

Co-conspirators

by Robyn Sarah

I never had the pleasure of meeting Margaret Avison, or seeing her in person. Although I thought of writing to her on more than one occasion over the years, our first direct communication was not until March 2005, when she was eighty-seven years old and I was fifty-six. Between then and her passing in 2007, we exchanged five or six long, rambling letters—a brief but lively correspondence that made me wish we had begun talking to each other a lot earlier. (It also made me wish some of the talk could have been face to face, because her tiny, crabbed handwriting was a serious challenge—a letter from her could take days to decipher!)

I say “first direct communication” because back in 1984, Margaret had reviewed my third poetry collection, *Anyone Skating On That Middle Ground*, in *Canadian Woman Studies*—one of the most thoughtful and perceptive reviews my poetry ever received, before or since—and thus she, at least, had communicated. Thanks to this review, I knew I had been heard by a woman whose astonishing poems were part of my literary landscape from the beginning—at least from the early 1970s, the years when I began to take my own calling as a poet seriously. I wanted to write and thank her for her review at the time, but—as I explained in the letter I finally wrote in 2005 following the release of her *Collected Poems, Always Now*—I was led to believe through the literary grapevine that she was a recluse, did not give out her address, and lived in “some kind of religious retreat.” In 1992, Anansi asked me for a quote they could use on the jacket of my new and selected poems, *The Touchstone*, and I chose a sentence from Avison’s review. Again I thought of writing to her, but was given much the same story when I inquired of her whereabouts.

“A recluse? No, never,” Margaret wrote in response to my long-delayed first letter:

If I got that reputation, it’s from 40+ years of earning a living in dreary ways 9 to 5 & 9 to 1:30 on Saturdays (sounds odd today!) & mind, energy, evenings, were saved for reading & writing & long walks, with a coffee and the morning paper around 10:30 p.m. at a counter nearby, often side by side with a friend in the neighbourhood...I’ve preferred a non-literary circle of friends—Miriam Waddington kept bringing me in when she lived in Toronto but I refused to bring any mss....

As for ‘religious retreat’:

—it’s perhaps because I live, moved here age 68, in a senior’s residence (apartment, not a full-care room!) called Fellowship Towers, because its construction was a social-consciousness project of the Fellowship Baptist Church. I am a dour Presbyterian. I moved here because 1) I’d shared expenses & space with my blind mother after she vacated the Galt [? illegible] bungalow when my father died . . . She was my primary focus humanly for 23 years & she died at 102; 2) when I was 68 she had heart failure. I worked north of 877 Yonge [address of Fellowship Towers] and her supper trays at the hospital I caught, barely, after work, south of here; 3) the big apartment I could not pay for alone & Mother’s money was dwindling. . . Here I am subsidized!!

It seems strange to me now that I never thought to write to Avison in care of one of her publishers, who would surely have forwarded a letter. Replying to her first, I remarked, “How odd that I thought of you all those years as “inaccessible,” a mysterious cloistered soul. Well, maybe I needed to think of you that way. Needed some such remote literary muse in my life. But it is also good at this late date to break through to a human exchange.”

A human exchange is what it was from beginning to end, abundantly digressive on both sides—a sharing of human concerns threaded through our literary conversation and inextricably intertwined with it. I don’t remember when I first encountered Margaret Avison’s poetry; it seemed just to have always been there. No doubt I was struck by poems of hers that I saw in the first Canadian anthologies I browsed as a young poet—A. J. M. Smith’s 1960 *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, John Newlove’s *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era*. But one thing I do remember is that poems of hers had a way of coming to me in the form of a human exchange. A teaching colleague, one year, sends me a holiday greeting card with a manually-typed copy of “New Year’s Poem” tucked into it; years later, another teaching colleague recites “Thaw” to me as we walk from the college to the Metro in early spring slush—it is, he says, one of his favourite poems to bring to the classroom. I recognize both poems as ones I’ve encountered before, but my appreciation is heightened on meeting them again this way—one transmitted by hand, one by voice. Then August Kleinzahler (who published his first chapbook with Villeneuve, the small press I co-founded) includes a generous selection of Avison’s poems in his 1982 mini-anthology *News and Weather*, a compilation made with no other mandate but to share the work of seven poets who have brought him delight as a reader. (It is this little book that establishes Avison firmly—and high

up—on my list of favourite Canadian poets.) Around the same time, *The Dumbfounding* comes my way as a spontaneous gift from a close friend (the one to whom I dedicated my own Villeneuve chapbook *The Space Between Sleep and Waking*; not a literary friend but a neighbourhood friend of my mothering-years.) And years after that, out of nowhere, David Mazoff (whom I know only slightly and have not seen in at least a decade) sends me an inscribed copy of *Waiting for the Son*, his critical appreciation of Avison's poetry.

In my first letter to Margaret, I described these serendipitous encounters with her work, and tried to name what I have valued and marvelled at in her poetry:

I think what I love most is the incredibly sharp, shivery ambience of a moment sentiently observed—the acute awareness and perfect transmission of qualities of light and weather, times of year and day, landscape and cityscape. Like the last stanza of 'Watershed,' which awes me—or the feeling in 'Pace' and 'Twilight,' 'The Absorbed.' But also the human stories, in poems like 'July Man', 'In a Season of Unemployment' . . . Do I understand your poetry? I am sure that I miss a lot—some poems do mystify me—yet even those get under my skin and linger. You write a poetry one has to keep going back to, and this is so rare in contemporary poetry.

I was interested to see that in collecting your poems, you eliminated a little poem called 'In Eporphyreal Harness.' I'm curious to know why? This was one of the ones that mystified me (and even the dictionary could not help me with the word "eporphyreal"), but you may like to know that I used to read this and some other of your poems aloud to my children when they were small (by "small" I mean between 2 and 7 years old) and it was one of their favourites! . . . They loved it—purely for its *sound* and energy. The same things I liked—not really needing it to 'mean.' You may find it strange that I would read your poems to such small children. I discovered very early on that kids will listen to 'adult,' 'serious,' 'difficult' poetry as readily as to Mother Goose and Edward Lear—not for meaning, but for sound and the sheer intoxication of strange words. My kids as preschoolers loved Dylan Thomas, e.e. cummings, Wallace Stevens.

Margaret's response:

'Eporphyreal' . . . I left it out because the word is not in dictionaries; my stuff is tough enough, but I want it to be untangleable, I want a reader to be able to trust me. It was written during a middle-aged return to Graduate School (. . .) The poet b.p. Nichol became a fast friend; he was a 'stack boy,' all day on a lower level of the U of T. Library where I had a carrel. One morning as I approached I heard him say to another boy putting books back off carts onto

shelves: ‘I’ve got all these poems’ (waving a sheaf of them) and I send them out & out & nobody will read them.’ Without breaking pace, I said, ‘I will’— & he thunked (in the dictionary) the wad into my hands. We began an exchange of short notes, on my carrel table, each leaving bits . . . my OK on his poem, his lively thoughts day by day—one of his notes, I remember, published by him later, in full: ‘What the frag- / meant.’ (‘Eporphyreal’ was a coined-word game we played.)

Your comment on reading to small fry—once I was waiting with a child in a cleared-out apt., sitting on the floor, while the last load was supervised by his parents. We had nothing to play with, but an old laundry list was blowing about on the floor. I picked it up, cradled the little fellow, & solemnly read every word & price. He watched my lips moving upside down, & when I got to the end, he said, “Read it again,” enraptured! Poetry? Or being read to any old way?

(To which I remarked in my next: “Well, yes, I guess children do simply love the phenomenon itself, of words transmitted that way—But I still think ‘In Eporphyreal Harness’ beats a laundry list...anyway my kids loved it, and used to chime in at the end with, ‘Sun...eyes...ice!’”) “Why do I like ‘Nursery, 11 p.m.,’ so especially?” Margaret asked in that same letter, in a seeming *non sequitur*, naming a poem of mine from my young-mother years—a poem about looking in on my sleeping children after a day of being something less than a perfect parent, and feeling undeservedly absolved by their peaceful breathing. “It’s strange that an old spinster, childless, ‘recognized’ every detail as if remembering vividly.”

At the time our exchanges began, I was just coming out of a long dry spell and would sometimes enclose a new poem when I wrote to Margaret. The first one I sent was a pantoum (my first poem in that form, and still my only one)—a poem called “A Prayer for Prayer,” which begins, ‘God! I am dead empty. / Pour me full again. / I am leaden; lighten me. / My cables are cut.’ Margaret alluded to it in her next, in a postscript: “You know that ‘A Prayer for Prayer’ is from those deeps where it is mine, & everyone’s, some time. I showed it to [?Georg Kershaw? illegible], a philosopher and theologian. He copied it out on the coffee shop’s napkin. ‘I need this for someone—later today,’ he said.” I was deeply touched by all that this moment encapsulated: the sharing, by a poet I so admired, of one of my poems; the copying by hand of that poem by the person she shared it with; the spontaneity of both gestures, and the thought of the unpublished poem being carried away, on a flimsy napkin, so it could be shared again.

Of her own fallow times Margaret wrote, “I always hated a dry spell but found it gave me more reading-time! In desperation to break it, at last, I’d

contrive a dud-poem; it served to prime the pump! The next one was not only not a dud, but richer for the learning I'd been free to do in the woeful interim. In spite of woes, may it be so with you." She signed this one, "Your co-conspirator, Margaret", which made me smile. (Is poetry a conspiracy? I like the idea. I think it is. It's the conspiracy of transmitting "news that stays news" in a world of fake news and endless spin.)

Our letters ranged over many subjects: reading (favourite books of our formative years, current discoveries, recommendations—in fact her very first letter to me began, "Dear Robyn, For some reason your letter prompts me first to ask whether you have read Micheal O'Siadhail's poetry?"—I had not, and blush to confess I still have not, but finding this again now, I will!); the benefits and drawbacks of "creative writing" culture, workshops, the energy of the group, as weighed against the solitary writing life and necessary solitude for writing; her generous response to my poems and a short story I sent, which she lent to a friend she thought would appreciate it, passing on that friend's response; thoughts about artistic mothers and daughters, her own mother's unfulfilled aspirations as a pianist; memories of her blind mother's late years, of sitting on her mother's bed reading aloud from books of seventeenth century literature; memories of coming of age during the war years: "You are enough younger to be not of those of us who were becoming adult in 1939...The males in my generation, including 3 close friends & 2 fine English professors, and my brother, all vanished 'over there' for the duration, 2 (my bro. and one friend) survived, changed though, as we all were..." Sometimes we touched on health issues of aging (incipient for me, ongoing for her)—in one letter, she described rheumatoid arthritis and the problem of "unwriggling" out of pain: "which I solved, sort of, by finding the precise colour of every stab & ache: Paris green here, sulphur there, fuchsia..."

We discovered (age difference and inflation notwithstanding) that we both began our writing careers in 10-cent notebooks—mine bright orange, a "HUGE 10c Scribbler" given me by my mother when I was six; hers shiny black—a new one from her brother on each birthday. And she wrote, in terms that I recognized, of "the way writing used to be for me at 16-24 years or so, the lyric impulse, the flow of sometimes inexplicable meaningfulness therewith—& so back to [?homework? illegible] or family meals or bed, lightsome, having been delivered of something presenting itself as urgent. That is what one wants young writers to know before (or even without?) groups and Creative-Writing encouragement, yes?"

Yes. As I wrote in a short essay to conclude a guest-edited poetry issue of *The New Quarterly*—an issue to which Margaret kindly contributed

new poems during the period of our correspondence—"I come back to the thought that, whatever else it is or does, a poem should deliver to us unmistakably the sense of an urgency behind the words." Under the heading "Writing Philosophy" on her webpage in the University of Toronto's Canadian Poetry Index, Margaret put it more succinctly (with a characteristic prefatory caveat: *Not prescriptive*): "Initiate a poem only under compulsion."

But it is that phrase "inexplicable meaningfulness," in her letter, that catches my eye right now, because the oxymoron seems to embody something peculiar to her art: the transmission of a meaningfulness that remains elusive, mysterious, like the mysteriousness of life itself. Her poems are a spotlight on the numinous in the everyday: the meaningfulness that we sometimes sense in the seeming random—stray particulars suddenly connecting, for reasons we can't explain.

"Write to me again—some day?" is how Margaret ended the last letter I have from her. I did, and I wish I still could. It felt as if our conversation was just beginning. But the conversation with her poems, which deepens for me with each passing year, is ongoing.

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