

DOCUMENTS

A Little Anthology

by George Bowering

Preface

In April of 2012 we drove back and forth across Florida for a week and a half, going to baseball games every night. Then we trudged onto a cruise ship in Fort Lauderdale, and sailed for Vancouver via the Panama Canal. This meant that despite the wonders of the electronic world, we had to haul a suitcase full of books. I like to read books and then leave them in cruise ships or hotels. The heaviest book I took this time was *An Anthology of Canadian Literature* (third edition) edited by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown (don't you love all those double consonants?) published by Oxford University Press.

Not only did I get to reread a lot of neat poetry and fiction, but I also found a project. Why don't I, I asked myself, while refusing to even consider accepting an ice cream cone, try my hand at translating some of these classic Canadian poems? After all, I had translated a collection of Eugène Guillevic's poems on a previous cruise. Besides, the activity would make me look more refined than all those other people in the ship's library, those jigsaw-puzzle doers, those cell-phone jabbers.

As Richard Bentley the great eighteenth-century classical scholar said, "A very pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but it's not Homer." That principle, I suppose, holds true here. Lucky you, Mr. Layton.

(from) The Dusty Village

You goofy sidekick of my early times,
Smiling abettor of all my boyish crimes,
With whom I rehearsed our brilliant routines,
And taught to roll the bottoms of his jeans;
Whose fine example urges patient cheer
And places no true limit to our beer;
Say if you will in this our dotting age
What you might think of my poor hopeful page,

Can you forgive the errors of my pen,
And let me pat your balding pate again?
There is no gink that I could better choose
To dodge my offer to become my muse.

Translation of “The Rising Village” by Oliver Goldsmith

(from) Sonnets Written in a West Point Grey Lane

The trucks are grinding thoroughly, and there
A back yard squirrel knocks the birdbath down,
And looks at me as if I were a dolt.
The normal spider’s web enwraps my face,
Disproving labour’s dignity and care.
I’d like to clean my face off, like to bolt,
But rain pelts down and floods the bloody place.
I hear big garbage bins come crashing down,
The music of our nearby merchants’ street;
Its harmony lends solace to my brain
And hints of Paradise beyond the fence.
If I could only smile away the pain
And welcome all that noise as something sweet,
This back yard’s yin and yang (and clang) might make some sense.

Translation of “Sonnets Written in the Orillia Woods” by Charles Sangster.

The Hockey Player

My bare feet squeezed inside their boots,
I’m with the crowd in tough cahoots.

The outside world is full of dinks—
Reality’s inside these rinks.

The music’s loud and full of drums.
While I’m not out there whacking bums.

In my spare time I tape my stick
Before I swing it at some dick.

He drops his gloves, I do the same—
At last we're at my favourite game.

The fans are spilling beer and ducking;
Their every second word is "fucking."

I'm on my ass, I've lost a tooth,
I'm in my second home, this booth.

I like my fans, they wear my shirt,
They like to see the arteries spurt.

If you don't like it, kiss my nuts—
It's Canada, you stupid putz.

We love our hockey, we're no fairies—
We freeze our assets on the prairies.

They pay me for a special skill—
I hear the crowd yell "Kill, kill, kill!"

But deep inside I feel the wish
To sit beside a creek and fish.

I wish my bloody nose was straight,
I wish I'd gone beyond grade eight.

But I have promises to keep
And Swedish guys to put to sleep.

Translation of "The Skater" by Charles G.D. Roberts

The Dogs

There are new renters now across the lane;
We know this for there is a brand new bark.
We'll hear it now and also after dark,
So wintry grief is on us once again.
Oh, how I wish to give those canines pain!
I mean the blissful owners of those curs.
I'd like to sprinkle sand fleas on their furs,
Then stand in court and swear that I'm insane.

From up on Twelfth, and over on the Drive
The chorus of those mutts presages Hell.
They bark because they're glad to be alive,
But on my porch I wish them down a well.
If these are voices celebrating Earth,
I find myself regretting my own birth.

Translation of "The Frogs" by Archibald Lampman

The Haida Gwaii Poet

She stands before us and begins her song,
This woman who will never fade away.
An ancient story boldens her to stay,
And teach us how to right our every wrong;
Her blood is mingled with her ancient foes'
Including Ottawa and all its men.
Though they make poems every now and then
They wind up writing white men's English prose.

They said her battled nation could not thrive,
They dragged in Darwin for their social thought.
The fittest came in crowds to fill her land
And poised their pens to check off every band.
But listen to her song and quarrel not—
Unlike those wise old thinkers, she's alive.

Translation of "The Onondaga Madonna" by Duncan Campbell Scott

The Bonehead Land

Concrete and darkened glass
resist hard rain
dumped from the grim
and smog-soiled sky;
while in the bay
long ships with deep rust
in thin acid spray
grunt
at the brownish sky;

and the green slime
reaches every way.

A house finch calls
to the void,
but the puny
yet passionate tweets
falter and stall,
then rise up weak,
and falter and stall,
in these streets—
a void
over slopping of water
on dark, stained stones.

There is no beauty
in dominance,
no resonance
of stony strand,
this smoking burg
oozes under a stripped hill
like a poisoned
and shit-covered prominence
where the oil
floods the beach and the spill
fondles the city
out of the sea.

There is a beauty
of life
broken by life
but this isn't it.

Translation of "The Lonely Land" by A.J.M. Smith

The Walking Stick

It echoes the rockslides of the province, heard
on a small town bedroom floor in B.C.—
wooden—it nevertheless speaks nary a word
but keeps old company with a grandfather's sigh.
By its pace the morning is shuffled away,

and at its tap my mother knits her brow.
This isn't her picture of a family,
but she's now the servant of her father-in-law

It is also the old man's prop, pair to his crutch,
the two friends in his later mortal quest,
that offer him a grasp to extend his reach,
and take their place beside him while he rests.
It's long been used to tickle grandchildren's sides,
or point at things that should be done.
The daughter-in-law is having a smoke outside,
enjoying, she tells us all, the Okanagan sun.

He told me about his own grandfather's aid
that's buried with its owner back at "home."
It had one hundred faces neatly made
as can be seen in one old tintype poem.
Years later, when I stood beside his niche
in Thatcham's crumbling churchyard, I enjoyed
a dream of disinterring the family stick,
a great-great-grandson walking undismayed.

I think I knew a symbol for the first time,
though not my mother's feeling until late.
He used that stick the way I handle rime,
but never suffered music for a mate.
A Protestant, he waited, then so he went;
his family made no speeches at his rite.
His soul may have scaled the firmament—
but his walking cane just vanished from our sight.

Translation of "The Rocking Chair" by A.M. Klein

Pentland and the Daisy

It pokes its bright yellow eye
Toward the windshield,
Riding the brilliant Volkswagen
In its little vase;
Wherever to,
It's only a region of Oz.
It breathes, it shines,

Shakes out its parasol,
Its rustling silk;

And all the while she zips,
Ricochets about,
Hands on the wheel of this tin car:
Nor ever can she be
Confined to street
But streaks higher than any tree,
Leaps from roof to roof,
Reaches inside the wind's throat
And pulls its harmony inside out.
It's day's eye.
She is slate.
It's light to come.
She swallows lightning,
Snorts out burning chrome.
But on this road, this spinning hour
These spirits breathe together and ride:
The flower, attar of hesitation,
The composer, scourge of expectation,
Becomes a burning axe,
Too fast for mortal eyes,
Splits the sky in half.
Now she's sweet dissonance:
Now the flower opens and reaches
For the rear view mirror.

Translation of "Bartok and the Geranium" by Dorothy Livesay

The Birth of Comedy

And I happiest when I play baseball.
Sex, music, the odor of Malbec
are pretty good stuff;
but a ball game beats them all to hell
winning or losing.
In my team, nature's lovely things—
bird, fish in bird—
meet their devotion;
we are their poets. Let them fly,

wriggle, like a flame spun.
We are their team; as a team we run.

And I watch while the darting swallows,
 dark beyond the outfield fence
 feed on flies as do we all
or send their musical cries green
 over the park the city made
of new-mown grass to be a diamond
 for these imperfect humans,
 who, lovers of divine order,
know a god's son made this game,
yet leave their Nike feet
for the headfirst slide.

A loud infielder, often leaking blood,
 I crouch like a hairy thing
 behind the eyeglasses the liner
sometimes shatters, and crack a joke
 that baseball brains insist upon
or punish when the inning's over;
 noting how many of these
 teammates are wearing pencils
and innings unfold as stanzas do,
while someone hovering over this
smiles on a perfect double-play.

Translation of "The Birth of Tragedy" by Irving Layton

The Waders' Moment

No exceptions:
The waders are going to get in over their heads,
But would you believe it? Lots will say
"No problem, this ain't the deep end."
And sure enough, they're okay,
If you think a lifetime of wading is okay.
I mean if you're not into underwater travel
Where there's not a dry map in sight.
And so the blank-eyed faces of those waders
Turn this way and then the other again
And again, without a moment's fright.

Of those who fell into the deep,
Most went diving where we've never been
Into water that wrapped them,
Then became them in universal privacy,
So that we imagine ourselves elsewhere,
Not grieving them but mourning ourselves
Whom fancy cannot cheat nor even divine
Guidebook trace the nameless path
Of those imagined few who
(Tread water inside a pool of light.)

Translation of "The Swimmer's Moment" by Margaret Avison

At the Cecil Hotel

I am writing
I am writing another goddam poem
about drinking beer
and it's clearly obvious that I'm an artist
And I figure that the bartender is an artist as well
so I show him my beer poem draft
mainly the part about the draft
he poured me that tastes a lot
like a Milton Acorn poem
But it seems that the bartender
is more into nonfiction prose
the way he turns his back
and lets out an anapestic fart
Across the semidark room
two women with large arms
and large tattoos on their arms
are drinking ale and writing poems
They pay no attention
to the two bony guys slugging each other
with grimy fists. "Pat Lane
couldn't carry Newlove's jockstrap!"
says one bony guy as he slips
in the beer and blood on the floor
and the other guy kicks him in the ear
After a while the guy picks himself up
and staggers over to his table
and sits down with a beer and a book of poems

Now the beer in my belly
is looking for a way out
but I have to pass the other bony guy
on my way to the dimly lit pisser
I can't help myself
being an artist and all
I told him "Dorothy Livesay could wipe the floor
with Newlove and Lane and Alden Nowlan!"
"Wanna come outside and say that?" he says
so I go outside and say it again
He takes a wild swing and falls down
and I sit on his head
which is face down in the parking lot
"Out here in Vancouver the poets
make love, not war!" I instruct him
He lifts his hand in a peace sign
and I let him up because I'm an artist
When we get back inside
there's a guy with a big bony nose
and a bag full of mimeographed poems
"A dollar a poem," he says
"or I will read you five pages for a beer!"
I ask him what kind of poems they are
and he says "Immutable, inscrutable, marsupial!"
I buy five of them and hand him a beer
because I've heard of this guy
He rides a bicycle all over town
and jams mimeographed poems in mail slots
He has recorded every poetry reading
ever given in this town
"Welcome to the Cecil!" he says to me
"I can tell that you are an artist
writing poems in a beer parlour—
you are contumacious, salubrious, bituminous!"
And he was out the door and off on his bike
before I could show him
my latest occasional poem
with him in it, him and beer and blood
Now I am an artist without a dime
an artist without a beer
and likely to remain that way.

Translation of "At the Quinte Hotel" by Al Purdy

Get the Poet Upstairs

Get the poet upstairs however you can,
push on the seat of his pants if necessary,
peel his fingers away from his pen,
then frisk him for other writing utensils,
check out his shoes and his coat
lapel,
tell him it's time to take a rest, five
poems a day about every stray cat
and lame dog are too many for any poet
or reader,
advise him to close both his eyes, say omm
and then omm, until the whole universe
drops by,
ask him to get into his striped jammies, no slippers,
lie down and remember yesterday's poem
about the bum on Yonge Street,
then let it go, familiar face in a comfy world, to
walk into the library, let it go to
find its friends between the covers
of the university anthology.

Translation of "Get the Poem Outdoors" by Raymond Souster

(from) Strip Poker

I denude
this shed
of things, a
bench, a lawnmower, a
spider, two books by
Mickey Spillane.

I have dropped my
pants on the floor.

Was it really
fifty years ago?

Translation from "Naked Poems" by Phyllis Webb

Another Canadian January Night

More rain: Commercial Drive
 a canyon of wet backpacks,
 tennis shoes dissolving,
 cars roostertailing,
 while I, hunched over, cursing,
 my hair flat wet on my forehead,
 am sorrowfully reminded—
 we share our graves
 with water, our bones float:
 this is a country
 where a person can drown
 simply by standing
 on a corner downtown.

Translation of “Canadian January Night” by Alden Nowlan

Suzy

Suzy takes you down
 with a step-over toe-hold
 she is twice as strong as Samson
 and she learned it from her father.
 She will touch you with her apron
 in the morning after Texas
 and she'll feed you shredded carrots
 that have been inside her housecoat.
 But when you want to wander
 from her houseboat in the harbour
 she will tie your feet together
 and explain that she's your mother
 though you know that you're an orphan.
 *You'd like to reason with her
 and you'd like to reason hard
 or you'd settle for some bingo
 but she's rubbed out every number
 on your card.*

Now Layton was a landlord
 when he wrote his rhyming verses
 and he taught creative writing

in the universe's centre
and when he caught an inkling
that professors really liked him
he said I could be the savior
of Canadiana culture
but too many younger poets
have now looked across the border
for an ego less inflated
and an ear that still retains a little tone.

*You'd like to wrestle with him
and you'd like to wrestle fair
but his finger's in your eyeball
and he's got a second mouthful
of your hair.*

Now Suzy's got your wallet
and she leads you to McDonald's
she wears designer bluejeans
that she pilfered from a clothesline.
And the rain just won't stop falling
while she orders quarter-pounders
and she lets you say you love her
but she won't give back your money.
There are puppies on the sidewalk
there are parents in the windows
they are crying out for breakfast
they will have to do without it
while your Suzy gives them names.

*And you want to argue with her
you want to argue long
but you know you'll never reach her
with the honest calculation
of your song.*

Translation of "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen

Four Little Scabs

This scab on my right knee
is emblematic of my latest fall
and she has called it feckless
correctly. This scab

on my right elbow
started the same night in Curaçao
and she has called it pathetic
correctly again. My knuckles' scabs

began with some sharp edge
at the terminus of my bloody plunge
where I gathered my expensive glasses,

my camera and what's left of my hip,
and nearly made it to another sonnet.

Translation of "Four small Scars" by John Newlove

This is an Old Poem About Me

It was written quite a while ago.
You might mistake it for
a few
notes: abbreviations and first thoughts
jabbed around the paper;

then, as you read
it, you see a line ending
with no discernible function: end
jambment it isn't, not
even the modern kind,
more like a thinness
reconciled, a youthful jape.

Along the way there is a trope,
and beyond that, U. of T.

(The poem was written
while friends were dropping acid.

I'm beside the lake, high on images
of canoes and surfacing trout.

It's hard to get it right,
young poems being what
they are, young poets too:

what with all the dangers
in nature, eh?

but if you think about it
you'll agree
it's a wonder the poem made it this far.)

Translation of "This is a Photograph of Me" by Margaret Atwood

Oh, That's How

Because I couldn't learn how
to be subtle like all those
university poets and living critters
were handy, I squashed kittens
and made women suffer
and shot deer in the gut
and ignored wailing children
and made true poetry.

Now forty years along
in my university office
I talk to creative writing
students about blood and wonder
if I'm going to get a grant
this year; they read theory
and step around beetles
they could just as easily
stomp and walk tall away.

Translation of "Because I Never Learned" by Patrick Lane

The Peach Picker

If I were a peach picker
I would hop into your bed
and leave this day's peach fuzz
all over your sheets.

Your breasts and belly would itch;
you could never go to the supermarket

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without scratching here and there
because of my job. You'd wish
complete strangers would lend you
their fingernails, the damned shower
didn't help at all.

I'd leave my orchard work
in every crease of your
glistening body, neck,
inside your elbow,
where your lucky thigh
joins the rest of you. You'd be
the peach picker's peach.

Translation of "The Cinnamon Peeler" by Michael Ondaatje