make their own importance.

And how in any real sense could there ever really be *post-prairie?* According to Yeats, it takes a lifetime to get to know even a field. What then of the prairies? The poet's eye "in fine frenzy rolling" is at home there as anywhere. There are ample poems to prove it. Of course, poets writing of the prairie have their own difficulties with editors "in important places" if the editor in Don Kerr's poem "Editing the Prairie" is anything to go by:

> Well, it's too long for one thing
> and very repetitive.
> Remove half the fields.
> Then there are far too many fences
> interrupting the narrative flow.
> Get some cattlemen to cut down those fences.
> There's not enough incident either,
> this story is very flat.
> Can't you write in a mountain
> or at least a decent-sized hill?
> And why set it in winter
> as if the prairie can grow nothing
> but snow. I like the pubic bush
> but there's too much even of that,
> and the empty sky filling all the silences
> between paragraphs is really boring.
> I think on due consideration
> we'll have to return your prairie.
> Try us again in a year
> with a mountain or a sea or a city.

The best poets stand in awe of their subject as if in perpetual wonderment. As with Pygmalion, poets get a sense of the poem watching them. John Steffler speaks of the verse of Sheri Benning (from Saskatoon, now studying in Scotland) "drinking the world in – in its darkness and loveliness and nameless potencies." The great archetypal nexi move like girders under *Thin Moon Psalm*: mother and child, sister and sister, lover and lover, father and daughter in waves of sorrow, loss and hope. As always, what's lost is ever more haunting than what's been accrued:

> We undress, hold each other urgently; heat of our bodies

a false certainty. Tired and dumb, we whisper small words,
I love you, I love you, pebbles to dam the tide of coming morning.
Forgive us. We don't know how. Love is not inevitable - . . .

. . .In the morning we take a cab to the airport.
Sky, a bloodless face we can't read, suspect it might be judging us.
We think we might've lacked courage the night before,
though we don't say. . .

Two other poets in whom *Eros* excels are Barry Dempster and Monty Reid. Dempster's *Love Outlandish* is just that: a traversing of the A to Z of relationships. Irish readers will probably find parallels in the searing honesty of his work with that of mid-life James Simmons in marital breakdown. On the outlandish theme, he is a kind of Erasmus into *Praise of Folly* number sixty-seven. "One moment they [lovers] are excited, the next depressed, they weep and laugh and sigh by turns; in fact they truly are quite beside themselves". Dempster's heart is essentially that of the big-hearted father in "Devotion" considering the inert body of his wife:

He picked up her hand which lay in her lap
like a heap of mousy bones
and, lifting it to his lips, kissed the abyss.

Monty Reid also specialises in the alphabet of love. His partner (as an introductory note tells us) left Luskville, a phantom settlement on the Ottawa River in western Quebec and returned to Alberta "nursing a suite of dissatisfactions." The poet can only murmur plaintively that he never forgot his partner's birthday, but must nurse an inventory of loss:

. . .we were together 32 years
let's say we had sex on average two times a week
allowing for absences or sick leave
or the above average holidays
and that hi-rate first year

that would be 32 times 52 times 2
equals 3328

and the nipple
still rises
to the tongue

times 2

Sofia Omelkovica from Lithuania provides two illustrations for a moment of tenderness and lingerie falling from past times of "the heart / . . .that delicate necklace with its solitaire".

Heather Brett is a Canadian poet living in Ireland. She has done our own hinterland no small service; her guiding hand has edited or co-edited a staggering thirty books of young people's writing, across the flat midlands in places like Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford, centres off the beaten track of, say, a Yeatsian Sligo or a Joycean Dublin, to name but two well- heliconized watering holes.

Other poets with a local connection include Jacqueline Turner who finds it no bother to re-work *The Faerie Queene.* If Spenser in his day drew on the relative spaciousness of North Cork, so does this poet, with a cocktail of genres, embrace the greater curvature of Horseshoe Bay. The poems of Mike Doyle, a Canadian now for some thirty years, still draw on an Irish, or London-Irish perspectives. A critic with publications on William Carlos Williams and James T. Baxter, Doyle is very much an own stylist in his poems purveying comedy in universal mortality as in "Raking Shaking". Stephanie McKenzie has spent some time in Ireland as lecturer, editor and researcher. Her poem "Reading a Two-Day Old George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems*" has for location Marquette in the U.S. In the poem, she feeds and burps the baby (called Alana, *Ir.* A leanbh / My child! My darling!) of a housemate so that the latter can take a shower (her partner from South America has been detained at some border or other). Feeding a baby, a task many a parent does, perhaps while watching CNN or SKY News to Herodian explanations as to why the murder of children in Gaza was necessary. Clarke's *Execution Poems* is an extraordinary *tour de force;* I regret not having it all included in *The Echoing Years*. Since then *Black* has appeared to no less acclaim and should be sought out too. Here, I've given space to a much younger writer, Keita Demming,and his poem,"Blackness" from *We Have a Voice: An Anthology of African and Caribbean Student Writing in BC*. This discursive poem is perhaps best read in the socio-political discourse of the new era on the continent heralded by Obama. Don Domanski, a native of Cape Breton Island, now lives in Nova Scotia, the location of George Elliott Clarke's *Execution Poems*. What Irish poet would dare a title like *All Our Wonder Unavenged*? There is no poem of Domanski that's not luminous at heart.

"Be transported", warns Gary Geddes, when reading the work of Elizabeth Bachinsky (it is as well to remember we're still in Elysium). Jeanette Lynes writes of the "strange dark music of what it means to be human" as a constant in Bachinsky. Her world is anywhere and everywhere, a place of marriage-hunting small-town girls and burst condoms with consequences, where the men are noticeably dependable. A virtuoso across the stock-in trade of poetic forms and metres, the poet even leaves these one-pagers in her dusty wake with her long two-sister trans-Canada road poem "Drive", a kind of pedal-down *Bonny & Clyde* at the limits of emotion, tears and fevered transit. Bachinsky is blessed, too, with a wicked sense of humour as in "St. Michael".

Douglas Barbour and Sheila A. Murphy, two poets cycling in tandem across the days to create a poem occupy a rare space: the everyday musings of each dovetailing with the other in seamless transit down the pages in luminous conjunction. A curious (in the Marvellian sense) experiment that succeeds, their duet in verse challenging the void, the inevitable fall, the nihilism in the heavens over the next rise:

their notes flew over
what is rumoured to be darkness

One of the big events in Canadian Poetry in 2009 must be the launch at The Hare of Tom Dawe's *Where Genesis Begins*. This book is lovingly introduced by Martina Seifert, DAAD-Lehtern in German Studies at QUB and sheperded by Stan Dragland's indepth study of the poet's work at the end, illuminated all the while by the work of Gerald Squires (the Jack B.Yeats of Newfoundland). Taking its cue from the Kavanagh poem "To a Man after the Harrow", the book keeps motley company with

among others on stage, Lot's Wife, Thoreau, Asters, Riggs and The Last Keeper surveying Ottawa. I once saw Tom Dawe (a modest, quiet and subversive man) hold the audience in his palm at a concert in Corner Brook, - rolling in the aisles is more apt, as he dissected the follies of politics and politicians: that is, before the Hare Police (in service to Al and other seven-minute celebs in the line-up) inveigled him off stage. He was doyen of Waterford schoolchildren at his workshops here. The audience at his reading took him to themselves as he stumbled with emotion in his poem on John Clare.

Sometimes the verse of Jay MillAr is that of subversive bristling naturalist. Perhaps he cuts loose fewer times than he should. There is more than a trace of Wordsworthian pantheism in the genes of his poems. This urban business is too much with us. But, then, there is the Lake Shore.

George Johnston, a poets' poet, heeds Yeats's injunction: "Sing [only] whatever is well made", an attention to craft at all times. In the service of celebrating the ordinary across a spectrum of experience, he is a master of diction, tone and nuance, complex form and metre. Acquiring a status akin to Don Francisco Giner de los Ríos (as fondly remembered by Antonio Machado) as mentor, apparently, Johnston's own "Farewell to Teaching" evokes a resonance with O'Carolan's famous lament or the 1792 *Sgarúint na gCompánach.*

But home is where the heart is. Andrea MacPherson in *Away* may recognise in spirit the estrangement of forbears in reverse, like a pilgrim back to first principles, as she traverses countries of the old world. Her gaze is young and constant, sharp yet benign, at once quiet and incisive. In the end, in parched Karterados, she's homesick, longs for home, Canada ("the geography of bougainvillea"):

> I dream of the places I will go once home:
> thick rainforests, yards of lilac and rose bushes
> circular parks with lagoons . . .

One doesn't have to read far into Carl Leggo (earning his bread in Vancouver) to discover where his heart is. His poem beginning, "After a semester in Memorial, I returned home with Lana . . ." could well step off the pages and the illustrious company of the *romance* genre poets in medieval Spain. His father, so well captured in "Lilacs", has just passed on.

The question of terminal sickness, or mortality, as it beckons to those in their prime is always a challenge. *Orphic Politics* by Tim Lilburn is an extraordinary work. In this reader's experience, never was there such a triumphant descent into Hades recorded for an Orpheus in full stride. An Orpheus facing the first-last shock of mortality through illness. The book's incantatory rhythms and primal imagery (in a cascade of personal and social contexts) take the reader, like Eurydice, through the shadowy catacombs of the soul. Will it all end in bleak tears like the original? The cover of the book in its life-sensuousness is a gospel in itself.

Francis Catalano works his own crepuscular world in the second book of a penthology titled *Le Crepuscule des Lieux / The Twilight of Places* due to appear in 2009 or 2010.

Night Work The Sawchuck Poems by Randall Maggs is also a descent into the heart of darkness of the vulnerable hero, in this case the famed hockey goalkeeper. Bardic in its scope and sweep, *Sawchuck* demanded a new language and Maggs forged it for him. In Waterford, and elsewhere in Ireland, and in Canada, people had the privilege of watching, hearing and perhaps adding to this long poem in the making (both countries share a passion for the historically related encounters of hockey and hurling). In this sense, its making had all the provenance of the original epic recited in community, added to and deleted in the communal mind on the rock of veracity. All the feedback probably helped to make the poem the best seller it became, running to new editions and outselling at one stage Cohen and Shakespeare. At a Sean Dunne Festival reading in Waterford, I turned to Kennelly and said,"Why aren't we doing this?" It's not as if every summer Sunday till September fails to witness yet another Gaelic triumph or put-down in packed stadia, glory or humiliation in a space and time as tight as any Grecian unity. Why write of Greek heroes when those of the Kingdom go largely unsung? Sean O Tuama's great two-pager on Christy Ring points to a wider dereliction. Why not take on the prose of Tom Humphries, if we're able to? For players more professional, for many, as loyal, free, unpaid *amateurs* than some professionals themselves.

Kevin Connolly's "I Really Need Ted Lilly To Throw The Hook" also belongs to this world, coming as it does in the wake of "Double Suicide". Anyone, anywhere, who joins the Sunday or Saturday afternoon or evening faithful, the tens of thousands following the Barnsleys or Westmeaths of football, who have seen Dessie Dolan attempt frees into the Nazi salutes, or fists, of Hill 16, will appreciate this poem:

> We're up two and I'm sick to death of losing.
> It's Posada, never an easy out, but the hook
> is there for Lilly. It's the seventh and his old team,
> the 250-million-dollar Yankees, have beaten the
> shit out of us all week . . .

Down from Kavanagh's Seat by the canal, at the embassy launch of her novel, *Outlander*, Gil Adamson, Connolly's partner, placed her man in the forefront of Canadian poets. Who among the packed seats dared to stand up to contradict the six-foot novelist? Except one voice to quip, "If you want to push your novel, go marry a poet" referring to Connolly's refusal to accept the defeat of a manuscript gathering dust, all the while exhorting his partner to move a story that despite publisher rejection after rejection went on to become the multiple award winner it has become. Connolly's *Revolver* has already won its own praise with his earlier *drift* (2004); a comparison with Whitman by one critic may not be farfetched. Another quote has Connolly treading the highwire between "elation and cynicism, joy and grief, terror and love".

Unfortunately, time and circumstance are all too short to allow me to expand more fully on the pleasures of reading the poets in the collections drawn on for this book. This volume can in no way be taken as a canon of contemporaneity in Canadian poetry. It merely represents one *anthos- ogia* from the broad field of work out there for the picking and the pleasure. What could be selected within the timespan available. Waiting longer, or reaching further, to collect that extra *anthos* jeopardizes the enterprise as it is. Websites open out on vistas of more individual publications and other anthologies. It is a boundless perspective. Like the old man on Patmos, one

could keep gathering and choosing, but there's enough here to be going on with. People *must get their hands on the books* and read them in their entirety, otherwise the anthology becomes the lazy man's read. There is also the skewed nature of this exercise; on more than one occasion I altered the sequence in the originals for the sake of this entity. I seek the forbearance of poet, editor and publisher in this matter.

Elysium. . . Diane Tucker's *Bright Scarves of Hours* belongs to this shimmering landscape: poems that celebrate veiled grace and contrariness, that list a fascination with recipes, holiday snapshots and the reciprocities of car-pooling and invite the eyes of neighbours in to view the love making of husband and wife ("to husbands and wives"):

> Cast off the dim years of doing it in the dark.
> Let the watered light spread across your backs, your bellies.
> In the history of all the world there has never
> been a belly like that one. There never will be again.

Alan R. Wilson is no stranger to the Pleiades. His *Sky Atlas* for purveyors of the sonnet lists eighty eight in the genre celebrating eighty-eight constellations. Another *tour de force* under the stars that influence our minutiae no less than the tidal pull of the moon.

A particular pleasure was to come across the long poems of W.H.New and David Zieroth, *Along a Snake Fence Riding* and *The Village of Sliding Time* respectively. The first links eight voices along the perimeter of love and loss; the second fairly hurtles with pace, its speed in counterpoint to the staid village lives it depicts.

So, from Arnott to Zieroth, this book moves. In the latter's poem "Had I Stayed on the Farm" the *fiat* of Joanne Arnott's "Conception" leads to the child, the boy in this instance, an archetypal One moving among us again who must get lost, straying off on his own, not in any temple, but

> moving along the ditches for days
> trapping muskrat and living on
> chokeberries and bulrushes
> sleeping by a little fire of sticks

until he returns, charting already his own path to immolation,

> as someone else, burnt and smoky
> his sisters silenced by the strides he took
> to reach the pump, the way he drank
> from the barn well, his hands
> a mesh of little nicks and cuts
> where the cries of the animals
> had entered him . . .

John Ennis, Waterford, February 2009