

# *“I Sing the Poet Electric”*

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The poetry that follows was born in the slippages between pedagogy and art, memory and desire, chaos and learning. Through the gestures of poetic language, I explore fragilities tied to times of learning, the conflicts of academic identity, and being touched and calling out in turn. I initially performed these poems under the aegis of *“I Sing the Poet Electric”* at *Après Vous*, a Canadian symposium organized in November 2012 at OISE in tribute to the extraordinary work of Professor Emeritus Roger Simon. Roger, a philosopher, social critic, intellectual, humanitarian and teacher, who made ethical responsibility for remembrance and historical consciousness the bedrock of his critical praxis, died on September 17, 2012. His Hebrew name, *Irakmiel*, meaning *one who is blessed by G-d*, bears well the formidable reach and spiritual refinement of his being—his profound humanism, passion for ideas, and ethical devotion to *“tikkun olam”*, repair of the world. Roger was the author of an extended canon whose incitement addressed educators with the ethical need to embrace critical and creative education practice. He was my doctoral supervisor. These poems are given in loving memory of the ongoing power of affect of his singular demands and teachings.

For me, Roger Simon was an intellectual giant whose capacity for finding grace in the life of the ordinary was insuperable. This is just one way in which the lyrical beauty and ethical range of his teachings inspire

the sequence presented here. More than any other person, Roger gave me the courage to use the medium of poetic language as a central form of expression in my life. He taught me to approach my writing as a public inventory of the contemporary mindset—a glance into the way it feels to live at this very moment in time. I learned from him a deep suspicion of a seemingly blinded progress. At the same time, his teachings incited me to maintain a thorough belief in each and everyone's potential to break free from these structures. Thus, his poetic and often melancholic works inscribe for me affirmation and encouragement. Never once resorting to leaving the reader unclear about the nature of obligation, his voice inspires me to take a stance and confront a bleak and alienating zeitgeist with vision. His lasting gift to me was an expanded notion of what art in times of conflict can be.

I present the following poems as scenes, in order to conjure a sense of dynamic movement and performance of the passage or journey of what it meant for me to be Roger's student. Scene one: A woman sits in a classroom during a spectacular thunderstorm, thinking. The thunderstorm has magical connotations that relate to what I experienced with Roger as an inner psychological 'transformation of being' and identity, as depicted in Ovid's epic eponymous poem in which the interconnectivity of humanity and the natural world is brought to life through mythological and psychological shape-shifting. Scene two: Time passes and something in the shape of meaning arises from the empty classroom, just as the dust of every day life eventually transforms landscapes. Scene three: A woman creates a fantasy of escape through the venue of something missing, a gap from which newness may emerge. Scene four: She runs away to an island in which—from recreated collections of waste, she sees how the intellectual life can hold meaning in relation to creative expression as commentary. Scene five: Touched by a remembrance of meaning, the poet calls out.

Scene 1

Lightning over Bloor<sup>1</sup>

My work in this poem recreates a certain texture of chaos that characterizes times of learning, focusing especially on temporal elements: time's singularity, time's extravagance, its eeriness, and oversized duration. "Lightning Over Bloor" takes us into temporality in times of learning, in this case in Roger Simon's doctoral seminar, and the seminar as a potential space. "Lightning Over Bloor" explores the experience of physical and mental astonishment what it means to appropriate such spaces—where time feels radically oversized—to the imagination. The poem is dedicated to Rachel Wetzsteon, whose "Rain at Reading" inspired it, and to Rilke, from whom it borrows a line.

We had taken our places at the table  
For some words after the break, following  
On various comings and goings.  
And when—twice—the professor said, "hope,"  
The celestial fireworks following the verb  
Had us rocketing skywards too. I had always suspected  
The poet's powerful leanings, but now I reckoned  
How few exchanges we had actually come to know  
Between pedagogy, providence, and rain.

Imagine a word inciting a rainbow  
Of kaleidoscopic color refracting against the sky  
With water heaving in at the windows and  
Curtains of yellow and indigo opening into  
Soft, new smiles on the faces of the persons assembled.

But then, just as quick, lightning hit loud and fast  
Taking hold of the sky with furious thunder following  
Before funneling its undiminished charge  
Into a room full of hunger and purpose.

I prize it, not knowing still whose soul at the sound released,  
May yet unfold. The seminar emptied fast upon the storm,  
Dispersing, anxious and radiant,  
At eight-thirty in the evening onto Bloor.

## Scene 2

### Time Passing

This poem is a sonnet, my favourite poetic structure, beautiful and difficult for its economy of form and forcefulness. The poem takes its inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, whose middle section of text captures the almost unbearable sensation of time passing in an empty room that once held life, laughter, learning. Woolf creates an elegiac masterpiece that is heartbreaking because of the visceral sense of loss. Here, the poet seeks to gain psychic entry through remembrance to a space of learning, where the problem of temporality presents us with tensions and imbalance.

If I could visit once again that room  
Where minds of youthful vigor once did gather  
And one more time be touched by you, in matters  
Great that beat in pulse of blood or scar

Of tissue... And once again if I could take back  
Time, and so be touched by thoughts that live  
Unfinished, like loss, subjection, the problem  
Of perception... And if good time itself could be my  
Gentle helpmate gathering all these stanzas  
Of all our months together, then would I through  
That lofty threshold pass? And once returned  
Could I the present make as not completed?  
It's possible to enter darkened rooms not wanting that.  
Some people do. Not me, not you.

### Scene 3

#### Cinderella: A Blue Collar Fairytale

Roger Simon has contributed greatly to understandings of class relations, how to subject institutions to critique, and how to ground such practice in new thoughts and actions. This poem fantasizes about the in-betweenness of experience and selfhood in academia, and its particular conundrums for working class students.

She was a girl who never had enough  
You know what I mean. Something  
In her longed to find the great  
Mother, and she leaped into OISE.

It took a while, but Roger  
Agreed to take her in.  
She knew it was touch-and-go, but once  
Past the SSHRC, it was too late.

It was OK, the Gramsci and Foucault,  
Buber, Kristeva, and Levinas. She viewed post-modernity  
As shit-load better coinage  
Than cleaning in the corners.

But a girl has to make her own way.  
Maybe it was her Ode to Two Good Shoes  
That did her in, followed by her poem  
With a real frog in it. She was out.

And that was it. She took the first train North  
To a small teaching town in Ontario  
Where she composed her first Tweet  
And texted the only mother she knew: "Let's talk."

#### Scene Four

Old Forge Garden, Southern Shore<sup>2</sup>

This poem is part confession, part journal, part act of mourning, and part an autobiographical work of magical realism. During my last decade as a Full Professor in Ottawa, I fell in love with a stretch of coastline in Newfoundland, where I escaped often to write. The fog bound property was at one time the site of an old forge, and in the soil leading down to the sea, I stumbled upon small horse shoes from ponies once shod there. This poem is about the fighting for one's own reality amidst a blurring of boundaries, disaffection or feelings of change within the academy, the emergence of a different reality, and being touched and calling out in turn.

Coming here from away  
She found the elsewhere that had kept her hungry  
(Like a sorrow that can strangle you  
Like something you can't live without  
Like something you crawl into: a second skin.)

Coming here from away  
She made her garden of green fury  
Conceived in impetuous desire  
And pitched against flint of sea and sky.  
Then for thirteen moons

Coming here from away  
She threw rocks and found horseshoes  
Fallen long ago from nails big enough to bear weight  
Turning up like magic things in the soil,  
And slowly she limbered free.

Coming here from away  
From a life of high romanticism  
And rigid performances, it was here  
In the bellow blow and varied beat  
Of a different lectern

That she learned to take new measure:  
Of how metal is made malleable  
And less likely to fracture  
When you can slacken up to anvil and take the heat  
Of a whole new world in counterpoint.

## Scene Five

### I Sing the Poet Electric

This short lyric is inspired by Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric". The poem draws energy, too, from various popular cultural appropriations of Whitman, especially those immortalized in the movie and Broadway musical *Fame* (... "I toast with my own reunion...I glow in the glory of re-birth"). The poet appropriates from these spaces the theme of the desire to repossess and to catalogue particular mysteries of psychic engagement, which also mark the emotional directness and even the psychic excesses of learning. This poem is dedicated to my teacher, Professor Roger Simon.

You are the archive in which I store my future  
The book of hours through which I measure faith  
I read within the pages of your countenance  
Contested memory's fierce counselor and face  
Upon the great wide staircase of your record  
You greatly give yourself in what is good  
We lean from out your skies to capture wonder  
Merci, monsieur, et toujours, AprèsVous.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Lightning Over Bloor" appeared previously in May 2012 in *Academic Matters: OCUFA's Journal of Higher Education*. <http://www.academicmatters.ca/2012/05/lightning-over-bloor/>

<sup>2</sup> "Old Forge Garden" previously appeared in *Academic Matters: OCUFA's Journal of Higher Education*. [http://www.academicmatters.ca/current\\_issue/article.gk?catalog\\_item\\_id=3930&category=/featured\\_articles/web\\_exclusive](http://www.academicmatters.ca/current_issue/article.gk?catalog_item_id=3930&category=/featured_articles/web_exclusive)