

By Word of Mouth

The Poetry of Dennis Cooley

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Selected
with an
introduction by
Nicole Markotić
and an
afterword by
Dennis Cooley

lps
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Foreword

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, poetry in Canada—writing and publishing it, reading and thinking about it—finds itself in a strangely conflicted place. We have many strong poets continuing to produce exciting new work, and there is still a small audience for poetry; but increasingly, poetry is becoming a vulnerable art, for reasons that don't need to be rehearsed.

But there are things to be done: we need more real engagement with our poets. There needs to be more access to their work in more venues—in classrooms, in the public arena, in the media—and there needs to be more, and more different kinds of publications, that make the wide range of our contemporary poetry more widely available.

The hope that animates this new series from Wilfrid Laurier University Press is that these volumes will help to create and sustain the larger readership that contemporary Canadian poetry so richly deserves. Like our fiction writers, our poets are much celebrated abroad; they should just as properly be better known at home.

Our idea has been to ask a critic (sometimes herself a poet) to select thirty-five poems from across a poet's career; write an engaging, accessible introduction; and have the poet write an afterword. In this way, we think that the usual practice of teaching a poet through eight or twelve poems from an anthology will be much improved upon; and readers in and out of classrooms will have more useful, engaging, and comprehensive introductions to a poet's work. Readers might also come to see more readily, we hope, the connections among, as well as the distances between, the life and the work.

It was the ending of an Al Purdy poem that gave Margaret Laurence the epigraph for *The Diviners*: “but they had their being once/and left a place to stand on.” Our poets still do, and they are leaving many places to stand on. We hope that this series will help, variously, to show how and why this is so.

—Neil Besner
General Editor

Biographical Note

Dennis Cooley's poetry has been influenced by William Carlos Williams, H.D., Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, and e.e. cummings. As well, the prairies and Canadian poets such as Eli Mandel, Andrew Suknaski, Daphne Marlatt, bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, and Robert Kroetsch have shaped and inspired his poems and poetics. Roaming the page, Cooley insists on disturbing the formal poetic inheritance he both esteems and from which he breaks away. Born in Estevan, Saskatchewan, on August 27, 1944, Dennis Cooley grew up in Saskatchewan and currently lives, teaches, and writes in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is married to Diane, and father of two daughters, Megan and Dana. He has written close to a dozen books of poetry, one literary travel book, a book of essays, and has edited five books. Dennis Cooley has published widely in Canadian literary journals, helped to establish the Manitoba Writers Guild, and was a founding editor of Turnstone Press. A 1998 issue of *Prairie Fire* dedicated an entire issue to Dennis Cooley's writing, revealing his passion for writing, reading, teaching, literary dialogue, and his keen engagement with the world around him. His books take on historical and fictional characters—while never entirely curving into narrative—in order to recount the less-heard stories of the underprivileged and the unfamiliar. Writing becomes political when you play with “certain kinds of voices that might enter and might become honoured in a literary world,” Cooley says in *Prairie Fire*. That engagement with—and ambiguity of—speaking voices invites readers to question authority, to challenge institutionalized privilege. Again and again, Dennis Cooley returns to the prairie vernacular—not to reflect, but to play: “I want reference and I want syntactical surprise and breakage and crazy puns and syllables freed loose and I want emotion and I want parody.” Dennis Cooley earned a Bachelor of Education, a Bachelor of Arts, and a Master of Arts from the University of Saskatchewan, as well as a PhD from the University of Rochester, SUNY. He is a professor at St. John's College at the University of Manitoba, where he continues to write and to inspire students with his playful love of language.

Introduction

*By Word of Mouth: An Introduction to Dennis Cooley's Poetry*¹

“Cuz it’s always gotta be blood.”

—Spike, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

More and more, when teaching poetry, I find myself defending difficult poetics, those unique and complicated aspects of language that encourage readers to believe in the White Queen’s “six impossible things before breakfast” (Carroll 101).² I accept that students (especially with a final exam approaching) want to know that they know what they know. But as Dennis Cooley remarks in a 1987 essay on the line break: “formal departure disturbs readers” (“Breaking and Entering” 79); indeed, departure from inherited forms does nudge readers to stray from their chosen comfort zone, to try, at least, to believe one or two impossible things, perhaps by lunchtime. So what—or where—is it, exactly, towards which this poet nudges readers? Poetry, says Dennis Cooley, “becomes vigorously rooted—in *our* time and in *our* place” (*The Vernacular Muse* 182). That the “our” changes as constantly as the times and the places proves his point that the Canadian canon is ever versatile, ever affected by its involved readership. Our place, our bodies, our language.

By not simply writing poetry directed towards what modernist poet Laura Riding calls the “plain reader” (Riding 218), Dennis Cooley changes and changes the rules, shifting *all* his readers towards an engagement with poetry as an act of capricious rebellion: through excessive attention to the line break, or to a word, or by sowing words across margins. “One of the consequences of scattering words on the page,” says Cooley, “or not offering a certain kind of pact through a text, is that it will give your readers a lot of permission but it also puts a lot of pressure on them” (*Prairie Fire* 49). Dennis Cooley flirts with the reader, teases the reader, invites his readers to share in the fun.

For Cooley, innovation means breaking away from established literary conventions, or traditions. Stuttering, stumbling, sprinkling a plethora of line indents and breaks, tripping over confining institutions, ruled corridors, imprisoned language, barred windows, falling out and falling away, fracturing the old, landing prairie-flat on his face, hesitating, hobbling through the ruptures, limping towards a new rhythm.

now our blood stirs
at this curve's list
this slug
slung in
gorging weight. (*Leaving* 7)

The poem doesn't fracture so much as it engorges: collapses and swells, curves the line with little regard for the metred, measured stanza, for verse conventions, or the crescendo enjambment (the body jammed up, the body's limbs striding forward and returning, the poem's lines kissing and parting and kissing again). But "falling away" from poetic conventions doesn't mean the poet has abandoned standards or principles or even poetic customs. Here, for example, is what Cooley asks of contemporary verse: "what has been happening to poetry that it should have been brought to such a state—past metre, past rhyme, and (here's the crux) largely past metaphor and grammatical phrasing" ("Breaking and Entering" 79). Here's the "crux": how do strategies of writing make room for a poet such as Dennis Cooley to challenge conventional wisdoms, to write against the power of the norm, to *break* with potent tradition? To bleed words all over the page? To defy sanguinity, yet refuse sanguinarity as he delivers the poem? And how, asks Dennis Cooley, do we recognize its bloody afterbirth?

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has examined the claims of mid-nineteenth-century Parisian artists and poets who insist they invert the dominant economic and cultural values of the bourgeoisie. His assessment has not been favourable, pointing out that such inversions merely reinstate the hierarchy, though tipped, now, in favour of art and decadence over upper-class refinement and status. But rather than the wild Bakhtinian carnival that reinstates the father/king at the very moment that it crowns the jester/son, Cooley looks to less venerated classes for heroes: to Jack Krafchenko, an immigrant and a criminal; to Irene, a mother and a woman with cancer; to Dracula, and to Sinclair Ross's Bentleys, literary characters whose fictional lives plague poetry. Cooley writes of loss and mourning, of astronauts and poor self-trapped Mrs. Bentley. And all the while, this poet is consistently willing to make mistakes, to embrace them, even. To cultivate flaws until the flaws themselves generate novel lines, invigorated stanzas, the embodied codex. In Cooley's books, bodily sensations of place and belonging, of speech and reply are such that when, for example, he writes *this only home*, he expands, as Deborah Keahey says, his sense of place from prairie to planet (Keahey 89), not to obliterate one with the other, but to expand the dialogue, spatially and organically showing the cosmos as a growing garden. Upon return, an astro-

naut, risking thresholds, feels one ear as “a shoe / full of blood” (“inner ear” 66), ever listening.

The “flaw” in the poetry is not a mistake or a defect, but a literary fault line, a poetic blemish that marks the poet’s shift from one formal endeavour to another. Notions of boundary crossings, and the ensuing rift, appear again and again in Dennis Cooley’s oeuvre (for example, *Bloody Jack* has been read as a long poem and as a novel, *passwords* as travel writing and as poetic diary). Cooley’s poems innovatively scramble over and across and around linguistic, poetic, and manuscript borders, dripping a flamboyant and crimson-red onto the lines, between the lines, with surprising scarlet stains that might appear as errors or flaws to those who don’t recognize their tarnished brilliance. Commenting on the notion of critical excess in composing poetry, Charles Bernstein writes that “poetics must necessarily involve error,” suggesting that poetry theory, poetry writing, and fortuitous chance come together on the page. This error, he says, comes in the form of “wandering, errantry,” but also through “mistake, misperception, incorrectness, contradiction.” For Cooley, such chance or contradictory writing may be a plethora of puns (such as the lines in “a poem for the other wise”: “they / wont let go / of the line” and “they know exactly / where to draw / the line”[36]) or a literal text dispersal in front of the reader’s eyes (many of Cooley’s poems make full use of spaces and tabs across the page, but see especially the poems in *Fielding*). Error, humorously, “slips, slides . . . as part of the process” (Bernstein 153). Cooley is always breaking/bending/sliding/rupturing the rules, smearing the neat line between the “mother tongue / we learn / to speak” and slipping readers into and past those words we “dare not / breathe” (*Irene* 14–15). Cooley’s acute formal innovation asks readers to question inherited assumptions about the inherited structures of poetry and the privileged inclusion such structures assume. He invites readers to cross a myriad of poetic borders; we Cooley readers joyfully acquiesce. The frenetic madness of the page is a roller-coaster ride, a poetry amusement park, and each word leads to the next line break twist, the next genre shout.

In his article on genre limitations and insubordination, literary critic Jacques Derrida writes of the potential for genre to exceed its boundaries, as individual members of a particular genre always signal boundary limits and excesses. Derrida explores the “laws” of genre, the rules that poets such as Dennis Cooley invoke and tease and respect and break. So that any critic’s (or writer’s, or even reader’s) decision that a particular text does or does not fit into a particular genre is nothing more than a legislation of inclusion and exclusion: that which identifies a text within a genre, identifies the cultivation of that same genre. So that “members” of a genre re-inscribe the

blood line,” “blood lust,” and even “one drop of blood.”⁴ By combining his interest in a literary figure and his passion for secular scripture (the body’s text, the body as text), Cooley—the master of puns, the emperor of witticisms—retools the tools of the body, the sovereignty of blood, the degeneracy of bloodlines.

i make quite an impression
i know that
there’s no denying
the way I hit you
sudden
get a word in
blood clot you can feel
me beating
breathing
deep in your heart

(*Burglar of Blood* 31)

Dracula, in this poem, hits his victim hard and fast, before language can sort the act, before thinking can arrest the violence. The blood clot that “you” feel is the one that stops your heart, that changes you from person into the blood-sucking monster Dracula inhales through your body. Dracula, says Michael Davidson, “marks an anxiety over ‘foreign’ or ‘ethnic’ insemination into Christian life” (Davidson 45). Although Davidson is concerned, throughout his essay, with literature that presents miscegenation as pollution and corruption, I am interested in his questioning of “blood as a marker of national identity” (Davidson 51), especially as his discussion leads me to look at how Cooley recognizes that blood itself often serves as a marker of social and cultural belonging and, in the example of Dracula, of a literal corporeal shift from one “cultural” identity into another.

Dennis Cooley’s chapbook *Burglar of Blood* and his recent book *seeing red* both delve into the literary history of Dracula and vampire stories as a strategy to reinvestigate the assumptions contemporary readers make about bodies, and especially the division between the outside and the inside. When Count Dracula puts his mouth onto your neck to drink, his body is inside your body, transforming your blood into his blood. As Davidson has pointed out, the image of the vampire has always disturbed gender hierarchies, as penetration is multivalent and does not necessarily behave heterosexually.⁵ In fact, as contemporary fascination with vampires attests, vampires don’t behave at all. Cooley, in his poems, does not attempt to redeem the pale aristocrat—to save him from the vengeful villagers—so much as to redeem

the act of misbehaving, attempting to penetrate the masculine poem with the masculine line break, or the masculine poem with the feminine word.

yes the sweet red
river sweet as straw
berry we build cities beside
marry the unmanageable blood

all the blood
the whole story
the whole bloody thing

all of it, singing
the woods ringing

menstrual
-minstrel
(*burglar of blood* 15)

In these lines, Cooley plays with the concept of the vampire's influence on his victims' bodies. Here, rather than a monster who steals heartbeats, Dracula sings a sweet ode to the feminine blood that he respects, that he understands ministers to his lover's lust for his lust, their mutual licking and swallowing of each other's juices. Cooley brilliantly plays with ideas of the "body" of language, altering readers' perception of the ravenous lover, the diabolical sinner, the naïve prey. This combination of sexuality and punning disturbs the known order as much as it heightens reading pleasure, the pleasure of wending the length of the "labiarinth" (*Dedications* 19).

A further pleasure in Cooley poetry is the oft-displayed secular faith he invokes as a rubric for rewriting the "official" story. Cooley's poetry questions when belief itself acts as interference to thinking. In *Soul Searching*, he writes, "souls were sneezes / that snooze in dough of bodies," and sinners "slept in bodies / like CO₂ cartridges" ("Paul Sd" 19). That "snooze" operates as both comical past tense for the sneeze of the soul, but also as the quick nap of the nascent soul, awaiting a corporeal "cartridge" into which it might tunnel. By challenging all poetic creeds and structural principles, Cooley rummages around the notion of spirituality:

in fall the fields of flax
from the mouth of night
spun over
night into gold

& the sky & the wind
& the spirits spurt ("Exorcism" 21)

(*seeing red* 133), sustained by inherited catastrophes, through catastrophic tropes, within apostrophic blood ties. Cooley writes of spring as a “swollen moon” (*country music* 134), of *sunfall*’s “blood lifting” (“Winnipeg in winter” 149) winter inhalation, and of blood clots whispering towards the vulnerable heart (*Irene* 45–46). He writes with the “muse of absence” and for readers’ “a muse ment” (*Dedications* 79 and 80), he writes towards crooked veins and against “the lethal bubble” (*this only home* 90). Cooley composes and corresponds and as he creates he bleeds and clots and hemorrhages and beats and pulses. His words, hypodermic, seep through the poetic corpus. Cooley, the caught Burglar of the body’s persuasive enjambments. His thefts scandalizing students and poetasters alike. Cooley, not just writing renegade, but converting into one. “What has been happening to poetry . . . ?” Cooley asks. His answers incite more poetry, more play, more innovative language and lines and stanza breaks, and more poetic philandering. In *seeing red*, Cooley introduces the idea that a vampiric succubus drains the bourgeois of lifeblood (“a dismal scientist speaks” 81), revising the definition of birth and origins. In a poem named for the love of blood, poetry as a “barricade of blood” (“haemophilia” 117) traps breath, crosses the double-crosses, permeates words with oxygen, with the cinnamon moon, with gorgeous bones. Cooley’s poems respond to each other, respond to me, compel me to respond, respond to the myriad of poetry that has come before and that pours out after. As each poem tantalizes with its responses, with more questions, Dennis Cooley nudges his readers to ponder, to write back, to reply. To *our* place. *Our* poems. Engorgeous.

—Nicole Marcotić

Notes

- 1 I wish to thank Neil Besner, Brian Henderson, and Rosemary Nixon for our many conversations about Dennis Cooley’s poetry and for their generous editing responses to this essay.
- 2 I begin, here, by speaking of the classroom to gesture towards Dennis Cooley’s outstanding career as an English professor at the University of Manitoba, and as an opportunity to mention his enthusiasm, delight, and passion for teaching the poem, the page, the word.
- 3 In particular, Cooley’s long poems (*Bloody Jack*, *Country Music*, *Fielding*, *Irene*) formalize the attention onto whose story gets told. Cooley has uniquely reshaped and redefined the role of prairie poetry within the nation that has become Canada; in fact, he has reshaped the very boundaries of what defines the limits of both nation and page.
- 4 Interestingly, identity based on “one drop of blood” has historically been an argument used both to restrict or preserve ideas of racial purity and to claim or withhold (tenuous) membership.

- 5 Says Davidson: “since Dracula’s blood lust is gender blind, he is linked to homoerotic discourses, for which his effeminate and aristocratic qualities serve as markers” (46).
- 6 Published first in 1984, *Blood Jack* ended with a poem titled “Appendix.” In the 2002 “reprint,” newer, cheekier poems shuffle that final organ farther inside the body.
- 7 Cooley wrote on *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in *The Vernacular Muse*, and invokes Ondaatje’s notion of the compelling bandit throughout many of the *Bloody Jack* poems.
- 8 Cooley-the-character chastises Jack for citing Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said*. Cooley appears troubled not only that Krafchenko believes birds talk, but also that he’s managed to read a novel not yet published in 1913 (“*what the crow really said*,” 176).
- 9 I am grateful to religious studies scholar Vijaya Subramani, who pointed this article out to me in her master’s thesis on *Rasa* theory.

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A Poem for You, Leaving Winnipeg

for three slim summers
 you wore
the burn of land
 blown lean
 by the wind's bend
 filled with
 the sun's bare circle
that pulled the darkness
 from your bloodslow cycle.

 was it fire
 for you
(from your
 English air and rain)
 turning the long
 bright winters of snow and ice
late summers of green/brown heat
 hard and fast
 here among us.

now you are leaving
 in the hanging fullness of
 our August life
 (palegreen sprouts skinred roots
 thicken and bulge sweet with
 juices sucked from earth and sky)
and you ask for
some words to wear
 more than the easy talk
 you have always heard
hurt that you found
 in me (raised
 in this prairie light) nothing

in his tangerine skin

we buried him
in mint condition
on his eyes
two georges
they shone like hens eyes
he inhaled the dark
hhhhgg hhggg
engorged it
like a badger breathing
for blood
when we shovelled him in
christ he was a gorgeous man
the eyes were breathing
& shining blood

the love song of j l krafchenko or the trans canada in (trance crypt

crossing

hhoo yyyoooooooooooo

hhoo yyYoooOOooOOOO

poosh ka

poosh ka

pooshka

po o sh ka

po os hk a

HOO

train at the level

coupling

pooshka pooShka pOoshKA PoSHkA POSHkA

end for end

poo sh ka Poo SH kA POO SH K A POOSH KA

YOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOO

Sonya Orlovsky

They say in Plum Coulee there's this old Ukrainian lady she can cure cancer. You know the Mennonites how they are always comin down with some kind of sickness or other. One time it's pneumonia, nother time it's they're simple in the head. Not one thing it's another. That's why they keep lookin for other men, the women there. Somethin about needin new blood on account of they're always marrying each other that causes all kinds of troubles for them—so babies dead when they're born or they've got one leg shorter than the other maybe or they've got their eyes crossed, that sort of thing. Sure, some people say they go just crazy at times the women there sometimes they're kind of mixed up crabby with women's troubles I guess and wantin dark men somethin bad but I dunno, can't say about that one.

Anways, this lady, Sonya Orlovsky's her name, she's Ukrainian and she can cure cancer, that's what they say at least. You might know her, remember she was just, well, one good-lookin woman at one time, apparently, they say, back round the 80's the one you musta heard it when Garry Reed left his wife and six kids and ran off with that dark woman well that was her, caused a real stink with his folks, never talked to him after, not once in all those years since then. Funny, n she the best liked schoolteacher district ever had too. Still got a way with men, I mean that's the story you get at any rate, isn't it?

But that's not what I was gonna tell ya. She has this, I dunno, this watchemecallem, a kind of power I guess you'd say. Ever since she was 13, 14 and startin to turn a few heads in town she's had it. It's kind of strange I mean a guy doesn't know what to make of it eh but, well, they say she just puts her hand on the growth, real gentle, always the right hand for some reason I hear. Say it's on the neck here and she'll just hold it there for

awhile, maybe 2, 3 minutes say and then, when she lifts it, the growth 's gone. It's in her hand there, just like a small white octopus they say. But the crazy thing is there's not sposed to be any scar left over. It's gone, every last sign of it's completely gone. Hands like that. I know that's hard to believe but I've talked to dozens of people from out that way and they all say that's what happens, they swear to God it's true, every last one of them swears that she just lifts the hand and there it is the cancer's gone, just like that. Layin right there in her hand.

Think that's amazin, wanna hear something really strange? All the people, all the ones had those growths removed, know what they do after? They go and pickle them. That's right, they put them up in jars and set them in their sitting room where everyone can see them. Callin by Karl Dyck's and his missus the other day, day it rained, week ago Tuesday must a bin, to pick up some eggs and there she was—a big white blob in this sealer, right there plop on top of the radio. Karl was pretty pleased about it, took down the jar and give it to me so's I could get a good look at it floatin round like a pig's foot in vinegar. Don know what he was thinkin but did he get a kick out of it, but to tell the truth it give me the willies. Got no stomach for them things but I guess it don bother the Dycks one little bit, they just passed it round like was one of those big French parsnips if you ever seen one of them, seemed to think it was somethin special we were all sposed to drop our drawers at or somethin. Funny thing 's even the little girl, what's her name, the little one always giggles, yeah—Caroline, Caroline she watched it like she was a cat fishin, know how they just sit there and stare and stare.

behind the door

bodies preferred to think of themselves
crowding cheek by jowl
into barns jewelled with grain
heavy hay & a farmer to keep them
warm & fed to bring them newly
born into rooms of horn & hoof
rut and root rain on the roof
of their brains

“to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth”

animals

girdled in the cluck
& moon of milk
egg white of cat & pigeon
eyeblick & heartslump
animals were muscles
made throatnoises through the lump
of months

secret in the stomach of wood

they arced or folded
in ecstasy eyes
flooded with oil
when the farmer touched them
nuzzled their chins & udders
in winter
inside ribs of wood
pails of water
spoke to them
language of grass & sun
what in the nights that are long
husbands to wives say

of grass & sun
& the opening of gates
of summer in them
the way water sits when it is almost ice
animals were leather
the farmer wore
close to his heart
they were
pouches filled with tobacco
in his dream
vests he wore to church
at night they spoke silently
to one another
the bodies dangled like babies
in the hump of barn
standing & standing in puddles of time
weight of nights wet
as sand
& when January punched at them
sandbagged snow against their eyes
they lay down into the sweet
grunt of straw that melodied dreams
hidden in hides
the paunch of dark
the lazy lift of time
left like smoke in the crease of dreams
all that long waiting
bodies were blood in a barn of bone

moon musings

moons

- : a grape on wedgewood
- : frozen lettuce
- : a thumb print on carbon paper
- : a glass of gin in an all star cast
- : a pimple on ms. cynthia harpers bum
- : a meringue pie
- : a turtle plopped on mud
- : a moth chewing on my blankets
- : a cashew before its eaten
- : a flashlight in gods fist making his rounds for the night

- : a tap spraying frost over our heads
- : a blimp of dough
- : a bagel from elis deli
- : an alka seltzer tablet fizzing
- : a butter tart full of raisins for whatever reasons
- : a clam cracked open)this is a pearl that was(
- : a battery post powdered with acid
- : a wad of double bubble gum
- : a nickel melting with cold
- : an Amazons breast

- : an Amazons nipple playing me for a sucker & me just trying
to keep abreast of current affairs
- : a wholewheat muffin & good for you
- : a western buckle on gods britches a button too
- : a slop pail of piss and ashes
- : a clicker on gods heel you like his moves
- : a hole acetylened in steel
- : a leprous forehead
- : a sugar cookie half eaten by bumsteads daughter
- : an aspirin
- : a chickens eye watching us the head chopped off & peeking thru

: a pan of milk black cat lapping
 : an earlobe packed with fat & hyperbole
 : a balloon a child moves pulling it after

 : a magic stone gazes through wallets of space
 : an eye of a cat open in sleep/death
 : an astrolabe taking its bearings on earth
 : a sugared apricot
 : a ball bearing earth turns on at night
 : lube in a tube
 : a pigs snout hairy with loveliness
 : snot on carbon paper
 : in heat secretes its lotions goes thru the motions
 : lube in a tube

 : an onion mired in mud
 : a 53 Merc one headlight shot on the backroads of Moose Jaw
 : opens a hole with the aplomb of a searchlight: a flash light
 plummets & plumbs the basement & lovers skitter crazy as silver
 fish on skates for cover
 : the dial of a telephone you cld call god
 : a hubcap (hubbahubba) rattling where its spun off on blacktop
 ding ding
 : glad tidings to all

holy cow

hey rune
diddle the
fiddle for
the straight
rat went
and wish
the the
riddle and
the dark
now such
jumped see
over to
the laughed
moon bat
the little

inner ear

once you have been
 there
all the blood

your head brooded
 as nightbirds
 with blood
 your life floats
 in arrears

 & you have seen
sun moon stars
 the earth

 you come back
 almost afraid
to touch
 any thing

wanting more than
 anything
to touch

 your ear a shoe
 full of blood

all of it, singing

the woods ringing

—minstrel

menstrual

so to construe
there at the tip our tongues
here at the top of our lungs
the ministering words
time & time again
the murdering rhymes
you lap up love
to run your tongue
over & over

he replies to his critics

why does it so offend you
i should say the moon
is a gland, perhaps mammary,
that it secretes over us
something we cannot see

is a poultice and draws
out of us strange secretions
moves us to strange feelings

what do you want from me
that the moon should be
a clear drop of amber
a bone china plate
that tings, elegantly, when you
ding it a dinner bell a wine decanter
is this what you want
all you can tolerate

is it that unthinkable
i should say of her face
it is rough it is tubercular

why does this upset you
why though you protest
do you lash why
do you think
i should not say this
why do you allow so little

all the cosmetics you would
paste over the cosmos

breathless

though you do not know
you wear me on your neck
think you can keep me off
safe as a cuff
link & as presentable

all along you are stringing
me along there
the chain of garlic
close to your heart

why is this why am i
always crossed in love

am a muzzle of time
i know

i make quite an impression
i know that
there's no denying
the way i hit you
sudden
get a word in
blood clot you can feel
me beating
breathing
deep in your heart

&
a crate of apples could i suppose
do it
create fall and before that spring
air of prairie in may
mayhem when red swallows
slip the sky knead it
into their houses
their thoughts of mud & straw & somewhere apples
white as snow already on the trees
dangle from their green syllabaries
chapters of worms & stars

what happens is
crow bars the way
crow spots a small crack in night
the lid dark and sealed with lacquer
pries his way in
beak & all
prayerful as his black robes allow
digs in &
heaves

breaks open the box light is nailed in
and it begins

a thin strip of veneer
on the horizon
by july it is burnt sugar

after words

Reader:

I suppose we could start by asking you: where did you start as a poet?

Writer:

Well I don't really know.

Reader:

Your early experiences of being a poet, I mean. Was there maybe a teacher or a parent who got you on to poetry?

Writer:

OK. My mom and dad read a lot, my dad especially. He had only taken grade 6 and had to leave school because his parents wanted him on the farm. Or didn't believe in education, I don't know which. I remember one time just before he died, about the only time he talked about it, he didn't say much, he never did, but I could hear hurt in his voice, and anger. Anyway he was a reader and he read mostly westerns and science fiction, but he read different stuff too. He'd be in from the field for dinner and he'd sneak in a little reading after he'd eaten, get so engrossed he was pretty much unaware of anything else. My mom, who had taken grade 11, which was pretty advanced for someone at that time in a poor farming and mining town, never read as much, probably because she got almost no time for her own. (Later, she read a lot, and took great pleasure in word games.) I also had a fabulous teacher for grades 4 to 8. Mr. Third. He believed with a passion in reading and writing and he had an enormous lot to do with what happened to me. One of the best times for all of us in that schoolroom—and we were a varied and straggly lot let me tell you—was when after noon hour he would read to us. We groaned when he stopped, wished he would never stop reading.

Reader:

I wonder if you could say a bit more about where those interests took you and how they brought you into poetry?

Writer:

Slowly, indirectly. By sheer chance quite likely. My dad said to me one day: what are you going to be when you grow up? I must have been 9 or 10

Writer:

Yeah, I do all sorts of things, including stuff that most poets who think of themselves as formally adventurous, would bridle at. I love the lyric, a form we're told time and again is dead. I even write the odd song or rhymed and metred piece. Mostly I'd say I work with open form that ranges from the exuberantly oral and bawdy to the hesitant and inward. I believe in taking chances, pushing the poem. A lot of the poems are metalingual, many of them respond to something in the prairies. Many of them are begotten by other texts, or written as parts of longer poems. Inasmuch as my work has been characterized by mildly attentive readers, it has been thought of as vernacular and comical I'd imagine. If so, I may be partly responsible for that notion. I've written in defence of vernacular as a basis for poetry, and when I read I tend to choose the narrative and playful pieces.

Reader:

Why is that? Why do you do that—read those funny ones?

Writer:

Listeners can readily connect with them. That plus my own pleasure in reading them. I love those voices, I really do, and I think they can be fresh and full of energy. I take crazy joy in the mad spillage of sounds and I guess there is something compulsive in all that play. But I steer clear of other ones also because I find them emotional (and I often do, when they're very close to me: my family, friends. *Irene* and *Fielding* would be examples). I soon get myself into trouble, start to lose them, my voice too, and start wondering how I'm going to finish them. I've written a lot out of longing and grief and desire, for sure. King of Hurtin'—that's me. Anyway I end up reading few of those poems.

Reader:

What's this got to do with Black Mountain? Robert Duncan?

Writer:

I did work on him, yes. I did, and it was an exhilarating experience. He was just dazzlingly smart and he showed me a lot about what can be done in contemporary form. So did a lot of others.

Reader:

Others? Who in particular?

Writer:

Just about anybody I've ever read, it seems, at least in the short run. I was thrilled when just after I'd arrived at the University of Manitoba (in 1973

few words gives time to happen on a few more, and the paper allows time to fill in words all over the place, which I habitually do. I get something under way and then I say: what have I got? Where might it go? What potential do I find here? About that time I enter the stuff into a computer and print it out, then have a go at the printed version and run it through endless tweakings. So I am a mad expander and reviser.

I also try to find some site around which I can write a series of related texts—Dracula poems, astronaut poems, *love in a dry land* poems, fairy tale poems, that sort of thing. Once I'm there I find I can generate material around it, and invariably I will do some research in scouting possibilities.

Reader:

So what are you doing now?

Writer:

I've got so many things on the go it's laughable. But I can identify one or two projects. I've been working for some time on a series of muse poems and metapoems which I've been calling *the muse sings*. Then there's a text built around my blown appendix, and that's gotten pretty big—the manuscript, that is; the appendix is fine. There are a set of family and Estevan poems—*correction line*. Lots more. The words pile up.

Reader:

We're about out of time, but I want to ask one last question. What about the body?

Writer:

I can't tell you how pleased I was to hear Nicole Markotić talk about the body in my writing. It's gone pretty much unnoticed up until now. Even in *Soul Searching*, which shows a lot of sympathy for the body—even there the body didn't seem to register, so that some read the book as a yearning for angels.

Editing is a thankless chore, and writing about poetry is not a whole lot more esteemed. Poets at their worst tend to be a vain and ungrateful lot, I sometimes think, at least when it comes to appreciating the kind of work that Markotić has done here. So I want to tell you I am gratified by the care and intelligence with which she—herself an exquisite poet—has assembled the book and written the introduction. Such a caring reader is what every poet dreams of finding.

—Dennis Cooley

Selected Cooley Poems: Sources

Leaving

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980

“A Poem for You, Leaving Winnipeg”

Fielding

Saskatoon: Thistle-down Press, 1983

“*anaeurysm*”

“& we are skinbags of heated water dreaming”

Bloody Jack (1984)

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984

“in his tangerine skin” [also in *sunfall*]

“the love song of j l krafchenko or the transcanada in (trance crypt)”

“Sonya Orlowsky”

Soul Searching

Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1987

“Paul sd”

“Exorcism”

“I think ‘Ego’: Ergo I am”

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Saskatoon: Thistle-down Press, 1988

“labiarinth”

“anatomy of love”

Perishable Light

Regina: Coteau Books, 1988

“prairie romance”

“behind the door”

“moon musings”

this only home

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1992

“holy cow”

“inner ear”

“my eye”

Burglar of Blood

Winnipeg: Pachyderm Press, 1992

“melodious rhyme”

“he replies to his critics”

“breathless”

passwords: transmigrations between Canada and europe

Kiel, Germany: I&F Verlag, 1996

“In Germany cooley...” “... again”

“Wished we had ... just out ...” “... light rain falling”

sunfall

Concord, ON: Anansi Press, 1996

“winnipeg in winter”

“a series of shocking pre-positions”

Irene

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2000

“mother tongue ...”

“this on remembrance weekend”

“bodies are”

Bloody Jack (2002)

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002

“jack’s dictionary of cunning linguists” [expanded]

seeing red

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2003

“blood brothers”

“red men ace”

“echolalia”

“the red / emption of blood”