

## Groundhog Day

by John B. Lee

In the 1972-73 school year, poet Margaret Avison was appointed first writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario in London. Her office was located in the English Department at University College, a limestone building in the heart of the campus. She served for one year and changed the lives of dozens of aspiring young writers.

I was a nineteen-year-old farm lad, and a third-year Honours English Major, when I went cap in hand to visit the office of this Governor-General's award winning poet. I knew her work mostly through the green tome, *Canadian Anthology*, edited by Can lit pioneer Carl Klinck and Reginald E. Watters of The Royal Military College of Canada. Carl Klinck had been my Can Lit professor in my second year. Eight of Avison's poems appeared on pages 434 through 440. That fusty green monster now holds a crushed corsage from the first formal dance with my girlfriend of the day, now my wife. It spills out from the pages of the book where it bookmarks and stains the marginalia of a callow Avison reader, who had written in his own young hand to the left and right of Avison's poems, "just a hint of life," "time is filled, but wasted," and "she asks for a revitalization of the human spirit," by way of paraphrasing and explicating what a young mind might make of Avison's meaning in poems such as "Mordent for Melody" and "The Apex Animal." I notice that I have underlined Avison's words, "pigeons chuckle." Pigeons chuckle indeed.

The first surprise for me on that first visit to Avison's shadowy office was the fact that Avison was so alive, so real, so absolutely in the flesh *real*. She was the first living poet I had ever met. When she inhaled, I could hear her breathe. When she read aloud, she exhaled the power and beauty of language. Her humanity was palpable, intimate, and to me quite strange. I sat there in her small office observing her, as she seemed also to be observing me. How could it be, I wondered, that I seem so worthy to her, so worth her attention? And yet, I felt honoured and worthwhile. She was giving me her precious time, freely and fully.

I don't know what I would have done had Avison criticized my work. I suspect I would have been devastated. I would have been stunned into silence as was a friend when he took his work to an editor. I was one of the lucky ones. She honoured my work with a close reading. She praised it where it hit the mark. And she even wrote an occasional poem about me



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On another occasion she simply said, “Mind your prepositions. Everything can turn on the tiniest of words.” And I think now of a single line from one of my favourite of Pablo Neruda’s love poems, “Every Day You Play,” from W. S. Merwin’s English translation wherein that single line turns beautifully on the powerful twin pivots of a repeated preposition, “I want to do with you what the spring does with the cherry trees.” That powerful little word “with” is so important to the line. Everything turns upon the preposition.

Another piece of advice she gave me was, “John, find out what your taboos are and then *break them all*.” I’ve thought about that advice for over thirty years now. I take it as a brave suggestion, not to be personally immoral, but rather as permission given to my mind to consider, to my hand to write, to my personality to publish, and to my persona to support the work I’ve written which ranges into territories that scare the hell out of my mother’s good son.

Thank you Margaret. Your voice remains in my mind as a *wholeness, jubilant*.