

A short interview with Monty Reid

this interview was conducted by rob mcLennan over email, August 2014

Q: What was the original impulse for *Garden*?

A: Initially, I just wanted to keep a garden notebook, the immensely practical kind that records, from year to year, what grew and what didn't, what seeds to use, when the first frost came, etc. This was obviously too much of a stretch. And then I thought it would be interesting to keep a visual record of the decay of a pumpkin that had been grown in the garden, used as a jack-o-lantern, and then returned to the garden to decay over the winter. And I sort of did this, taking regular pictures as the pumpkin gradually caved in. You can still see remnants of this project in the November unit, which was the first one written.

It was about this time that I read George Bowering's *My Darling Nellie Grey*. I was impressed by the project he set himself – *make a dozen poems, or maybe a dozen monthly parts of a long poem*. Since I was trying to keep these records anyway, I thought this might provide a useful, if somewhat challenging, model for a garden book. George's book makes clever use of a variety of baffles or formal constraints to discipline and charge the writing, but that interested me less than establishing a more-encompassing constraint on the project as a whole. And that constraint would simply be the garden itself – I would record only what I could find in the garden. And the word 'garden' itself, which means 'enclosure' in Middle English and is linked to 'wall' in Old Persian, is precisely that – a constraint, a wall that determines an inside and outside. But a garden wall is a notoriously weak constraint, with weeds, groundhogs, bugs and airborne toxins readily breaching the wall. It is with the dialectic of wall and breach that *Garden* is concerned.

I've made a garden almost everywhere I've lived. In Edmonton, going to university, I literally dug up a small parking lot and made a backyard garden. In Ryley I had a huge garden, and one year stuffed surplus zucchini (along with the appropriate treats) into the somewhat startled and now much-heavier Halloween bags of the neighborhood kids. In Drumheller I slowly built a garden in the badlands silt, surrounding it with a walkway made out of stones found at various literary sites – Robert Kroetsch's farm, Ezra Pound's birthplace, Sheila Watson's backyard, etc. I think this still exists. And now, in Ottawa, this is the second garden I've made, and by far the most productive. This year, the strawberries were amazing.

Q: The big difference between your project and Bowering's is that you utilized the months and seasons, whereas his were projects simply composed during monthly units. How does *Garden* fit with other literary projects you've been working on? How do you see your work progressing or developing, especially now, with *Garden* now existing as a complete, published work?

A: Well, that would be one difference, but he also used a much greater variety of organizing devices. It's hard to write about a garden and not bow to the seasons as they sweep through. For me, one of the nice things about *Garden* is the recognition that what happens in the garden in January is just as significant as what happens in August.

I think *Garden* is a further development of some elements that have structured my writing for a long time. It celebrates, or at least utilizes, my immediate environment, a tendency that goes back to my earliest books. *Fridays* was a nod to a pub I enjoyed at University of Alberta. *Ryley* was a town I lived near Edmonton. *Flat Side* is full of Drumheller. *The Luskville Reductions* grows out of Luskville, Quebec.

In addition, my default mode of work, the sequence, now gets expanded into a meta-sequence, a cycle of cycles that could, in theory, just keep going. My current work *Intelligence*, does just that – it keeps going – it’s a short poem every day celebrating life in the priority target zone created by the construction of massive new facilities for Canadian spy agencies just a couple blocks away from my home. It doesn’t have the development or direction one might expect of a long poem, but it does have the persistent if somewhat incoherent quality of electronic intercepts.

Another continuity is the ongoing simplification of language that one sees in *The Luskeville Reductions* and in recent chapbooks such as *Site Conditions* or *Moan Coach*. I want the vocabulary and the syntax to be relatively straightforward, the ideas clear, with enough room to let the important words resonate. This is, I’m sorry to say, partially a reaction against the fragmentation, appropriation, pastiche, discontinuity, and other procedural strategies that have largely lost their urgency for me and have become, instead, an aestheticized apologia for the morphing capitalist system they purport to undermine. Not that such strategies are without value. They clearly are useful, and they get used frequently enough throughout *Garden*. But as critique they tend to be feeble, and as theology they’re counter-productive.

I find that there is more humour in my work these days too. Most of my previous books had a funny moment or two but *Garden* has a thread of quiet good humour running right through it. A garden, I think, always helps to take yourself not quite so seriously.

Q: One thing I’ve noticed for some time is how the grounding of your work has shifted. The books you published before heading east were far more situated – being very placed in Alberta – than the work you’ve done since. *Disappointment Island*, for example, seems very much a transitional, even displaced book. *The Luskeville Reductions* is certainly a work within the same mode, but I don’t see the works that are following to be particularly “Ontario” or “Ottawa” works. What do you think accounts for this shift? Do you feel less “placed” here than you did in Alberta?

A: It’s interesting that you don’t think of *Garden* as an Ottawa book. It has lots of Ottawa references – Lee Valley Tools, Kingsmere, Ottawa Folk Festival, etc – and I’m at pains to identify the garden in question as a backyard in Ottawa. It was written in Ottawa and is published in Ottawa. I’m heavily involved with the literary community here.

But I do agree that it takes more than local references to ‘place’ a book. Perhaps I just haven’t lived here long enough to be thoroughly assimilated. Or perhaps my discomfort with the official bureaucratic culture of Ottawa shows up often enough that some distance is created. Perhaps I’m more explicit now than I used to be about identifying broader cultural and social issues in my work. Perhaps the discourse is less comfortable with itself than it used to be. Or perhaps you just can’t be ‘placed’ anymore, at least not with the same degree of confidence as you could in the past.

Nonetheless, I do think of *Garden* as an Ottawa book – I don’t think I’ll ever be more Ottawa than I am now. And the book I’m currently working on, *Intelligence*, with its explicit placement right beside the headquarters of CSIS and CSEC, not to mention NRC (at the beginning of the long dash...), is unavoidably urban and Ottawa.

Q: I’m curious as to how much *Garden* might have been influenced by other poetry collections dealing with variations on the same subject matter – works by Stephanie Bolster and Cole Swensen come to mind – especially given the prevalence with which the garden has been the subject of poetry and poetry collections

over the years. Was there an influence, or an awareness, as you composed your *Garden*? Did it make any sort of difference?

A: Yes, there is a lot of garden-related poetry, and I've read some of it, enjoyed much of that, and been variously influenced by it too, I suppose. The various quotations that introduce the sections of the poem give some indication of the reading behind this work, but of course not all of it. Bob Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* is in the background. I occasionally tried to steal some of the serene elegance of Cole Swensen but never quite managed it. Alice Oswald's *Weeds and Wildflowers* came out around the time I was working on this and that probably had some influence, at least as encouragement, as well.

I have a butterfly garden in my front yard, where I'm gradually replacing the lawn with native (for the most part) flowers and shrubs. But my primary garden is a vegetable garden, so this book is in some ways about food production and the great pleasure of eating and sharing what you've grown yourself. So it tends towards the dirty and the messy and the communal, and not so much the clever flowers or the formal designs of show gardens. The poetry of vegetables and dirt makes a shorter list than the poetry of flowers. In landscape architecture or garden design or various other religious texts, vegetable gardens just don't rate.

But for food, they rate big time. So many of the writings that have influenced *Garden* come from guerilla gardening publications and writings on the politics of food. In addition, books such as Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, William Bryant Logan's *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*, and Gustaf Sobin's wonderful *Luminous Debris*, all have echoes in *Garden*. The writings of Donna J. Haraway, Carey Wolfe, Michel Serres and Niklas Luhmann got dug into the dirt too. And my friend Sarah Martin, something of an expert on food politics and a great cook to boot, kept giving me ideas in return for rhubarb and zucchini.

Q: I find it curious that your response to the prairie burst of book-length/long poems of the 1970s was to evolve into the sequence. Even your book-length works are broken down into portions, which themselves are broken down into smaller portions. What is it about the form that appeals?

A: You can't consciously evolve, all you can do is mutate.

And every time I determined to write a long poem, and there was a time I wanted to, and often with short poems as well, they just kept morphing into a sequence. Not enough for a long poem, too much for a short poem, full of stops and starts and rethinkings, and often without the various ambitions of the long poem. Perhaps it's a result of my writing practice, which until recently only allowed me short periods of writing time, often very early in the morning. So while I would often return to a piece, it always felt a little bit like I was starting over. I think that writing choices are very often determined by constraints as banal as this.

For a while there, it seemed like the long poem wagon was just a little busy, with people hopping on and falling off without a great deal of clarity or sense of historical precedence. You yourself have noted the difficulty of producing a definition of the long poem on anything but length. After that, the definitions seem to depend on a somewhat prescriptive poetics. And although it certainly wasn't exclusively prairie – Kroetsch's *The Seed Catalogue* was the only prairie poem in Ondaatje's 1979 anthology – the long poem certainly did have a prairie flowering. Mandel and Suknaski and Cooley and Barbour being some of the better-known practitioners, with important contributions from Jon Whyte, Wilfred Watson, Susan Andrews Grace and others. Although I was friends with many of the above, I just never quite fit the profile.

But clearly I've developed some comfort with the sequence. I think it's the flexibility. A sequence can go on indefinitely, or it can be almost eliminated, cut down to two or three short pieces. Since I rarely know what's going to happen with a poem when I'm starting out, a sequence, with its unlimited stops and re-beginnings, has become a useful form for me. A sequence however, does have order. That's its definition – an ordered list. So at some point it begins to self-organize, based on seasons, numerical cycles, map locations, or varying intensities in the language. It doesn't have to rely on an origin or a presumed endpoint. And I think I'm ok with that too – a bit of order in an otherwise flexible unit.

The only criteria for a successful mutation is that it survives, and a sequence survives for me.

Q: You've published more than a dozen poetry collections going back to *Fridays* (Sidereal, 1979) and *karst means stone* (NeWest Press, 1979). After some thirty-five years of publishing, do you see any themes running through your work that you wouldn't have expected? How has the process and experience of writing and publishing changed for you over the years?

A: Any unexpected themes...nah. Different ideas get elaborated or sometimes blunted, get tried out in new contexts, get nuanced here and there. The primacy of the natural world gets asserted, and sometimes actually argued for. You'll note I didn't say the "so-called" natural world, which is the frequent strategy used by those who wish to argue for the social construction of everything. The world is not made of texts, or textes. So called.

The human need for community, and the simultaneous need for mystery, the Other that can never be fully apprehended, both grow out of our evolutionary development, there is nowhere else for it to come from, unless you are religious. That oscillation between the social and the dream continues to run through my work. I still take the immediate impetus for poetry from what is near at hand, whether it be Burgess Shale fossils, house renovations, other poets and yes, a backyard garden.

Writing continues to be a profoundly satisfying experience for me. My practice hasn't changed radically, except for the odd hiatus. I write early every morning. I continue to be interested in the varieties of contemporary writing and various avantgarde lineages, although the stasis of the latter has become a bit disheartening. As I get older, I get a little more anxious to get stuff out there, so I'm still excited when someone wants to publish me.

Q: Finally, what authors have you been reading lately that you would recommend? What works can't you help but return to?

A: I'm a big fan of Lisa Robertson and am looking forward to her new book. She has the kind of restless attention that I like, and I find myself going back to *Short Walks* frequently. I loved Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, various works by Mary Ruefle, Sandra Ridley and the fabulous Andrée Chedid.

I'm trying to read more outside English traditions, in spite of my miserable French and meager Spanish and my top recommendation right now is the Chilean Raul Zurita, a survivor of, and witness to, the Pinochet years, whose work is deeply political but formally engaging as well. There are several translations of his work around and he and Forrest Gander have just produced a big new anthology of Latin American poetry in translation – *Pinholes in the Night* – that I'm particularly looking forward to.